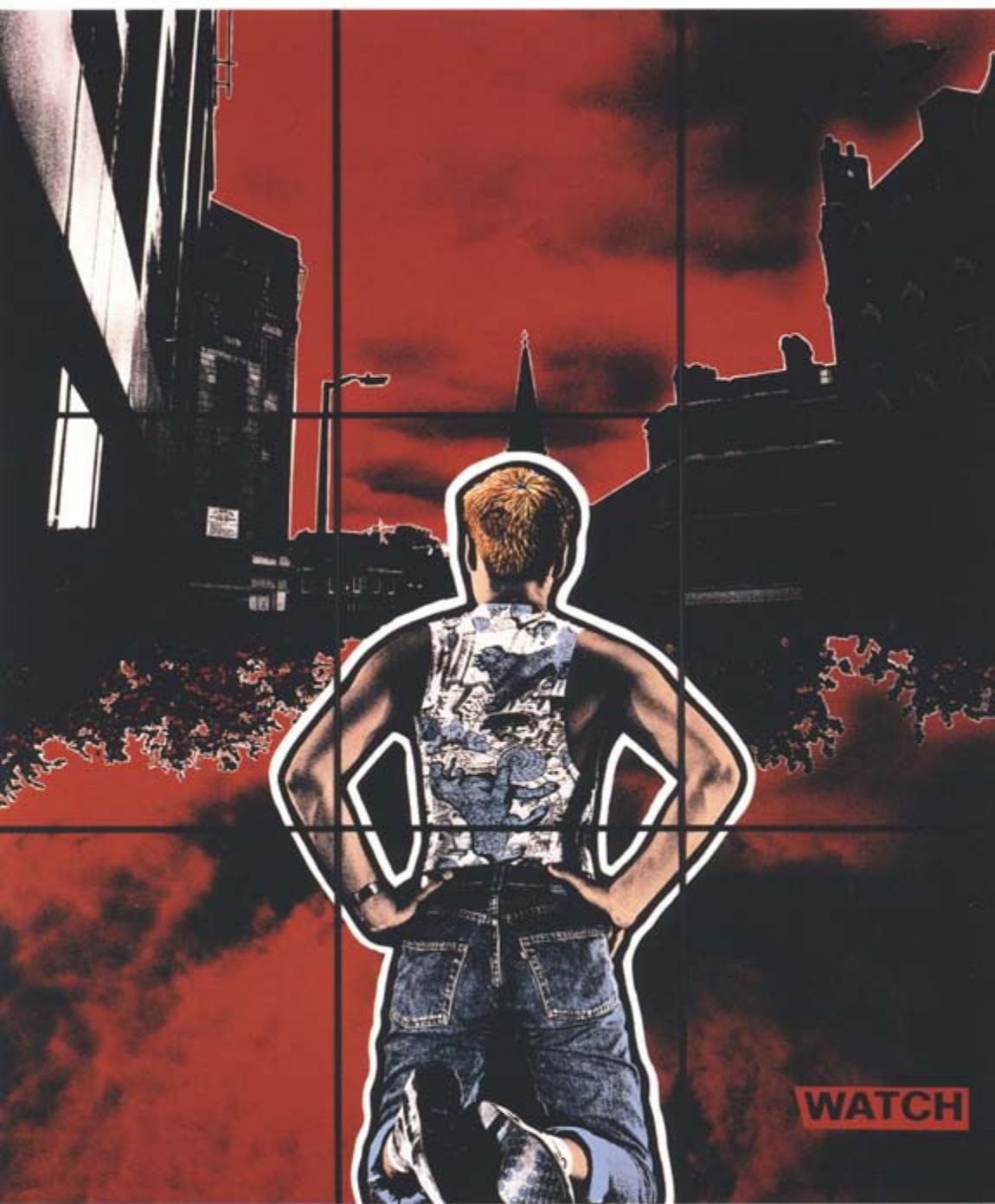


# VIRTUOUS VICE

*Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere*



ERIC O. CLARKE

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Edited by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg,  
Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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ERIC O. CLARKE

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appear on the last printed page of this book.

