

Queer Visual Pleasures and the Policing of Male Sexuality in Responses to Images of David Beckham

Abstract

Since he stepped out in a sarong in 1998 David Beckham's sexuality and gendered image has been a popular topic of discussion in the media. He has also attracted academic attention for the expanded range of masculinities he seems to represent. Some academic study of Beckham has employed 'queer theory' to analyse the destabilising of gender that his public presentations seem to embody but little attention has been paid to the specifically visual dynamics of images of Beckham. In this essay, I take Sam Taylor-Wood's *David* (2004) as a starting point to suggest the types of visual pleasure which images of Beckham might be seen to offer to both male and female audiences. For the remainder of the essay I focus on an Armani male underwear advertisement from the 2007-08 campaign. Informed by discourse analysis and queer theory, I identify a set of 'queer' responses to the advertisement, suggesting they represent the 'policing' of male sexuality which often accompanies potential signifiers of homoeroticism. I conclude by considering how and why Beckham has retained his status as a heteronormative masculine icon despite his continued appearance in homoerotic images.

Keywords: Beckham; queer theory; masculinity; masculinities; advertising; sexuality; homophobia; gender; Armani

Queer Visual Pleasures and the Policing of Male Sexuality in Responses to Images of David Beckham

Since his public appearance in a sarong in 1998, David Beckham's sexuality and gendered image has been a popular topic of discussion in the media.¹ As Gary Whannel observes in *Media Sports Stars: Masculinities and Moralities* (2002, 204), masculinity has been a recurring theme in tabloid responses to Beckham's performances both on and off the pitch. In this essay, I focus on a particular advertisement featuring Beckham from the Armani male underwear advertising campaign of 2007-08, in order to suggest the queer appeal of images of Beckham – an appeal suggested not only by the image itself but by responses it attracted.

Whilst Beckham has appeared in several advertisements during his career, and indeed other male footballers have modelled for Armani underwear, I suggest the particular advertisement focused on here is significant for the responses it drew from the tabloid press. I suggest that these responses, on the one hand, articulated Beckham's body as a site for various types of visual pleasures and, on the other, represent instances of the 'policing' of male sexuality, as Beckham's exposed body became the subject of intense visual scrutiny and concern regarding the boundaries of heteronormativity. In considering the policing of masculinity, the essay is informed by a Foucauldian perspective on the shaping nature of gender discourses. Whannel suggests that the 'tabloidisation of the press' has 'encouraged a culture of surveillance in which miscreants are punished by publicity' (2002, 145) with the tabloid press as the village stocks (154). Whilst responses to Beckham certainly indicate such a monitoring, they co-exist with an increasingly visible and often queered male body. Rosalind Gill has suggested that in the years since Nick Kamen appeared in the Levi 501 'Launderette' advertisement in 1985, male bodies have become increasingly visible and objectified, with an 'ongoing transformation in depictions of the male body' (2011, 29). As Foucault demonstrated in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977), the body is the central focus of surveilling cultures and becomes the subject of regulatory discourses.

As well as a Foucauldian framework, also central to my discussion is an engagement with queer theory. As a branch of poststructuralist gender studies, queer theory concerns itself largely with gender and sexuality,² working to expose the logic of heterosexualising thinking, unfix gendered or sexual 'identities' and explore marginalised or 'deviant' subject positions. Whilst Beckham himself is, of course, not marginalised, he is an attractive object of queer study due to the homoerotic potential of the images in which he appears. Ellis Cashmore claimed that Beckham is 'an infinitely mutable being who can accommodate any number of apparent contradictions – straight and gay; disobedient and respectful; ostentatious and bashful; transcendent and earthy' (2004, 55). Whilst Ellis does not point out the inherent queerness of these contradictions, it is exactly these kind of incongruous pairings in which queer theorists are interested. Regardless of Beckham's own (hetero)sexuality, queer theory is a useful tool for examining representations of him and the responses they elicit. In particular, as a deconstructive methodology that involves 'reading against the grain', queer theory can work to undermine the logic of seemingly straightforward tabloid responses to Beckham's public images.

In recent years Beckham has become the subject of academic analysis in the study of celebrity, sport, gender and sexuality. Cashmore's *Beckham* (2002) marked the beginning of this interest. Written for both an academic and a general audience, the book offers a persuasive account of the ways in which Beckham's image and persona is both constructed and historically specific. However, as an accessible study, *Beckham* is little shaped by an engagement with gender theory or by close reading of visual representations. A more focused analysis of Beckham and masculinity is Momin Rahman's 2004 essay 'David Beckham as a historical moment in the representation of masculinity',³ examining magazine articles on Beckham over a six-month period in 2002 in relation to queer theory and ideas of 'gender destabilization'. However, whilst images comprise some of Rahman's objects of study, there is little or no distinction between his approach to these and written text. In fact the majority of essays about Beckham and masculinity appear in the field of sociology or social history rather than that of visual culture,⁴ despite Beckham's dominating visual

