

Back to the Retro-Closet: Narratives of Closetedness and Coming Out in Retro Television Shows

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Abstract: This article explores the dramaturgical, aesthetic and ideological uses of the metaphor of the closet in recent retro TV shows. It aims at showing how retrospective and fictional depictions of queer lives—be they through closeted characters or through coming out narratives—serve both to anchor the diegesis in the times that the series ambition to represent and to offer a cultural renegotiation of a violently homophobic past, all the while building dramatic tension within the fictional world. It contends that although they allow for queer audiences to engage in a form of reparative nostalgia by representing their experience onscreen at last, these storylines also support an idealized vision of a contemporary post-gay, post-closet America, obscuring the ongoing attacks against LGBTQ+ people and rights in recent years.

Keywords: Nostalgia, TV Series, Homophobia, LGBTQ+ Representation, Post-Gay

Résumé: Cet article s'intéresse aux enjeux dramaturgiques, esthétiques et idéologiques de la métaphore du placard dans une sélection de séries télévisées rétro. Il entend montrer que les intrigues *queer* – qu'elles concernent des personnages placardisés ou des récits de *coming out* – servent tout à la fois à ancrer la diégèse dans l'époque que la série représente, à mettre en lumière un passé violemment homophobe, et à créer de la tension dramatique dans le monde fictionnel. Parce qu'ils représentent enfin à l'écran l'expérience des personnes *queer* ayant grandi dans la seconde moitié du xx^e siècle, ces arcs narratifs permettent au public de s'adonner à une forme de nostalgie réparatrice qui vient corriger l'invisibilisation longtemps subie. L'article met néanmoins en garde contre la dé-historicisation à laquelle procèdent parfois ces intrigues, qui viennent alors soutenir une vision idéalisée d'une Amérique contemporaine post-gay et post-placard, occultant la persistance des attaques contre les personnes et les droits LGBTQ+ de ces dernières années.

Mots-clefs : nostalgie, séries télévisées, homophobie, représentation LGBTQ+, post-gay

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While there is ample evidence that the force of the closet is still an active part of American culture, it remains the case that all the vast changes of the past twenty or so years have chipped away at and altered the contours of the coming-out story. [...] Undeniably, coming out retains a place in the lived experiences of many gay people, but there is no doubt that it has receded as “the story” in popular culture, even as it is clear it has not wholly disappeared. (Walters, 2014: 36)

Those words, written by Suzanna Danuta Walters in 2014, attest to the recession of the coming out narrative, once central to LGBTQ+ representation, at a time that some have described as “post-closet television” (Becker, 2007; Becker, 2009) that is to say, in a TV landscape which does not problematize queer identities through logics of dissimulation and disclosure anymore. This evolution is to be linked, of course, to the dramatic evolution of gay rights in the United States (Walters, 2014: 5-6; Garretson, 2018: 3-33), from the social opprobrium and consequent shame forcing queer people to hide and adopt double-lives to protect their secret, to the same-sex marriage victory of *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, leading some commentators to somewhat hastily describe contemporary America as “post-gay” as early as 1998.¹

Yet, a number of series broadcast in the late 2010s and early 2020s still rely on coming out narratives for their queer characters (Haensler, 2022). These include the recent wave of “retro shows” that have emerged on networks, cable, or streaming platforms in the past ten years. Those shows, which set their scene as early as the 19th century (*Dickinson*, Apple TV+, 2019-2021), but more generally in the second half of the 20th century, often include a storyline centered around the discovery of one of the characters’ queerness, their navigation of the liminal space of the closet, and their subsequent coming out. This article aims to explore the role of closetedness and coming out narratives in a selection of retro TV shows whose action takes place from the 1960s to the late 1990s.

1. “in a post-gay world, homosexuals have won their battle for acceptance, and are now free to move beyond identity politics”, in “New Way of Being”, *New York Times*, June 21st, 1998.

Navigating the space of the closet in the “Kulturkampf” of the 1960s



The first season of *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-2016) sets its scene in late 1950s America. It focuses more precisely on the work and the fictionalized lives of real-life doctors William Masters (Michael Sheen) and Virginia Johnson (Lizzy Caplan), who conducted groundbreaking experiments on human sexuality at Washington University in Saint Louis, Missouri. In season one, the series also introduces its first queer storyline with the character of Barton Scully (Beau Bridges), the medical school Provost. When the character is first introduced, Scully, in his fifties, is in a heterosexual marriage with his wife Margaret (Allison Janney), with whom he has an adult daughter. Upon finding out about the controversial study that Bill Masters has started to conduct, leading him to observe couples during intercourse, Scully chastises the doctor for his impropriety and cancels the study, for fear of negative repercussions on the hospital.² Soon, however, Masters discovers through participants in his now bootleg study that Scully has been having regular sexual encounters with male prostitutes. He then proceeds to use this information to blackmail Barton into allowing the study back into the hospital,³ knowing that should Scully’s secret be unveiled, the Provost would be fired from Washington University.