To my mother, Gerry Clarke, with love



## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere i

### I. THE SUBJUNCTIVE PUBLIC SPHERE

ONE Visibility at the Limits of Inclusion 29

TWO Autonomy and Conformity 68

### II. PRACTICES OF VALUE

THREE The Citizen's Sexual Shadow 101

FOUR Inseminating the Orient, Disseminating Identity 126

FIVE Shelley's Heart 148

Epilogue: Beyond Tolerance 169

Notes 173

Bibliography 215

Index 229





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## VIRTUOUS VICE



## INTRODUCTION    Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere

*Under the social conditions that translated private vices into public virtues, a state of cosmopolitan citizenship and hence the subsumption of politics under morality was empirically conceivable. — Jürgen Habermas, THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE*

*Publicity is the very soul of justice. —Jeremy Bentham, DRAUGHT FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF JUDICIAL ESTABLISHMENTS*

Homoeroticism has gone public like never before. As an embodied identity for public persons and media characters and as a reference point in literary and visual culture, intellectual debates, and commercial activities, homoeroticism has become a staple, if conflicted, feature of the U.S. public sphere. The national lesbian and gay press has enthusiastically embraced this unprecedented inclusion within public forms of representation — from television situation comedies, Hollywood films, glossy magazines, and lawmaking bodies, to educational institutions and corporate marketing practices. While enthusiastic narratives about lesbian and gay inclusion seem at first glance to be warranted, they fail to ask how this inclusion is defined, and on what terms it is granted. In its quest to secure inclusion, mainstream lesbian and gay politics in the United States has largely sought to reassure straight America that queers are “just like everyone else,” and thus has restricted itself to a phantom normalcy. It is tempting to read this strategy simply as an understandable and appropriate response to a pathologizing homophobia or, alternatively, as an impoverished restriction on the part of lesbian and gay politics and media culture. Both readings have some truth to them. However, neither reading can adequately explain the problematic entanglements between homoerotic representation and



the inclusive procedures of the public sphere itself. The historical and structural nature of these entanglements, and the representations they generate, form the central concerns of this book. As the “very soul of justice,” the democratic ideals claimed by publicity require a critical vigilance over both their normative thrust and material distribution.<sup>1</sup>

From its beginnings in the worldly interests and developing self-conception of an emergent middle class, the ideal of “publicity” or “the public sphere” aimed toward democratic self-determination. This ideal sought to guarantee uninhibited communication between persons conceptualized as equal in their capacity for rational deliberation. Private individuals were to assemble freely and equally to discuss issues of public interest and exercise their powers of critical judgment. At first the ideal of publicity grew out of the informational needs and literary activities of an educated commercial class in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. It then developed into a full-fledged class ideal of social, political, and cultural organization. As this ideal gradually attained hegemony within the institutions and organizations of civil society and the state in the nineteenth century, its status as a cornerstone of a just social order seemed all but assured. Indeed, this hegemony can be glimpsed in the enabling confusion manifest in the English translations of the German term *Öffentlichkeit* (from which current discussion about the public sphere largely derives): on the one hand “publicity” or “publicness” as a normative ideal, a *quality*, and on the other “the public sphere” as a material *thing*, a spatial ensemble of places, organizations, and practices. While it is true that the ideals of publicity live in and through specific outlets, such as voluntary associations or the mass media, it is useful to view these outlets as having a *normative relation* to publicity. To identify a set of outlets and their practices as forming a public sphere is an irreducibly evaluative judgment. By insisting that the public sphere signifies a *qualitative relation* and not necessarily a distinct place or totality of venues, those disenfranchised from the venues that claim publicness can ask more insistently whether they actually embody this quality. Moreover, understanding the public sphere as a qualitative relation enables the disenfranchised to question, and to formulate alternatives to, the norms to which the quality of publicness refers. Questioning the normative definition and material distribution of publicness as a quality cannot but have an importance for counterhegemonic formulations of public interest. One