presence over the last decade or so. This essay proposes therefore to attend to the specifically visual dynamics of images of Beckham, and how they relate to queer theory and the gendered gaze. After discussing the Armani Beckham advertisement, and the variety of queered responses it attracted, I conclude by considering what a heteronormative yet queered Beckham means for contemporary masculinities, in particular the degree to which his public images represent a challenge to 'hegemonic masculinity' – that is 'successful ways of 'being a man' in particular places at a specific time' (Beynon 2002, 16). Before discussing the Armani campaign though, I wish to briefly consider Sam Taylor-Wood's video portrait *David* (2004), in order to introduce discourses of visual pleasure apparently effected by images of Beckham's body.

In Bed with Beckham: Sam Taylor-Wood's *David*

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Sam Taylor-Wood's *David* (Fig. 1) is a 67-minute long video work, consisting of a single take of Beckham asleep in bed during a post-training siesta in a Madrid hotel room.⁵ The footballer exposes a naked upper torso and arms adorned with tattoos, wears a silver necklace glistening in the light, and an earring seen in his exposed ear. The piece is warmly lit, giving Beckham's already-tanned skin a healthy glow. Beckham's highlighted hair flops away from his face towards the pillow, leaving his well-defined features to cut a clear outline against the dark background.

On a *Newsnight Review* discussion of *David* panellists spoke about the work in terms of a feminized aesthetic. Linda Ruth Williams suggested the work is a kind of 'Snow White for girls', Paul Morley described Beckham as 'beautiful' and 'a sleeping beauty', whilst Rosie Boycott admired the work for allowing the viewer to take the position of David's lover, beside him (*Newsnight Review*). Elsewhere, Charlotte Higgins (2004) claimed that the work is 'unashamedly beautiful' due to Beckham's curving musculature and 'honey'-toned skin whilst Richard Dorment, like Morley, described Beckham as a 'sleeping beauty' (2004).⁶ In these responses Beckham is cast as a passive feminized heroine, whilst the viewer (male or

female) enacts the role of fairy-tale Prince with the potential to claim Beckham as their prize. This, in fact, is also how Taylor-Wood saw the work; following an interview with the artist, the art critic Waldemar Januszczak claimed that Taylor-Wood ‘fancies ... that this is Beckham as Sleeping Beauty, and that visitors ... will always encounter him in exactly this delightful fairy-tale state’ (2004, 9). However, at the same time, Beckham remains in *David* an embodied, sexualised being. The viewer is confronted by Beckham’s naked torso, the rest of his body, out of the frame, signalled by his left hand which alternates between resting by his face and reaching down to his lower body. At various points throughout the piece Beckham shifts his position, moves his head or moistens his lips. At such moments the work is erotic and seductive, effecting an intimacy with Beckham’s image which is underlined by the use of his first name for the title of the piece and by the close proximity of the viewer to the frame.⁷ Furthermore, male physical perfection is connoted through the titular connection with Michelangelo’s sculpture *David* (1501-04). Taylor-Wood’s *David*, therefore, allows the viewer to imagine Beckham as at once a fairy-tale figure, a specimen of ideal physical masculinity and a sexualised being. During one of its runs at the National Portrait Gallery *David* shared the ‘Sporting Lives’ display with two other time-based works – Dryden Goodwin’s *Sustained Endeavour: Sir Steven Redgrave* (2006, NPG 6767) and Marty St James’ and Anne Wilson’s *Duncan Goodhew* (1990, NPG 6815) – but neither of these focused on the athlete’s body as does *David*.⁸ Furthermore, both works featured an athlete during activity or movement, whereas in *David* Beckham is doing nothing but sleeping, there purely to be looked at. Interestingly, the nearby ‘Champions’ room, which contained black-and-white nude photographic portraits of male and female sports stars, inadvertently pointed to the potential destabilization of the active male subject when photographed for display, thereby forming an unintended dialogue with *David* and bringing to the fore the problems of displaying the male body.⁹

My reason for opening with this brief consideration of *David* is to draw attention to the multiplicity of visual pleasures seemingly offered by the work. In responding to *David* critics have articulated an aesthetic that is pleasing to women and men, and that effeminizes but

does not emasculate. Beckham can be at once both prince and princess – a perfect queer subject. Furthermore, as with all portraits, *David*, despite appearances, does not offer unmediated access to Beckham's body (although the illusion that it does is part of its appeal) but rather objectifies Beckham in much the same way as his many fashion shoots, a process obscured by the work's occupation of the respectable visual register of fine art. Following *David*, Barry Smart suggested 'Undoubtedly other cultural texts on Beckham will emerge in due course' (2005, 144). I wish now to focus attention on another significant visual 'cultural text' on Beckham.