In this first season onward, the entirety of Barton Scully’s character’s arc deals with the themes of closetedness, and of heterosexuality as a performance, on which both his career and his social status heavily depend. Although Scully continues to meet with men, their encounters always take place in the confines of the brothel or in a car, at night, away from prying eyes. The discussions that he and Masters share on the topic of his homosexuality—although it is never named as such in the diegesis (Scully will only call himself a homosexual in the very last season of the show)—similarly take place in dark, muffled atmospheres and are conducted with hushed tones. The choice of confined and poorly-lit spaces for the *mise-en-scène* evidently echo the metaphorical space of the closet, which hides its inhabitants from the condemnation of society. Because it takes place in the medical field, the series can adequately portray the pivotal moment when homosexuality came to represent both a mental illness—it was inscribed on the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental illnesses in 1952—and a moral degeneration, as documented by Jeremiah Garretson:

2. “Space to Race”, S01E02, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 6th, 2013.
3. “Standard Deviation”, S0103, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 13th, 2013.

As new medical notions of the homosexual as a distinct type of person started to take root in the public mind, they became connected to previous notions of homosexuality as sinful and immoral. Although many in the medical profession believed homosexuals were ill and thus in need of treatment, not sinners in need of punishment, the majority of the public came to believe that a whole class of individuals who were inherently degenerate or immoral existed (Garretson, 2018: 71).

Thus began the era of what William Eskridge calls the “Kulturkampf” of the 1950s and 1960s. Homosexuality came to be seen as a threat to the institutions of marriage, family, but also to civilization itself (Eskridge, 1999: 57-59), when it started to be associated with communism: the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare representing two sides of the same coin (Johnson, 2009). In this context, gays and lesbians became “public enemy number two”, and fell prey to a campaign which aimed to identify and expel homosexuals from government and state institutions, while the general public demanded that the closet door be “thrown open” to purge society from homosexuality (Eskridge, 1999: 60-67). In *Coming Out Under Fire*, Allan Bérubé reports on the intensification of persecutions in the aftermath of World War Two, when stricter gender norms and the domestic ideal came to be enforced:

[Gays came] under heavy attack during the postwar decade. [...] When arrested in gay bar raids, most people pleaded guilty, fretful of publicly exposing their homosexuality during a trial. [...] Legally barred from many forms of private and government employment, from serving their country, from expressing their opinions in newspapers and magazines, from gathering in bars and other public places as homosexuals, and from leading sexual lives, gay men and women were denied civil liberties. [...] Such conditions led to stifled anger, fear, isolation, and helplessness. (Bérubé, 1990: 271)

In this context, the metaphor of the masquerade, which was prominent in the first half of the century (Chauncey, 1994: 6), gave way to that of the closet (Eskridge, 1999: 55), delineating a space where homosexuality needed to stay hidden.

In its first season and onwards, *Masters of Sex* acknowledges the violence exerted on queer people despite (or through) the closet. It shows it as a space that can be broken into, thus endangering queer people’s lives when they least expect it and feel protected: in the third episode, Barton Scully is stabbed in a gay-bashing assault while he is cruising in the dead

of night, in his car.⁴ He is found in critical condition by Bill Masters, but refuses to be taken to a hospital, fearful that his secret will be revealed. The series also illustrates how the closet leads gays and lesbians to internalize the homophobia of the rest of society: at the end of the season, Scully, desperate to get back to a “normal life”, undergoes electroshock treatment to try and “cure” his homosexuality, despite the pleadings of his wife, who upon discovering his secret and his intentions tries to discourage him to do so.⁵ Finally, the show underlines the absolute lack of social and legal protection for gays and lesbians: in its last season, Masters’ assistant Betty (Annaleigh Ashford) loses custody of her daughter after her partner dies in labor, since the state does not recognize her as the child’s mother.⁶ Although Betty had always been more openly queer than Scully, due to the fact that as a former prostitute, she was already considered deviant from the norm, the rampant homophobia of the times eventually catches up to her. The pathos that characterizes those often-heartbreaking scenes (the gay-bashing, the electroshock treatment, Betty’s child being taken away) is revealing of showrunner Michelle Ashford’s 21st century gaze on 1950s homophobic society: the situation of the diegesis in remote times allows her and the viewers alike to look at these mistreatments in hindsight and experience the violence of situations that, at the time, were commonly accepted in American society, much like it allows the show to address other societal issues of the time such as sexism and racism.