of the primary historical achievements of middle-class hegemony, in fact, has been to conflate the quality of publicness with the organizations that claim to embody it, even as this embodiment may be partial, at best. This conflation was achieved at least in part by the democratic claims by which bourgeois forms of social, political, and economic organization have been justified. In this sense, “the public sphere” designates not so much a particular set of places or institutions, as the tense relation between Enlightenment ideals of democratic publicness and their material realizations.<sup>2</sup>

As the medium through which private people freely and equally came together to make public use of their reason, deliberating issues of concern to all in a manner open to all in principle, the bourgeois public sphere “undercut the principle on which existing [absolutist, monarchical] rule was based” and formulated new, more democratic values of social and self-governance.<sup>3</sup> Straddling a reconceptualized division between public and private that was rooted in the moral subject-formation of the bourgeois family and integrated within the commercial activities of the middle classes, the public sphere translated “private vices” into “public virtues”: acquisitiveness, competition, and rational calculation from private commerce; companionate love, voluntary association, and self-cultivation from the intimate domestic spaces of the conjugal family. It was, in fact, the new models of subjectivity generated within the bourgeois family that provided the public sphere with a decisively moral conceptualization of the human. As Jürgen Habermas indicates, “The sphere of the public [Publicums] arose in the broader strata of the bourgeoisie as an expansion and at the same time completion [Ergänzung] of the intimate sphere of the conjugal family.”<sup>4</sup> In the moral universe of the bourgeois family, “humanity [Humanität] had here its genuine site.”<sup>5</sup> Together with conceiving private persons as property owners, this essentially moral conception of humanity formed a “fictitious identity” upon which social equality and the democratic nature of the public sphere were based: “The public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. . . . Accordingly, the public that might be considered the subject of the bourgeois constitutional state [bürgerlichen Rechtsstaates] understood its sphere as a public one in this strict sense; in its deliberations it anticipated in principle that all human beings belong to it. The private person too, was simply a human being, that is, a moral person.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the ideal of universal access, how-

ever, the connections between a moral conception of personhood and bourgeois political and economic relations have had proprietary implications that historically have limited social enfranchisement for many.

Precisely because many constituent features of bourgeois publicity originated in the private sphere of commerce and the intimate sphere of the family, not all private “vices” were translated into public virtues. This was especially true for those whose experiences and social position marked them as lacking the characteristics deemed necessary for full enfranchisement. Crucially, the principles of translation from private to public retained by the bourgeois public sphere have historically contradicted its own universalist, democratic ideals. While claiming to establish a “context-transcending” sphere through which to adjudicate competing interests equitably, the conversion from private to public has involved quite particular, context-specific determinations of value. For example, the bourgeois public sphere explicitly excluded women from participation, based on their supposedly inferior rational capacities and resolute identification with the domestic. Because working-class men were not seen as owning property, they too were shut out from the institutions of free rational discussion. In the United States, the explicit disenfranchisement of African slaves of both sexes was based not simply on the fact that they did not own property, but that they *were* property. Even as marriage and labor were publicly valorized, their value was at the same time inequitably distributed; women were more often than not disenfranchised by the marriage contract, and the collective interests of socialized labor were routinely suppressed if not enslaved. And today, many of the racist presumptions of public sphere participation are channeled through linguistic qualifications, to which anti-immigration and English-only movements in the United States would attest. Historically, the intimate connections between *property* and *propriety* have determined in large measure the kinds of subject positions and experiences that could be translated into the legitimate grammar of a “general” public interest.