“Is he or Isn't he?”

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In December 2007 Beckham appeared in the first of a series of advertisements for a campaign for Armani male underwear (Fig. 2). The advert appeared on billboards in the UK, America and Europe and attracted considerable attention. Beckham is pictured reclining on a bed with an open white shirt falling from his shoulders, legs apart, hands resting on crumpled sheets and looking out at the viewer from beneath a slight frown. When Beckham was a young football player there were concerns about his physical stature and strength (Cashmore 2004, 28), but having since transformed himself into a superior physical specimen Beckham is now hard-bodied, with rippling muscles and taut skin – an ideal model for male underwear. In a photo shoot for *Now* magazine (29 September 2008), British swimming champion and *Strictly Come Dancing* contestant Mark Foster imitated the pose, investing him, according to the feature, with 'Becks Appeal'. The Armani advertisement therefore became a visually recognisable sign for male sexual and physical attractiveness. Sales of Armani underwear rose dramatically following the advertisement, suggesting that its promise of what Jonathon E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick call the 'transformational power' of consumer products is strong (2004, 43).¹⁰

The advertisement was produced by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, an advertising duo known for the sometimes 'queer' aesthetic of their fashion shoots and advertising

campaigns. The reclining Beckham is just one of several advertisements in the campaign but this was the image that soon became the iconic one. Alas and Piggott also shot the Rafael Nadal Armani advertisements beginning in 2011. These too articulate a queer aesthetic as Nadal poses in various sexually available positions (although with a focus on his buttocks rather than the crotch shot featured in the Beckham advertisements).¹¹ The Beckham Armani advertisement therefore exists within a context of other queered images of the male body which themselves have visual precedents. Marky Mark (Mark Wahlberg) famously posed for Calvin Klein underwear in 1992 whilst the Swedish footballer Fredrik Ljungberg modelled Calvin Klein underwear from 2003-07 in one of their most successful campaigns to date. Mort (1996) and Nixon (1996) have explored the emergence of the commodified male image in the twentieth century whilst Breward (1999) explores the development of the fashion conscious male consumer in the nineteenth century. At the time of the Armani campaign, Beckham was already a familiar object of display, appearing for advertisements for Gillette (2004-07) and Police sunglasses (2006-06).

Following the appearance of the Beckham Armani advertisement, a thread on the *Men's Health* magazine internet discussion board was started by a man who revealed that, although 'straight', he had found the image sexually arousing.¹² The advertisement also sparked public debate about Beckham's own sexuality as it was perceived to have a homoerotic appeal. For example, Britain's best-selling tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, which thrives on sexualised content,¹³ put 'gay TV presenter and Big Brother winner' Brian Dowling on the case to find out 'Becks: Which side is he on?' after claiming that the advertisement sent their 'gaydar haywire' (2007). Dowling was asked to 'study the evidence and give his authoritative view' on Beckham's sexuality. Supporting 'evidence' for the case of Beckham being homosexual included him having worn a 'skirt' (the sarong in 1998), donned Victoria's thongs, used face cream and been waxed and tweezed. This type of investigation is, of course, conducted tongue-in-cheek and for entertainment's sake but the play on words in the title works precisely because Beckham is commonly held to be a 'metrosexual',¹⁴ interchangeable in the tabloid imagination with homosexuality. Other journalists have also

played on the issue of Beckham's sexuality for attention-grabbing headlines, such as Tom Utleby with 'The Beckham conundrum: is he or isn't he?' (2004), which actually refers to whether or not Beckham is asleep in *David*, whilst Januszczak opens a review of *David* with a mock confession: 'I have an admission to make. I've slept with David Beckham' (2004, 8). Clearly for these male writers there is some pleasure to be had in either posing questions about Beckham's sexuality or in placing themselves in an erotic relation to Beckham, in order to tease and entertain the newspaper's audience. Whilst Dowling's inevitable conclusion that Beckham is heterosexual could be said to ultimately 'shore up' hegemonic masculinity (as Rahman suggests of magazine coverage of Beckham (2004, 228)), the repeated jokes about his sexuality point to the queer and destabilising potential of the Armani image.