The anchoring of the plot in the 1950s and 1960s thus allows for a poignant representation of the advent of the closet and the persecutions that gays and lesbians endured at the time. It also allows the series, which is set in the medical field, to disseminate and circulate the theories and latest findings of the time on human sexuality: in its last season, Scully and Masters are lectured by a new doctor in their team on the work of Alfred Kinsey,⁷ who theorized sexuality as a continuum rather than a polar opposition between two distinct and exclusive identities, homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin *et al.*, 1953). Conversely, references to actual studies of the time, as well as representations of violence against gay people and their confinement to the space of the closet, serve to anchor the diegesis in the time that it seeks to portray by granting the show a dose of realism. *Masters of Sex* is no exception in representing its queer characters as victims of systemic violence forced to hide their real selves. It is indeed customary, in retro shows set in the 1960s and 1970s, to portray queer characters as closeted—one could think, for example, of the characters of Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt), in

4. “Standard Deviation”, S0103.

5. “Manhigh”, S01E12, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast December 15th, 2013.

6. “Family Only”, S04E06, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 16th, 2016.

7. “In To Me You See”, S04E07, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 23th, 2016.

Mad Men (AMC, 2007-2015), or Wendy Carr (Anna Torv) in *Mindhunter* (Netflix, 2017-2019).

Interestingly, although these shows underline the violence and subsequent paranoia that queer people might have felt at the time, they also show, through mise-en-scène and storylines, the complex “epistemology of the closet” (Sedgwick, 1990), both envisioned as a space that can be infringed upon and a space of liberty, shielded away from the heterosexual world. In *Masters of Sex*, queer characters are often the only ones privy to each other’s secret, seemingly recognizing one another, all the while flying under their straight counterpart’s radars. The third season, especially, illustrates the alternative, underground world of symbols and codes shared by gays and lesbians, and the complicity that emerges from the mutual recognition of somebody else’s queerness. Upon meeting Barton, Betty immediately identifies him as a homosexual, in spite of his traditionally masculine presentation.⁸ Later on, in a similar fashion, she bonds with a pianist with the following words:⁹

BETTY: I’m looking for a little moral support from the only other homo at this party.

PIANIST: How did you know I was...?

BETTY: You’ve played “Don’t Rain on my Parade” twice in the last hour. You might as well be wearing a flashing sign.

The dialogue highlights the existence of collective, shared “signs” that can easily be read by fellow queer people, but that the straight crowd at the party remains oblivious to. The same idea is at play in a line from Barton’s new assistant and love-interest, Jonathan (Rob Benedict), who tells him¹⁰:

Jonathan: You strike me as someone who might like classical music. In my experience, one classical music lover can often tell another.

The “classical music lover” is an obvious double-entendre, which allows Jonathan to subtly hint and probe at Scully’s homosexuality while signaling his own: the understanding of the euphemism thus depends on whether or not Scully, as a homosexual, has the ability to decode the sign. The scene exemplifies the epistemological advantage that queer people might have over straight people in recognizing each other, based on the assumption that “it takes one to know one” (Sedgwick, 1990: 169). It reverses the image of the closet as a place of lonely imprisonment to

8. “Through a Glass, Darkly”, S03E10, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast September 13th, 2015.

9. “Coats or Keys”, S04E04, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 2nd, 2016.

10. “Surrogates”, S03E08, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast August 30th, 2015.

propose a vision of the closet as a collective space, an underworld which protects its inhabitants' secret all the while allowing them to identify and support each other.

Beyond dialogues, the idea that homosexuals were, in fact, always hiding in plain sight, is exemplified by the *mise-en-scène*, for instance in a scene where Betty and Barton discuss Barton's now boyfriend Jonathan in the former Provost's office.¹¹ If the conversation deals with a private matter, and takes place in an enclosed space evoking the walls of the closet, the office happens to have glass walls: while the two friends exchange on Scully's current love life, other characters appear in the frame, in the background, their voices sometimes heard as a faint chatter. Their presence can be meant to symbolize a form of social control and the porosity of the walls of the closet, in a way that is reminiscent of the panopticon (Foucault, 1975: 202), in a series that more generally thematizes the concept of observation (of the practice's patients), surveillance, and plays on the scopic dimension inherent to the televisual medium. The scene thus literalizes the concept of the "glass closet", as developed by Sedgwick (1990: 164), who uses the term to refer to homosexuality as an open secret, in instances when the queerness of a celebrity is commonly known or assumed without them having ever come out, or without them being in control of this supposedly private information. The scene materializes, through the layout of the room, the potential power imbalance between the inhabitant of the closet, who believes their secret is safely hidden away, and what the outside world actually perceives, rendering the walls of the closet metaphorically see-through. However, because Betty and Barton's conversation seems to go unnoticed by the people walking in and out of the frame in the background of the scene, this literal glass closet could also be interpreted as a sign that spaces of liberty still remain, in the middle of the heterosexual world, for homosexual discourses and practices. The plurality of meanings that can be derived from this *mise-en-scène* thus perfectly illustrates the duality of the closet space, simultaneously protecting its occupant from excessive probing, and exposing them to heterosexual investigation.

