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Metrosexual

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Metrosexual. The metrosexual male (there is no female metrosexuality) is commonly understood, in the North American and British use of the term, to be a young man who, shunning any reluctance and hesitation informed by received notions and expectations of masculine patterns of behavior, engages in grooming to the betterment of his appearance. That is: the metrosexual male will attend to his clothes and hair, will employ hair conditioners, skin creams and moisturizers, with the understanding that this will render him more attractive to the opposite sex. Such traditionally female concerns with appearance are not perceived to be a challenge to his heterosexuality – his “hetero-certainty” as Queer theorists put it – but, rather, an enhancement of his sexual potential, his “pulling power”. In these respects, the metrosexual represents an emergent consumer group – a group in search of grooming products specifically designed and marketed to a set of needs, and a group with the potential to propel a niche market into the mainstream.

The female, encountering the metrosexual male, will find evidenced a concern with appearance, and thus the potential of the male to be “arm candy”, preferable to the rough and ready males otherwise available (unmoisterized, clothing as considered in predominantly utilitarian ways, haircuts standardized and manageable, carrying the sweat and wear of the day, etc). Furthermore, this concern for appearance, it could be surmised, is indicative of intelligence, character and a general concern for others (the “sensitive man”, akin to the “singer-songwriter” model; not homophobic or racist or given over to violence; a reader; domestic in the sense of a cook, a cleaner and an ironer), and a creative temperament (the so-called “Renaissance man” and then “new man” of the late 1980s and onwards). And, further still, metrosexuality denotes upward mobility; freed from the blue collar environs of the building site, the factory floor, the lorry cab, and so on, the metrosexual male comes to understand the

importance of affective labor in the white collar environs of the office, the up-market cafe, the conference or presentation room. From the working class female perspective, and in respect to societal affirmations given to post-war embourgeoisement, the metrosexual represents an economic progression from the male role models adopted by the generation of their fathers and grandfathers. With embourgeoisement comes the migration from rural to urban areas, and the consolidation of city-center lifestyles, and so the phenomenon of metrosexuality is understood to germinate and occur in the centers of society – the metropolitan areas and their forms of lifestyles. (The earliest uses of the term metrosexual in the popular press, in the mid-1990s, coincides with urban regeneration and the repopulation of formerly desolate city centers). As Houlbrook notes in his study of London's queer subcultures, the city, with its plethora of available experiences – particularly for the newly arrived and the naive – thus becomes “... a productive space that generates and stabilizes a new form of selfhood and way of life... a space of affirmation, liberation, and citizenship...” (Houlbrook, *Queer London*: 2005, 3). Metrosexuality thus engenders and finesses further upward mobility.

Such themes of new modes of male presentation and upward mobility underlie the advertising campaigns for male skin moisturizers, which are often provided with the caveat that they are related to shaving, to hair conditioners, and the sexualisation of the male body in advertisement for male underwear (the footballer David Beckham, held to be an embodiment of the metrosexual ideal, has modeled for Armani campaigns in recent years). In this way, the social dividend of upward mobility – sexual activity – is understood to be available via a new beauty regime, and new concerns of self-presentation, now appropriate to the social spaces of the urban conurbation.

The Ideological Positions of Metrosexuality

This phenomenon represents two problematic areas. Firstly, that the attraction for the male of adopting a more metrosexual lifestyle / appearance, is an attraction predicated on the idea of increased sexual conquests – the very opposite of the intention as read by the female encountering the metrosexual male. In itself, this contradiction between perception and intention is no different from those associated with all forms of male grooming and presentation, and indeed seemingly disinterested display of sophistication, maturity and wit mounted to impress the object of desire. Secondly, and more convolutedly, the phenomenon as described – in male, heterosexual, patriarch terms, in respect to female heterosexuality and with the assumption of a female tendency to search for one, “appropriate” male – is highly retrogressive. This indicates the way in which metrosexuality, once identified in the real world, had been capitalized upon by advertising companies, reconceptualised and arguably heterosexualised in the process, and then rearticulated in respect to a further opening up of markets so that previously minority products take on a wide appeal. It is thus that metrosexuality is relayed into the market by commerce, via the imagery of advertisements, but also in, as ever, symbiotic relationship with magazines, comment and opinion pieces in newspapers, the profiles of newly emergent celebrities, and so forth.