Habermas, the primary contemporary defender of publicity as a normative ideal, has countered that while such exclusions have historically marred the realization of the public sphere’s democratic principles, these principles retain a utopian capacity for “self-correction.” “In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” he argues, “the universalist discourses of the bourgeois public sphere could no longer immunize them-

selves against a critique from within. The labor movement and feminism, for example, were able to join these discourses in order to shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as ‘the other’ of a bourgeois public sphere.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it remains an open question how far the inclusive mechanisms of the public sphere can go in overcoming their historical limitations and admitting excluded groups, particularly when the very nature of such groups challenges the proprietary codes that (inappropriately) shape publicity practices. And thus it remains an even more urgent question what effects inclusion has in translating oppressed and/or minoritized concerns into issues of public interest. This book will seek to chart some of these effects in relation to homoeroticism and queer representation. Given the continuing purchase of public sphere ideals for conceptualizing justice, cultural vitality, and social organization (however contradictory this purchase may be), the effects of inclusion in the public sphere cannot but have an important bearing on the future of queer self-definition and its relation to the social.

Historically, the greatest impediments to queer public sphere inclusion have been twofold: first, the heterosexist tenor of the bourgeois familial morality defining proper civic personhood and universal humanity; and second, the relegation of erotic experience, which has largely shaped a queer sense of self and collective belonging, to the proprietary privacy of the intimate sphere. Acting together, these two impediments have meant that even as the public sphere both draws upon and legitimates specific forms of intimacy and erotic experience—indeed is saturated by spectacles of intimacy—those that do not conform to a heteronormative standard are demonized and repudiated. Paradoxically, the “affirming” spectacles of homoeroticism, or the embodied identities to which it is presumptively attached, that one does find in contemporary public culture largely conform to this heteronormative standard. These heroically bland affirmations pay for their admission with immiserating disavowals.

To name these affirmations as heteronormative thus marks a crucial aspect of dissent within *queer* thought and life: that sex, erotic experience, and identity formations are not necessarily coextensive. While there is (often confused) overlap between cross-sex eroticism and heteronormativity, the latter designates both something more and something less than specific acts and erotic experiences. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have persuasively argued, heteronormativity names “the institutions, structures

of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged.” Rather than an internally consistent set of norms, heteronormativity is more what Raymond Williams called a “structure of feeling,” one that aims to produce an entitled coherence. As Berlant and Warner argue, “It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts sex between men and women might not be heteronormative.”<sup>8</sup> By modeling homoerotic life according to a heteronormative standard, the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the public sphere grants them a sense of entitlement by repudiating that which defies or exceeds this proprietary standard. Here we find a distorted recapitulation of the bourgeois public sphere’s equation between morality and the human: instead of an egalitarian justice, a restrictive notion of *moral worth* now inappropriately functions as the distributive principle for social enfranchisement. Moreover, the authenticating goal of representing queers as they “really are,” which is to say, “just like everyone else,” dissimulates this type of moral value determination that mediates public discourse. The democratic norms of publicity intermingle with proprietary codes that, in fact, have little to do with democracy as an ideally egalitarian form of social organization and arena for self-determination. The capacity of the public sphere to “self-correct” is seriously compromised by the retention of historically particular, ideologically limiting principles for the determination of value and the distribution of equity.

To approach the salient structural and historical problems shaping the inclusion of homoeroticism, much of my investigation is focused through the category of value. The analytic and political force of this category, as one encounters it in Western Marxist thought, can suggest troubling limitations to the context-transcending claims of modern publicity. Value, I argue, provides an important analytic node for grasping the mediations by which inequalities are preserved under the cover of equality. I argue that the justice conferred by public sphere inclusion involves value relations that at the very least tend to produce a heteronormative sanitation of queer life. This sanitation cannot simply be attributed to prudery, although traditional

sexual mores are certainly a factor. Rather, I argue that it can be linked historically and structurally to what I call the “subjunctive mood” of bourgeois publicity.<sup>9</sup>