The same logic is at play in an episode of the series *Mindhunter*. While interrogating an allegedly queer serial killer, Wendy Carr, a closeted professor in psychology at the University of Boston and FBI investigator, hints at a relationship that she used to have with one of her female college professors, thus risking to out herself to her colleague, Greg (Joe Tuttle). Once they are out of the investigation room and back into the car, Greg comments:¹²

11. "Full Ten Count", S03E12, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast September 20th, 2015.
12. "Episode 4", S02E04, *Mindhunter*, Netflix, first broadcast August 16th, 2019.

GREG: When you talked about... the woman, that relationship, that was... (*long pause*) how do you come up with something like that? It was exactly the right story at the right moment.

The focus is initially on Wendy, in the foreground. She is trapped between the audience—who knows that she is a lesbian—and Greg, and at first it seems that he has uncovered her secret and is about to ask for confirmation, with her unable to escape. However, the end of his sentence reveals that he actually believes that she invented the story in order to coax information out of the convict. A rack focus then changes the emphasis of the scene to highlight Greg, in the background, leaving Wendy out of focus—and out of danger.

What protects Wendy, in this scene, is her traditional gender presentation: she does not correspond to stereotypical images of butch or masculine lesbians that were circulated in the media at the time (Streitmatter, 2009: 147-148; Marolleau, 2015: 61-68), and as such, Greg is unable to read her as queer, even though he has, metaphorically, set foot in her closet, symbolized here by the shared space of the car. The scene reveals the powerful role played by the presumption of heterosexuality—the idea that a person is believed to be straight in the absence of signs pointing to the contrary (Rich, 1980; Chambers, 2003: 28)—in the protection of queer secrecy and the enforcement of the closet. For Sedgwick, and after her David Halperin, the presumption of heterosexuality is precisely what maintains and endlessly reproduces the closet, rendering coming out an exercise in repetition (Sedgwick, 1990: 38; Halperin, 1995: 34). In Wendy's case, the coming out is deprived of its performative power because of the assumption, based on her look and demeanor, that she cannot be anything but straight.

Progressing into the “Gay Nineties”: stepping out of the closet and into the world

In their quest for verisimilitude, and in order to stay true to the time that they seek to depict, retro TV shows set in the 1960s rarely ever present the traditional coming out narrative that we have come to associate with gay and lesbian identities. On the contrary, retro programs set in the 1980s, and *a fortiori* in the 1990s are replete with storylines of characters exploring and accepting their queer sexuality.

The context of the 1980s and 1990s, in terms of gay and lesbian rights and visibility, was widely different from that of the 1960s. The first homosexual movements of the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a more assertive

gay rights movement in the 1970s (Garretson, 2018: 80), heralded by the Stonewall riots, in New York. In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis pulled the gay question front and center. Although it brought about fear, suspicion, and shame, it also helped solidify the gay rights movement around the health crisis, and led to the emergence of a new, more radical activism (Marche, 2017: 30), with groups such as ACT UP or Queer Nation, who advocated, in part, for a better representation in the media (Walters, 2001: 61; Gross, 2001: 94-109). Constraints on representations progressively loosened with the end of the Hays Code, at the end of the 1960s and the repeal of the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters in 1983 (Lobrutto, 2018). Thanks to the deregulation of the market introduced by the birth of cable channels in the 1980s, new representations of queer characters emerged both in cinema and on television, so much so that the 1990s were prophetically nicknamed “The Gay Nineties” by *Entertainment Weekly* in 1994.

It is in this general context of activist effervescence and augmented media presence that the storylines developed *a posteriori* by contemporary retro shows such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-), *Everything Sucks* (Netflix, 2018), *The Carrie Diaries* (The CW, 2013-2014), *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015-2020) or *Little Fires Everywhere* (Hulu, 2020) should be understood. *Stranger Things* sets its scene in the early 1980s, between 1983 and 1985. In its third season, high-school student Robin (Maya Hawke) timidly comes out to her friend Steve (Joe Keery), who initially believes she is confessing her love for him. The two teenagers are sitting on the floor of a bathroom stall—once again an enclosed and intimate space that can be reminiscent of the closet—its door opening to let out Robin’s secret.

ROBIN: Do you remember what I said about Click’s class? About me being jealous and, like, obsessed?

STEVE: Yeah.

ROBIN: It isn’t because I had a crush... on you. It’s because... she wouldn’t stop staring at you.

STEVE: Mrs. Click?

ROBIN: *(she chuckles)* Tammy Thompson. I wanted her to look at me. But... she couldn’t pull her eyes away from you and your stupid hair. And I didn’t understand, because you would get bagel crumbs all over the floor. And you asked dumb questions. And you were a douchebag. And – And you didn’t even like her and... I would go home... and just scream into my pillow.

STEVE: But Tammy Thompson’s a girl.

ROBIN, *softly*: Steve.

STEVE: Yeah? ... Oh...

ROBIN: Oh.

STEVE: Holy shit.

ROBIN: Yeah. Holy shit.¹³

13. “Chapter Seven: The Bite”, S03E07, *Stranger Things*, Netflix, first broadcast July 4th, 2019.