The striking heterosexualisation of metrosexuality (in the Armani images of Beckham, for example, machismo is merely “reframed” via a metrosexual window dressing) points to the perceived homosexual origins of a concern with male grooming. Any attempt at a prettification, even towards entirely heterosexual ends,

had traditionally been met with contempt. In John Steinbeck's 1937 novella *Of Mice and Men*, the character of Curley, who applies Vaseline to his hands so as to ensure softer skin for the benefit of his wife, elicits suspicion from his fellow rural workers. The Hollywood *film noir* antagonist is either a roughian or heavy (slow, ape-like and violent; "primitive" as a model of man) or smooth (well-presented, effeminate, with a concern for his mother, and surrounded by other men). More recently, the *South Park* episode "South Park is Gay" posited annoyance in the town's homosexual community at an outbreak of metrosexuality, perceived as an intrusive "faking" of homosexuality. The bohemian homosexuals among the "Bright Young Things" of the 1920s, who adopted feminine fashions, even to the point of transvestitivism and unconcealed make-up, were understood to be flaunting their sexual difference; resigned to their role as sodomites and outcasts, they sought to rejoice in such marginalization rather than (as polite society would increasingly demand, particularly during the austere years after the Second World War) remain effectively invisible. These exceptions that proved the rule, however, can be seen as forerunners to the male of the "glam rock" period. Here make-up, an ambiguous sexuality, "gender-bending" (a becoming ambiguous in sexual orientation and/or gender) were briefly entirely in vogue in popular, mainstream culture. Urban myths concerning men from building sites carefully applying make-up prior to a night out in fashionable urban clubs in the first half of the 1970s speak of the ending of a ghettoisation of the cultures of sexual difference. Although the "glam" period is often considered as forgotten, or remembered with embarrassment, this second "Summer of Love" (entirely comparable, that is, to 1967 in its attempt at utopian modes of existence) has long remained in the popular consciousness, particularly through pop music. Yet this afterlife, when considered in relation to the very *lack* of homosexuality (David

Bowie's seeming eventual heterosexuality, Morrissey's proclaimed asexuality, and the straightness of effeminate and "queeny" Brett Anderson of Suede) was criticized by queer theorists as "tourist homosexuality": an acting gay rather than being gay – an acceptable simulacrum in an industry with radical pretensions but deeply conservative practices and politics. In this criticism, the feminization of males would seem to be a legacy of a homosexual bucking of the trend. In this respect, metrosexuality owes its biggest debt to homosexual cultures, in direct opposition to heterosexualisation of commercialized metrosexuality.

However, this lineage merely re-enforces the idea that the essence of metrosexuality is a concern with presentation on the part of the male or, more precisely, the male who is not ashamed to exhibit evidence of a concern with appearance. This raises the question as to whether metrosexuality really does represent a new phenomenon; from the dandy of the 1920s to the medallion man of the 1970s, presentation has been a facet of seductive strategies. It is arguable, therefore, that motor for metrosexuality is the female, who now wishes to have less heterosexually-sexualized males. The "metro-" of the term *also* suggests that the urban-dwelling female, upon encountering the urban-dwelling male (that is: those in the domain of white collar, tertiary and affective labor) no longer requires outward signs of sexual prowess from this group. The "rough and ready" is readily available in the hinterland (figuratively, and literally: the gentrification of inner cities has banished the previous occupants to the city outskirts). Metrosexuality, therefore, suggests a new class stratification and codification of female desire rather than – as is often understood – the enlightenment that occurs through a breaking of sexual role models.

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