This subjunctive mood can be located first in the claim that because the public sphere is built on universalist ideals—equal representation, participation, and access for rational discussion—it has an irreducibly counterfactual aspect. As universal ideals, they may be approximated, but never fully realized. The vagaries of history and context will continually test their validity and application. Beyond elaborating its ideals as counterfactual, however, the public sphere also demands that one act as if the material practices and organizations associated with the public sphere unproblematically embody the ideals of democratic publicness. In terms of homoerotic representation, publicity’s subjunctive mood requires that one act as if equal representation, participation, and access are achieved through homogenized proxies—lesbians and gay men who are “just like everyone else.” This subjunctive requirement compresses the complex syntax of value in determining matters of public interest and, just as importantly, representations of public interest. By opening up this compressed process of value determination, I aim to problematize publicity’s utopian promise: that it is able, *through the subjunctive conceptualization of its ideals and their material embodiments*, to self-correct its historical exclusions. Even as excluded groups are brought into the fold, so to speak, the homogenization of interests and representations demanded by inclusion also indicates that it requires deferred and demonized remainders: queer persons and interests that would doubtless seem slightly out of place on a city council or in an Ikea commercial. Formulating ideals of democratic publicness as legitimately both impossible and actual, as at once “claimed and denied” in Habermas’s terms, allows inadequate principles for the distribution of representational equity to operate under the cover of the very equality they deny. It is in this sense that public sphere inclusion is irreducibly bound to relations of value that are dissembled by being written in the subjunctive.

The public sphere’s subjunctive mood can thus be characterized by two interrelated contradictions. The first is the contradiction between the ideal and the historical reality of the norms defining publicity. Exclusion goes against the grain of the public sphere’s democratic ideals. Habermas has responded by claiming for the public sphere an ever-expanding ability to dissipate social prejudice and redress its own exclusion of traditionally dis-

enfranchised persons and constituencies, even as the very ideals of the public sphere have historically been attached to a quite particular subject position: the white Euro-American, educated, presumptively heterosexual middle-class male who owns property. Habermas argues that “because publics cannot harden into organizations or systems, there is no exclusion rule without a proviso for its abolishment.” Such a proviso stems, in turn, from the fact that “boundaries inside the universal public sphere as defined by its reference to the political system remain permeable in principle. The rights to unrestricted inclusion and equality built into liberal public spheres prevent exclusion mechanisms of the Foucauldian type and ground a potential for self-transformation.”<sup>10</sup> The public sphere can self-correct because its own ideals provide the means to critique their instantiation. To claim that the public sphere has a built-in capacity to self-correct, however, raises a more fundamental question: Will the public sphere and its norms ever not need to remedy their own contradictions? Or to put it another way, will the democratic ideals of the public sphere always be held hostage to their contradictory articulations and materializations, by virtue of the claim that these ideals are necessarily counterfactual anyway? In their important revision of Habermas’s often overly optimistic analysis, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have pointed to the fact that, at least in Immanuel Kant’s classic statements concerning bourgeois publicity, the “construction of the public sphere derives its entire substance from the existence of owners of private property.”<sup>11</sup> This constitutes one of the core prevarications of the bourgeois public sphere exemplified in Kant’s political thought. In order for Kant to advance “universally valid rules of public communication,” he must also “negate this material base on which the public sphere rests . . . In a word: he can constitute bourgeois publicity neither with the empirical bourgeois-subject nor without it.”<sup>12</sup> This prevarication, they argue, indicates the extent to which the universal presumptions of bourgeois publicity were both founded on and set against “empirically given capitalist commodity production.”<sup>13</sup> To illustrate the exclusions enforced by this contradiction, Negt and Kluge include an intriguing footnote where they point out that “Kant must—with considerable violence of thought—exclude *one substantial group of humanity after another* as inadequate to this ‘true politics’: children, women, store clerks, day laborers, ‘even the hairdresser.’”<sup>14</sup> “The weakness characteristic of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere,” they conclude, “derives from this contra-