Similarly to Wendy Carr in *Mindhunter*, Robin's queerness is initially protected—even though she has admitted to it in the dialogue—by her traditionally feminine gender presentation. The scene thus highlights the force of the presumption of heterosexuality, both in Steve's initial understanding that Robin was in love with him, and then in his dumbfounded interrogation, “but Tammy Thompson's a girl”. It is reiterated finally in his expression of surprise, “Holy shit”.

The harrowing musical motif which accompanies the scene, composed of a few chords placated in the low register, contributes to the suspense of the scene. Robin seems to fear Steve's reaction: the close-up shots show her looking away from him, and the reliance on the shot and reverse-shot symbolizes the possibility that her confession could lead to a split in the teenagers' friendship. The end of the scene however reunites the two friends in a single shot while Steve teases Robin on her poor taste in women, the melody higher and lighter than at the beginning of the scene, both suggesting his acceptance of her queerness.

Because homosexuality is still a taboo subject in the conservative era of the 1980s, the coming out narrative retains its dramaturgical force, in a context where the risk of rejection for Robin is quite real. The coming out scene is powerful in its overt acknowledgment of queerness, in a series which had previously only hinted at the queerness of characters before having them disappear (Will), or through the representation—and condemnation—of homophobic bullies (Freeman, 2019: 95). In allowing Robin, one of the main characters of the show, to come out of the closet, the series renders queerness manifest and rights the wrongs denounced by Heather Freeman, who bemoaned in 2019 that the series, in its first two seasons, “never acknowledge[d] the idea that being gay could be acceptable, much less commendable” (Freeman, 2019: 95).

While *Stranger Things* does not make the reasons why Robin might be fearful explicit, *The Carrie Diaries*, which takes place in Castlebury, Connecticut, in 1984, does so with the character of Walt (Brendan Dooling), the protagonist's best friend. When he realizes that he is gay, Walt comes out to his friends, to mixed reactions. He discusses the matter with an older gay man that he met in New York, who tells him:¹⁴

BENNET: Walt, we don't live in a world where people are that accepting of us. I mean, there's pockets like New York, but then there's also places like...

WALT: Castlebury.

BENNET: Exactly. Where being honest often means being shunned.

14. “Kiss Yesterday Goodbye”, S01E13, *The Carrie Diaries*, The CW, first broadcast April 8th, 2013.

In this scene, the dialogue explicitly refers to the homophobia that is still the norm in the 1980s, but also to the difference in mindset and tolerance between urban enclaves—overall more progressive—and the conservative stance of the rest of the country. As a matter of fact, most coming out narratives in retro TV shows do take place in rural areas and suburbs rather than in large cities, be it the fictional Hawkins, Indiana (*Stranger Things*), Boring, Oregon (*Everything Sucks*), or Shaker Heights, Ohio (*Little Fires Everywhere*). This double displacement—temporal, geographical—allows the series to build suspense and higher stakes around coming out scenes that it would in contemporary New York, for example. Although most of the time, coming out narratives are resolved in a happy ending and words of acceptance from friends and families alike, *The Carrie Diaries* does portray the actual danger that coming out often entailed for kids, when Walt is thrown out of his house by his parents after they find out that he is gay.¹⁵

Most of the coming out storylines in retro shows set in the 1980s or the 1990s involve teenagers, who are often the protagonists of the show, in narrative arcs that conflate coming of age and coming out stories. Maybe in a somewhat unconscious way, this move towards younger queer protagonists, in comparison with retro shows set in the 1960s, mirrors sociological evolutions of the time in the average age of the first coming out, which stepped back from 19-to-23 years old at the beginning of the 1980s to 14-to-15-years-old in 1999 (Walker, 2002). On a metatextual level, it also echoes actual change in media representations of the end of the 20th century, since teen dramas were among the first fictional genres to address homosexuality, although timidly, in the 1990s (*My So-Called Life*, ABC, 1994-1995; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, The WB, 1997-2003; *Dawson's Creek*, The WB, 1998-2003) (Tropiano, 2002: 211).

The moment of puberty, because it constitutes a time of discovery of one's sexual desires and urges, appears specifically appropriate for storylines which deal with coming to terms with one's queerness. The queer closet is often conflated, in retro TV shows, with the confined spaces which typically host games such as "7 Minutes in Heaven", in which two teenagers (usually a boy and a girl) are stuck together in a closet and left to do whatever they see fit—more often than not kissing. In *Everything Sucks*, Kate shares her first kiss with Luke during such a game,¹⁶ and this encounter helps her come to term with her sexuality. After they have exchanged a kiss, and while they are still stuck in the closet, she states blankly: "I think I'm a lesbian". The door opens abruptly, symbolizing both the force of her

15. "The Second Time Around", S02E08, *The Carrie Diaries*, The CW, first broadcast December 20th, 2013.

