

Big Love, Big Mistake: Popular Culture as Mirror

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I recently watched a few of the first episodes of Soap, a show of considerable controversy when it aired back in 1977. Billy Crystal plays Jodie, a homosexual, possibly transsexual character who is frequently called "fruit" by his stepfather and other relatives. His mobster older brother refuses to face Jodie's sexual orientation, and threatens anyone who mentions it.

Nearly 30 years later, Showtime has made a fortune with shows like Queer as Folk and The L Word, that provide highly stylized, perfectly coiffed, openly gay characters. Even on network television, shows like Will and Grace put unashamedly gay characters in front of Middle America every week, sponsored by mainstream companies.

The question is, did our popular culture change to reflect a new acceptance of gay people, or did the media changes hope to create a new acceptance of gay people...and if so, did it succeed or fail?

Now, I can't help but apply this question to new programs offering a peek at other somewhat closeted lifestyles. Take, for example, HBO's new series Big Love.

Big Love is the story of a polygamist family living the American dream. The husband, Bill, has a series of successful home improvement stores, so he is careful to keep his alternative lifestyle on the down low. His three wives live in three adjoining houses in a clean suburban mecca. Only one of them, his first wife Barb, works...as an elementary school substitute teacher. Second wife Nicki has a nasty credit card problem and has mounted over \$58,000 in debt. She also is the daughter of the leader of a cult group that Bill borrowed money from more than once and now owes a stake in his business. Third wife, Margene, is pretty young and naïve and her role in the show seems primarily to be making mistakes.

This Tom Hanks-produced show spends a lot of time focusing on the problem of maintaining sexual prowess with three women, and also the constant fighting over whose night it is to get Bill. You can count on every episode to do two things:

- It will condemn the polygamist who lives outside of suburban America and takes brides under 18, such as the villainous Roman (Nicki's Dad).
- It will glorify the fun, fun, fun that Bill gets to have with three eager women waiting to serve his every desire, sexually or otherwise.

Are we, then, to get the message that it's just fine for men to have more than one wife and to keep them in a perpetual state of servitude as long as they live in the suburbs? After all, since polygamy is still illegal, isn't Bill really just having an affair with two women with the consent and complicity of his wife? Is HBO trying to tell us that hey, a guy's got needs, and women should learn to be less jealous and accept this so they can be kept in big houses with big secrets?

The explicit sex scenes that we are "treated" to in every episode certainly clarify what the writers think this is really all about, but I am left feeling a little nauseous when I think of Bill moving from one bedroom to another and the women in the other rooms knowing that the person they love is currently with a woman they just argued over child care duties with. The tensions between the wives sometimes erupt into malicious gossip or angry outbursts. It's the job of first wife Barb to make sure everyone remembers that they are all supposed to love each other and are doing this for God. But who is their God? It seems to be Bill and his seemingly never-empty wallet.

Will popular culture open up acceptance for polygamy, an institution that slaughters all the progress of the Women's Movement by returning the image of women to that of the receptacle of

patriarchal will? Perhaps not. But make no mistake, the glorification of this lifestyle reinforces these ideas for the mainstream in a subtle but significant way. By creating a fantasy image for men of a world where women are largely ineffectual in the world outside the home, and useful only as playthings and child care providers, Big Love is offering an endorsement of a rollback to values that oppress women.

Popular culture is never just what it appears on the surface. It always promotes the values and ideals of its authors. In this issue of MP, we look a little deeper at what popular culture is trying to tell us and how it serves to change our attitudes and/or reflect our attitudes. If popular culture is our mirror, what are we looking like?