diction: namely, that the bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole.”<sup>15</sup> The gaps between publicity ideals and their manifestation may indeed indicate a diachronic project under construction; but historically these gaps also and perhaps more strongly pinpoint a constituent contradiction *within* this project’s self-understanding. To the extent that its ideals have been articulated as irreducibly counterfactual, and therefore on their own terms must remain contradicted by their historical manifestation, the public sphere can only ever asymptotically approach any consistency with these ideals, even as such consistency remains an operative, indeed demanded, pretension of publicity practices. It would therefore seem that the public sphere will always have a need to “self-correct.” The constitutive gap between ideal and history thus risks becoming merely a form of managed inequity. While this gap could provide the disenfranchised with the means to critique the failures of publicness, articulating publicness as “always already” counterfactual and requiring one to act as if it weren’t, disables critique with a legitimated contradiction. In this way, the public sphere risks an infinite deferral and dissimulation of its own promise.<sup>16</sup>

However, the second contradiction I would point to in the public sphere’s subjunctive mood concerns precisely its inclusionary promise. Were one to grant the public sphere’s capacity for self-correction, this capacity represents only one element in the process of bringing groups within the public sphere’s purview. More importantly, inclusion entails fundamental *transformations* in a group’s self-identified interests. On the one hand, the ideal of publicness certainly contains an irreducibly transformative force that beneficially aims toward a democratization of social life and hence the elaboration of fully enfranchised civic subjects. On the other, however, the normative thrust of this ideal is often contradicted by the proprietary codes through which it is realized. The democratic promise of civic subjectivity is often contradicted by the inclusive processes that would grant it. To achieve integration within forms of public discourse, excluded groups must appear to conform to the standards of the “normal citizen” by which they were excluded to begin with.<sup>17</sup> This does not just entail the erasure of difference, although this does occur; publicity’s conformist inertia can also render forms of difference into, for example, nonthreatening entertainment (as in the rather banal drag queens seen in a number of 1990s Hollywood films). With respect to queer life, the transformations demanded by inclusion compress



and thus mystify the processes of value determination they involve. These processes can be parsed into three interpenetrating modes:

*Mode One:* The determination of particular interests as worthy of the public interest. The structural division between public and private has traditionally relegated sexuality, other than the publicly decorous trappings of cross-sexual monogamous marriage and other entitled aspects of a heteronormative imaginary, outside the parameters of public interest. This structural impediment, largely rooted in the class-specific nature of the private/public divide, itself signifies the specific historical content embedded within the public sphere's putatively disinterested and universally valid norms. Given this structural impediment, queer efforts to become an integral part of a (however fictional) deliberative public have more often than not necessitated self-censorship. With regard to eroticism, only those private vices that conform to a heteronormative moral code are translated into legitimate public virtues. Thus elements of queer life that do not conform to this code are expunged with little, if any, regard for the imaginative diversity of queer life. Justified at least in part by the struggle for public sphere inclusion and equal rights, the denigration of erotic nonconformity in particular by prominent lesbians and gay men over the past few years confirms the constricting requirement for a heteronormative conformity. As Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed usefully summarize, "What good does liberation do a queen if his [sic] rights depend on no longer being a queen?"<sup>18</sup> Because the ideals of bourgeois publicity use unduly universalized moral codes to govern the distribution of equity, conformity to a historically particular, class-inflected, and often racially homogenized heteronormativity determines what precisely will and will not become valorized representations of queer life.

*Mode Two:* The mediation of queer interests by value formations unrelated to, yet mistaken for, the public sphere's ideal of participatory democracy. In the first mode, queer interests are bestowed value only insofar as they conform to the heteronormative standards retained within publicity's supposedly universal moral-political principles. In mode two, this bestowal becomes the alibi for, and thus is overlapped by, the mediation of homoeroticism through the extraction of commercial value. This mode is paradoxically the most blatant, but—perhaps for that very reason—the most unremarked. One finds it in every Absolut vodka image in lesbian and gay magazines, every corporate sponsorship of a lesbian and gay event, and in