16. "Romeo and Juliet in Space", S01E04, *Everything Sucks*, Netflix, first broadcast February 16th, 2018.

realization and the risk that her confession be overheard by the other players. The same logic is at play in a scene from *Little Fires Everywhere*, when it is revealed during a similar game with other teens that Izzy (Megan Stott) and her best friend are actually romantically involved: the space of the closet, where they are trapped for a few minutes, functions as a cocoon that allows them to kiss and share an intimate bond, materialized on the screen by the use of extreme close up on their intertwined hands and faces and by the soft, warm light, and tender music that accompanies the scene.¹⁷ This moment of comfort is however interrupted when the door of the closet suddenly swings open, revealing the two girls to the rest of their classmates. Izzy's best friend then pushes her away and accuses her of having assaulted her, before joining the other teens. Izzy is thus left standing alone in the open closet, exposed to the laughs and mockery of the group. Right before the scene, when Izzy had spun the bottle and it had landed on her female friend, both girls had seemed uneasy. One of the other kids had then exclaimed "It's the 90s, right?" as a reminder of the supposed open-mindedness of teens in the context of the "Gay Nineties". However, their reaction post-kiss, as well as the bullying that will ensue in the rest of the series, attest to the permanence of homophobic attitudes in 1990s America.

Focusing on teenage characters allows shows to target both teen audiences—which seem to be the target audience for *Fresh Off the Boat* or *Everything Sucks*, with younger protagonists around 13 or 14 years old—and young adults in the 18-39 age bracket, for shows such as *Little Fires Everywhere* or *Stranger Things*. To capture this audience, comprised of spectators born in the 1980s and 1990s, retro shows often play on a sense of nostalgia induced by a specific aesthetic and tone, rendered by the use of 1980s earworms as soundtrack (Mcclantoc, 2019: 114-115) and the reliance on objects and technologies associated with these two decades, be they "boom boxes", old Coca Cola bottles, or a wall telephone with an extended chord (Stephan, 2019: 30). In the second season of *Yellowjackets* (Showtime, 2021-), which switches between two timelines to take a look at the after-effects of a plane crash on the lives of its survivors, the 2021 version of Vanessa (Lauren Ambrose), who secretly dated a girl from her soccer team in the 1996 timeline, is represented as the owner of a vintage shop selling records, VHS tapes, and books related to queer culture, which she passes on to the younger generation that seems both ignorant and fascinated by that past, much like the viewers of the show perhaps. This reflexive storyline can be seen as representative of the ambitions of retro shows themselves, which aim at activating a sense of nostalgia in their older viewers, as well as a curiosity for remote times in its youngest.

17. "Picture Perfect", S01E07, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Hulu, first broadcast April 15th, 2020.

Much like vintage objects or soundtracks, the depiction of coming out in the late 20th century is also topical, in that anxieties around how it will be received might very well echo the experience of the older portion of the audience, and more specifically the queer audience, who may have experienced firsthand how it felt to discover their queerness in the context of the 1980s and 1990s. The success of retro show thus relies on a totemic nostalgia, as theorized by William Proctor (2017), that ties together the spectator's self-narrative with cultural artefacts and media products. This totemic nostalgia is specifically mobilized in intertextual references to queer cultural artefacts, memorabilia or icons who add affective value for queer audiences, nodding to the shared objects around which the community assembled. In *Everything Sucks*, the young Kate (Peyton Kennedy) is obsessed with singer-songwriter Tori Amos, who, albeit straight, was a gay icon in the 1990s. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, which sets its scene in 1998, the young Izzy is often called "Ellen", in reference to Ellen DeGeneres, who had come out of the closet only one year prior. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, finally, the first coming out scene of the young Nicole (Luna Blaise) takes place in a lesbian bar in Orlando, Florida.¹⁸ When she initially steps into the bar, she is surprised to come across her stepmother and her clueless best friend, who ask her what she is doing here. Immediately, the patrons of the bar fall silent, and turn expectantly to Nicole, who is about to come out. Behind the bar, the barmaid gives instructions to the women in the assembly:

BARMAID: Kristen, get that bottle of champagne. Barb, get that cot ready in the back. We've got to be prepared for this to go either way. Bev, you set?
 BEV, *standing next to the jukebox*: It's either gonna be B4 or C29.
 NICOLE: Um, I've been wanting to tell you this for a while, but I could never find the right time. But maybe there's never a right time. So... I'm gay.

While Nicole nervously awaits an answer from her stepmother, several shots show the anxious faces of the bar's customers. When Honey finally takes her step-daughter in a warm embrace, the other women erupt with joy, clapping and cheering, while the woman close to the jukebox launches "Come to my window" by openly lesbian singer Melissa Elleridge, another gay icon of the 1990s. The tune is easily recognizable for an older queer audience as one of the queer anthems of the time. The fact that the scene takes place in a bar is also a way to elicit nostalgic feelings

18. "A League of Her Own", S04E06, *Fresh Off the Boat*, ABC, first broadcast November 7th, 2017.

from the audience, in a context when lesbian bars are going extinct in contemporary America.¹⁹

Restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia, and linear narratives

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes that “nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as felt lack” (Stewart, 1993: 23).

