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reading the L Word: outing contemporary television

Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (editors); I.B.Tauris, London, 2006, pp.247,
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Showtime's lesbian drama series *The L Word* is certainly notable; indeed that notability provides this collection's key rationale. Within what editors Kim Akass and Janet McCabe dub a 'recent gay-TV craze exploding into primetime' (xxv), lesbian representation has typically occupied a less prominent place than that accorded to gay men, whether in focus or supporting roles. So, the 2004 launch of a drama following the interconnected lives of a group of West Hollywood lesbians compels comment and attention. The book was published in 2006, with contributors able to comment only on the first two seasons of *The L Word*. Reviewing the book in 2008, as season 5 is currently airing in the UK (scheduled for 2009, season 6 is slated to be the last) is a slightly uncanny experience. So, many of the contributors wonder whether the show will continue or how it will develop in terms of the themes that are centred here: looking and desire, diversity and identity politics. Coming so early in its run, the volume's rationale lies in an attempt to offer a rapid appraisal of the series. Contemporary readers will need to think about the arguments offered here against the ways in which *The L Word* has developed subsequently (both the coming out plot and the adultery plot identified by the collection continue to feature prominently).

Like other cable productions, *The L Word* has exploited the attractions of subject matter deemed too controversial for the networks. It has also made use of a number of the talents of women writers and directors, queer and otherwise, creative figures who have too often found getting films financed, finished and seen in theatres a challenge. As Michele Aaron writes, new queer cinema also turned out to be more receptive to gay men than lesbians. The involvement in the show of writer/director Rose Troche and writer/performer Guinevere Turner (both gained attention and acclaim for the 1994 movie *Go Fish*, a hit with lesbian audiences for its smart evocation of lesbian community) is suggestive. The collection features interviews with Turner and with some of the show's performers, juxtaposing academic, fan and industry commentary. All parties agree that *The L Word* stands out and requires attention. Yet one of the contradictions around the show, and it preoccupies many of the authors contributing to this collection, is that *The L Word* is in many ways pretty conventional. Unlike the new queer cinema, for instance, it is not particularly formally innovative. Nor is it particularly concerned with sexual or gender politics – although these certainly figure, as in the attempts

to deal with bisexuality or the recent storylines around Tasha's need to mask her sexuality if she is to continue to serve in the military. These issues figure since they are part of lesbian lives, even the relatively luxurious and open lesbian lives *The L Word* portrays.

Reading this collection reveals a range of responses to *The L Word*. On one hand there is a celebratory impulse, a recognition that as Sedgwick notes in her foreword (reprinted from an early comment piece) that just taking up space on television is somehow significant. There is also a strong strand of fandom, evident in the episode guide, in Kathy Belge's evocation of the show's sexiness and, rather differently, in the frustration Diane Anderson-Minshall expresses at the hostility towards discussion of the performers' sexuality. Equally though I get a strong feeling of disappointment from several of the book's contributors that somehow *The L Word* ought to offer more. This response oscillates between a sort of deflated 'is that all there is?' to a recognition of how the desire to speak to lesbian audiences is complexly (and at times crudely) coupled with the commercial need to attract other audiences. Merri Lisa Johnson explores the show's emphasis on monogamy, its 'uncritical allegiance to cultural norms of coupledness' (p. 132). Candace Moore and Kristen Schilt note the tendency to bypass and undervalue images of female masculinity, so much a part of lesbian culture.

Indeed, the underlying question for many of the contributors is one of representation. The glamour of the world portrayed, and the investment in conventional femininities on display is appealing and troubling in equal measure, so removed from most lesbian lives yet inscribing those lives in the very consumer culture that defines mainstream television and the world it pictures. As Samuel A. Chambers notes, lesbian visibility is not necessarily progressive (he reads the show as endorsing heteronormativity). Time and again the book comes back to this central contradiction: *The L Word* is not experimental TV, but it does something that television does not do as a rule, that is to evoke lesbians in terms of community rather than isolation, reinvigorating the clichés of coming out and lesbian motherhood against other stories of lived lesbian lives. *Reading the L Word* can not resolve these questions, but for those interested in the show and in lesbian representation, it is a valuable attempt to think them through.

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