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After Will & Ellen: Uneventful queer television

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In the second episode – entitled ‘Who’s Your Daddy?’ – of the rebooted sitcom *Will & Grace* (2017–), Will (Eric McCormack) goes on a date with 23-year-old Blake (Ben Platt), only to lecture him about the history of gay and lesbian liberation:

It’s great that you have no shame. I mean, you missed the joy of signing up for football to fool your parents. But you guys can never forget the struggle that came before you, the people that fought and loved and died so that you could walk down the street in skinny jeans with rights you never even knew you never had. The minute we forget what we went through to get here is the minute it could all be taken away. And that . . . Will be the night. The lights . . . Go out . . . In Georgia.

Obviously, Blake neither gets the campy reference to the cult monologue from the 1980s sitcom, *Designing Women* (1986–1991), nor seems open to such a cross-generational call for a shared gay political identity, thereby emphasising the age gap between the two gay men. Will, in turn (although left implicit by the series), sees Blake’s lack of response merely as youthful indifference rather than considering the possibility that a younger generation might have a queerer, less rigid sense of LGBTQI+ identities.

When lecturing about queer activism in our annual media activism course at the University of Amsterdam, I often feel like the 2017 Will. Most of my students take lesbian, gay and even trans visibility for granted. They cannot believe that the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres, now two decades ago, was ever a big deal. Yep, she’s gay . . . so what? They have grown up as teenagers watching ‘gay-friendly’ television series like *Glee* (2009–2015) and stars like Lady Gaga. To many of them, the annual Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade is just a carnivalesque celebration and another reason to party rather than a form of political activism demanding the right of inclusion and visibility, rooted in

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the gay and lesbian liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, like the 2017 Will, I might misread this seeming indifference as a lack of critical perspective. Some of my students rightfully point out that ‘queer’ and ‘LGBTQI+’ are often used as mere synonyms of ‘gay and lesbian’, that events like Amsterdam Pride have become commodified, serving the interest of corporate culture rather than queer communities, and that the demand for inclusion might happen at the expense of those ‘queers’ who do not fit within the now dominant forms of gay and lesbian visibility.

While the original *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) hardly can be seen as a radical contribution to ‘the struggle’ to which the 2017 Will is referring, the sitcom is part of a movement that Larry Gross has titled ‘up from invisibility’ (2001: 179–180), encompassing an increased visibility of gays and lesbians in the media, in the United States as well as in many other countries, including my native Netherlands. Back in the late 1990s, I was thrilled to see an openly gay male character on television that was neither stereotypically gay nor straight acting. His flamboyant and promiscuous – and thus stereotypically gay – best friend Jack (Sean Hayes) obviously was there to normalise Will as a man who ‘just happened to be gay’. Will looked and acted just like my friends (though some were more like Jack) and me, and we used similar humour and pop-cultural references as they did. It was a refreshing sight on television. However, even back then I recognised that the sitcom was reactionary rather than progressive. As Ron Becker writes, ‘*Will & Grace* had a decidedly gay sensibility, two openly gay characters, and relatively explicit references to gay sex, but the series carefully avoided representing same-sex physical intimacy and overtly political story lines’ (2006: 172). Will was safe: a White, cisgender male, non-promiscuous, upper-middle-class lawyer played by an openly straight actor (unlike Sean Hayes, who played Jack and who did not publicly come out as a gay man until after the original series of *Will & Grace* had ended). What attracted me to Will – the recognisable ordinariness of his gayness – also made *Will & Grace* such a reactionary sitcom.

Here a comparison can be made to *Ellen* (1994–1998), the sitcom, its main character, as well as the actress who portrayed her. The popular success of *Ellen* and its cancellation after both the fictional and the ‘real’ Ellen came out, created space for *Will & Grace* to present a more acceptable and sustainable gay character on network television. Will was possible at the expense of Ellen, not only because he was a gay man and she a lesbian woman but also because Will was just gay in the fictional world while Ellen came out twice: the fictional Ellen on her sitcom after being coached by her therapist played by Oprah Winfrey (30 April 1997) and the ‘real’ Ellen on the ‘Yep, I’m Gay’ cover of *Time* magazine (14 April 1997) and again to Oprah Winfrey, but this time on the latter’s talk show the afternoon before the coming out episode was broadcast. Seven years later, the cast of *Will & Grace* also appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (23 January 2004). In spite of the sitcom’s gayness, nothing was said about homosexuality. Instead the focus was on the pregnancy of Debra Messing (the actress who plays Grace) and the straight marriage and recent fatherhood of Eric McCormack, while the personal lives of the then-closeted Sean Hayes and the allegedly bisexual Megan Mullally (the actress who plays Karen) were not discussed. Ellen came out as lesbian into the ‘real’ world; the gayness of *Will & Grace* was contained within the fictional world of the sitcom.