While nostalgia has been theorized by some scholars and commentators as potentially “solipsistic” (Freeman, 2019: 92), “harmful” (Boym, 2001: xiv), a “feedback loop” (Metzger, 2017) that offers comfort through an idealized representation of the past while obscuring important questions of exclusion, discrimination and more generally politics, I believe that these retro representations of coming out and closetedness in TV shows constitute a way to open up the past for revision and confront the country’s history of violent institutional and socially sanctioned homophobia.

These nostalgic representations hold educational value, in the sense that they allow for the transmission of a queer history usually marked by violence, repression and invisibility, while also recalling the general discourses and debates of the time around questions of homosexuality and their progression—while *Masters of Sex* presents Kinsey’s work on sexual fluidity as potentially trailblazing, but somewhat “new” and unproven, *Everything Sucks* shows the two teen characters finding the Kinsey scale test in a textbook from the school library and evaluating, based on their answers, whether or not Kate is a lesbian.²⁰ The fact that Kinsey’s work has apparently moved from experimental to academically acclaimed research taught in high-school in the 30-year period that separates the diegeses of the two shows speaks to the change in attitudes and knowledge around homosexuality.

Because they render queerness manifest, when it was once made invisible and hidden away, these shows could best be understood as a form of “progressive nostalgia” or “cultural reflective nostalgia” (Lizardi, 2015: 50), that allows us to acknowledge, from the present, the failings and errors of the past, all the while participating in a rewriting that makes room for queer lives, but also, on a metatextual level, for the queer storylines that

19. See the documentary *The Last Lesbian Bars* (Drew Denny, 2015). In 2020, there were only 15 lesbian bars left in the entire country (Kim, 2020).

20. “What the Hell’s a Zargina?”, S01E05, *Everything Sucks*, Netflix, first broadcast February 16th, 2018.

were missing from television productions broadcast at the time. Indeed, from the 1960s to the 1980s at least, homosexuality was virtually absent from big and small screen alike—only visible to the eye of those who knew how to read between the lines (Russo, 1987). When homosexuality was addressed on television, it was either in talk shows that approached it as a “problem of the day” (Tropiano, 2002: 3), adopting a pathologizing approach that robbed queer people of control over their narrative, or in episodic shows (procedurals, medical shows) which featured gay or lesbian characters as “guest” characters, who came in, came out, and disappeared at the end of the episode, never to be seen again. On the contrary, contemporary retro shows often put their queer characters front and center, allowing untold stories to finally be told, freeing them of “heteronormative erasure” (Freeman, 2019: 97).

To queer audiences specifically, these shows offer what Nishant Shahani has theorized as “queer nostalgia”, that is to say “not a restorative return to a fixed past”, but “the ability to forge a space of belonging in the present (...) predicated on the affective force of the past” (Shahani, 2013: 1227). Drawing on recent works on queer temporalities,²¹ she establishes a difference between a heteronormative approach of nostalgia, characterized by its linearity and attachment to tradition, and an alternative, queer vision of time, characterized by its back-and-forth motion, resulting in meanderings that address the group’s former exclusion from tradition all the while enabling the “reparative process of assembling collective memory as the base materials for imagining a different future” (Shahani, 2013: 1227).

The reflective approach must not, however, obscure the commercial and ideological dimensions at play in representations of closetedness and coming out in the past. In his article about *Stranger Things*, Matthias Stephan writes that retro shows:

[a]llow for a reconsideration of the past—invoking the iconic 1980s vibe but making the racial components, and gender dynamics, more up-to-date politically. This progressive use of nostalgia can be used to brand Netflix as both appealing to our sense of self-narrative while maintaining a connection to contemporary progressive attitudes in terms of race and gender [...] (Stephan, 2019: 31)

The same observation applies for the inclusion of queer storylines, now a staple of contemporary TV representation, especially on platforms such as Netflix which strive to offer inclusive and diverse narratives as part

21. More specifically Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*. Other works in queer temporality include Muñoz, 2009; Edelman, 2004; and Dinshaw, Edelman, Ferguson, et al., 2007.

of their brand (Jenner, 2018: 161-182), an echo and continuation of the narrowcasting strategies adopted in the 1980s. Although they might provide comfort and a sense of self-narrative to a queer audience, the inclusion of coming out stories in retro shows must also be understood, first and foremost, in narratological and economic terms. The dramaturgical force of the coming out narrative, with its uncertain outcome and the tension that it builds, as well as the attraction that it is likely to exert on the audience, certainly play a role in broadcasters' choice to feature these types of storylines. They are, in fact, a prime marketing and advertising tool for Netflix, which regularly uploads clips of the "best coming out scenes" of its catalogue—among which Robin's confession in *Stranger Things*—on its Youtube channel.²²

According to Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, "nostalgia informs the imaginative effort to connect who we were with who we are now, and reflect on the ways we have changed" (Keightley & Pickering, 2012: 137). In other terms, representations of the past are always connected to our lived present: they tell something of the perceived evolution or regression of the American people and mindset on societal and political matters. In relegating closetedness, coming out, and more generally homophobic attitudes in the past, retro TV shows run the risk of reinforcing an idealized vision of modern-day America as post-gay, that is to say as wholeheartedly accepting of homosexuality and queerness, in the contrast that it draws between now and the time depicted in the diegesis.

The temporal and geographical displacement that the plot usually operates thus ideologically contributes to portraying coming out as a bit passé or out-of-date, in an America that has, to paraphrase Seidman, moved "beyond the closet" (Seidman, 2002). As Walters notes:

Even the campy, closeted, and largely miserable gay characters of AMC's critical hit *Mad Men* are framed as signs of a boozy but not so gayfriendly past when men who like men were pariahs or bore the brunt of office humor. Like the casual racism of the series, homophobia is assigned a place in the past. (Walters, 2014: 38)

In their categorization of the 1960s as the era of the closet, the 1980s as slowly warming up to homosexuality and their 1990s celebration of queer culture, these shows, taken altogether, support a linear, progressive vision of history, building a contrast between the reactionary force of the past and the allegedly progressive drive of the present time, in which one

22. "The Full Robin & Steve Bathroom Coming Out Scene | *Stranger Things* S3", *Still Watching Netflix*, Youtube, published July 12th, 2019. URL: <https://youtu.be/HEIHVsrCtlA> (last accessed May 16th, 2023)

could imagine that the characters or Robin, Izzy or Kate now live their adult lives as fully out to their peers.

This depiction is problematic on two levels. On the one hand, it de-historicizes and naturalizes the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality and the persecution of homosexuals, and thus fails to account for the hundreds of queer people who found pockets of freedom and ways to experience and live their homosexual lives and relationships within the institutional constraints of the time in the 1950s (Gutterman, 2020) and even prior (Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988). On the other hand, in its relegation of homophobia to the second half of the 20th century, it obscures the continued violences endured by queer people in modern-day America, be they institutional or social. The recent slew of attacks on transgender people, and especially on trans kids, forced to detransition at the risk of their own lives, in South Dakota or Alabama; Ron DeSantis signing SB1580, a bill that will allow healthcare providers to refuse treatment to LGBTQ+ people because of religious, moral or ethical beliefs, or the worrying rise in hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people in the past few years are all signs pointing to the fact that America has not, in fact, entered a “post-gay” era, and that homophobia is still alive and well in the country.

Conclusion

In a 1977 article dealing with the “nostalgia wave” of the end of the 1970s, Fred Davis reports on the etymology of the word nostalgia, “from the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algai*, a painful condition; thus, a painful yearning to return home” (Davis, 1977: 414). If this definition is fit for the melancholic relationship that ties straight audiences to depictions of the past during periods of instability or threat, such as the social unrest of the 1970s (Davis, 1977: 414), or the “post-truth” late part of the 2010s, it is certainly more complex for queer audiences, looking at retro productions, to engage in this longing for ancient times. For them, the process of idealization of the past is necessarily impeded by the knowledge that, had they been born a few decades before, they could have never enjoyed the same amount of freedom that they do today. According to Hutcheon and Valdes:

[N]ostalgia is not something you “perceive” in an object; it is what you “feel” when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. (Hutcheon & Valdes, 1998-2000: 22)

For queer audiences, it might be that this emotional weight carried by representations of queer life in the past is condemned to be bittersweet. Retro shows picturing 1960s and 1970s America, especially, acknowledge the persecutions and harm caused to homosexuals, by exposing the risks attached to stepping out of the closet, while shows set in later periods illustrate the progressive change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. Although these representations participate in bridging the gap between the “individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (Boym, 2001: xvi), thus creating a sense of community around a shared history, they also create a false narrative of a linear, progressive history that shields from view the discriminations currently encountered by sexual minorities, as well as the very real risk that some hard-earned LGBTQ+ rights be overturned or taken away from the community.²³ In this sense, they participate in a vision of America as post-gay, and belong, paradoxically, to a wider trend of “post-closet television”, in which coming out is not problematized anymore, or solely when it takes place in a remote past.

In the face of repeated attacks on LGBTQ+ rights—with “Don’t Say Gay” laws passed in several states across the country in an effort to curb the transmission of an LGBTQ+ history, coming out bears monumental significance—echoing its militant use and roots in the 1970s, when activists bravely came out of the closet to demand equal rights, and the recognition of their existence. In this context, it is paramount to continue telling the story of LGBTQ+ people through shows past, present and future, and prevent television from becoming a depoliticized post-closet, post-gay utopia.

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23. I am referring here to the anxieties introduced by the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, and the knock-on effect that the Supreme Court decision could have on other historical decisions such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

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