In her analysis of *Ellen*'s final season, rather than only discussing the famous coming out episode, Anna McCarthy refutes the prevailing argument that *Ellen* was a failure that enabled the success of *Will & Grace*. The discussion whether the 'out' Ellen was either 'too gay' (too progressive) or 'not gay enough' (too reactionary) is unproductive. Instead, McCarthy highlights the relationship between queerness as an interruptive force that challenges the status quo versus the mundane banality of network television in general, and the sitcom in particular. As she argues:

Its fear of a quotidian, ongoing lesbian life on television suggests that, although the network could support queer television as a spectacular media event, [ABC] could not sanction a lesbian invasion of serial television's more modest form of history making, the regularly scheduled weeks of televisual flow. Queer TV, in short, could make history as event television but not as what we might call 'uneventful' television. (2001: 597)

The question, then, is not whether *Will & Grace* was more or less progressive than *Ellen*, but rather how *Will & Grace* was able to turn the queer event television of coming out episodes into the queer uneventful television of a sitcom based on daily gay life. One answer lies in the emphasis the sitcom placed on the impossible romantic relationship between Will and Grace, a familiar sitcom trope in which the difference in sexual identity works similarly to the class difference that kept apart housekeeper Tony Micelli (Tony Danza) from his employer Angela Bower (Judith Light) in *Who's the Boss?* (1984–1992) or nanny Fran Fine (Fran Drescher) from aristocrat Maxwell Sheffield (Charles Shaughnessy) in *The Nanny* (1993–1999). Parallel to how these two latter sitcoms ended with holy matrimony, the final episode of the original *Will & Grace* series includes a flash forward to the chance encounter between Will's future son and Grace's future daughter, enabling a strict heteronormative closure to their parents' impossible romance. The episode 'Acting Out' (22 February 2000) is another example of how *Will & Grace*'s potentially disruptive queerness is made ordinary and thus becomes depoliticised. When Jack stages a protest at the NBC's headquarters to demand the first gay kiss on network television, Will at first dismisses his friend's activism as silly (acting out rather than Act[ing] Up), but then kisses him in front of the live cameras of NBC's *The Today Show*. While literally the first gay kiss on network television (thus seemingly a disruptive queer event), the kiss is not a passionate exchange between gay male lovers, but an act of compassionate yet platonic friendship. Indeed, as *The Today Show*'s Al Roker tells Jack, 'Sometimes a kiss is just not a kiss'.

Two decades later the rebooted *Will & Grace* immediately disregarded its original heteronormative closure by suggesting it was simply Karen daydreaming, enabling the sitcom to return to its focus on the impossible romance of Will and Grace. The 'real' Ellen, in the meantime, had become the popular host of her syndicated television talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003–present). In 2018, she returned to stand-up comedy for a Netflix special, in which she referred to her sitcom past:

I lost my sitcom when I came out and it took three years for me to get back on television. There was this one station manager that said, 'No-one's going to watch a lesbian during the day'. So I said, 'Well, they weren't watching me at night, what time of day is good for a lesbian?'

Ellen's current popularity makes the joke funny (as she clearly has proven the station manager wrong) and also suggests that lesbian invisibility on network television is an issue from the past. However, as Andre Cavalcante (2015) has illustrated, sitcoms like *Modern Family* (2009–present) continue to use White gay men to make homosexuality 'normal' and 'unmarked by difference' at the expense of characters that are presented as 'other' based on gender, race and class differences, as well as having gay male characters distance themselves from 'extreme' queerness, both sexually and politically.

I doubt that my students watch the rebooted *Will & Grace*, but they do watch Netflix shows like *Sense8* (2015–2018), *Master of None* (2015–2017) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017–present), which all include LGBTQI+ characters who are neither defined by their sexual, gender and ethnic identities nor forced to be rendered invisible. 'You know I'm gay, right?' Tony Padilla (Christian Navarro) asks Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette) in *13 Reasons Why*, presenting his sexual identity as a given that hardly needs to be declared. In *Master of None*, the Black lesbian Denise 'digs straight girls', yet her gayness is not discussed until the eighth episode of the second season (12 May 2017). Based on the personal history of actress Lena Waithe, the episode is entirely devoted to Denise's coming out story, presented not as a single event but an ongoing process. In *Sense8*, Nomi, played by White trans woman Jamie Clayton, uses Pride to highlight the solidarity that connects different races, genders and sexualities: 'Today I march to remember that I'm not just a me. I'm also a we and we march with pride'. What these series share is the notion that sexual and gender identities matter without always being an event, that they can be explicitly recognised without being problematised and that they can be taken for granted without being made invisible.

The 2017 *Will* is right to remind us that the earlier struggles for gay and lesbian visibility should not be forgotten. As Richard Dyer says: '[There have been times when] gay and lesbians were not only hidden [from history] but literally invisible. Even when they were in full view you would not necessarily know that they were there' (quoted in Grant and Kooijman, 2016). These movements up from invisibility have made a difference and still matter. Yet, while the event television of Ellen's coming out and the uneventful television of *Will*'s ordinary gayness may be seen as achievements, they do not necessarily resonate with younger generations searching for more inclusive LGBTQI+ representations. The moment when the older generation of *Will*, Ellen and myself dismisses the concerns of younger ones as indifference, when the achieved gay and lesbian visibility is at the expense of other queers, and when the inclusion of one means the exclusion of the other, that will be the night the lights go out in Georgia.

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