What is particularly noticeable about Dowling's response is the pleasure he takes in the unfixing of Beckham's sexual subject position. Dowling claims: 'Posh is so lucky: She has a lover, husband and gay best friend all rolled into one', recognising Beckham's heterosexuality but also queering him. The article therefore works at two basic levels. At one level is the straightforward 'is he or isn't he?' line of questioning, troping the language of the law ('evidence') and ultimately being resolved (Beckham is heterosexual). On the other, Dowling's musings work against the grain of the article's content; although asserting that Beckham is heterosexual, Dowling continues to cast him in various gay subject positions: 'gay best friend', 'gay lover' and 'the perfect gay man'. This exploratory scope does not undermine the resolution of the article – the final section reassures the reader that 'Becks is a red-blooded, football-loving, heterosexual man who is crazy about his wife' – but points to an alternative imagined sexual script for Beckham along the way. Beckham therefore emerges from the article as both gay (at an imagined level) and heterosexual (at an actual level), prompted by the imaginative visual appeal of the Armani advertisement. Dowling's response suggests the alternative sexual 'scripts' which images of Beckham might be seen to write, even if these should ultimately be relinquished as Beckham is recuperated for heterosexuality. In its active imagining, Dowling's response exemplifies Nikki Sullivan's claim

that 'We are never simply consumers of popular cultural texts, but in and through our very 'reading' of them we actively (re)create them.' (2003, 189).

It is significant at this point to note another queer response to Beckham. Rahman's identification of Beckham's audiences as 'gay, straight men, straight women' suggests either a homogenisation of gay groups or a neglect of gay women (2004, 228). However, recent lesbian interest in Beckham has labelled him a 'dykon' – a lesbian icon (Doyle, 2008).¹⁵ Whilst a gay icon is a role inhabited by both men (for example, Beckham) and women (for example, Kylie Minogue), a 'dykon' usually exclusively refers to women.¹⁶ The description of Beckham as a 'dykon' therefore recasts him in a female role and is further testimony to his queer appeal.

The 'Policing' of Masculinity

Whilst Dowling's response to the Armani advertisement simultaneously confirms Beckham's heterosexuality yet also gives play to an imaginative homoerotic potential, others were much more circumscriptive. In the same newspaper as Dowling's piece was a very different reaction from sports and television presenter Adrian Chiles (2007). Chiles derides Beckham for appearing in the advertisement – 'You're above this Beckham'. His criticism is implicitly framed through class, the colloquial 'daft' connoting a working-class commonsense thinking, betrayed by Beckham's materialistic narcissicism. Chiles' message invokes the imperative of what, following Adrienne Rich (1980), has been described as 'compulsory heterosexuality' – a mechanism Nikki Sullivan identifies as the 'tool *par excellence* of patriarchy' (2003, 120).

Chiles' response can be seen as that of what has been termed the 'retrosexual',¹⁷ – the man on the rearguard to protect masculinity against the rise of the 'metrosexual' – (especially given that few of the online forum contributors agreed with him).¹⁸ His chastising of Beckham bears out the poststructuralist claim that gender is relational, defined as much by what it is not as what it is. Martin Francis has noted, for example, that 'the expansion of queer history has reminded historians that normative masculinity not merely seeks to make distinctions between men and women (and between men and children), but also between

different categories of men' (2002, 638). Such work has been informed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) which, as its title suggests, explored the dynamics between men and other men, rather than between men and women, as productive of the defining features of normative masculinity. We gain then from Chiles' article an idea of what masculinity is *not* as he implicitly seeks to differentiate heteronormative masculinity from other forms (in particular emasculated and homosexual). For Chiles, masculinity is not compatible with putting oneself on display, semi-naked, for the purposes of modelling. Tim Edwards has argued that:

masculinity fundamentally and psychologically depends on the disavowal not only of femininity but of homosexuality, and, in doing so, is predicated upon a lack, or absence, rather than a given, or presence ... Masculinity as a positive identification depends on a double, not single, negative dissociation. (2005, 61)

Chiles does not explicitly identify a homoerotic quality to the Armani advert but his response can be seen as the type of 'disavowal' to which Edwards refers. This disavowal leads to what in Foucauldian terms might be seen as a form of surveillance; Martin Francis has noted that the monitoring of gay sexuality narrows 'the range of masculine identities and behaviours permitted to *all* men in modern Britain' (2002, 652), whilst Garry Whannel suggests that 'the boundaries of masculinity are almost always the subject of redrawing, policing, and contestation' (1999, 254). Such policing appears to be a corollary of public visibility of modern male homosexuality, evident in W. T. Stead's oft-quoted lament to Edward Carpenter in 1895 that 'a few more cases like Oscar Wilde's and we should find the freedom of comradeship now possible to men seriously impaired' (quoted in Tosh 1994, 187). The number of tabloid articles about Beckham's sexuality that appeared following the Armani advertisement, even those that did not refer to the image, point to such a monitoring and invoke Foucault's connection of the gaze with mechanisms of power (1977).

The Male Body on Display

Chiles' concerns over the Armani advertisement no doubt arise from the fact that it involves Beckham's body on display without the justification of a sporting context, thereby departing from heteronormative modes of representing the male body. As writers such as Richard Dyer (1992) and Sean Nixon (1996) have demonstrated, modelling is, for men, both a risky and risqué business. With its presentation of the body or face for display and its concomitant invitation of the gaze, male modelling brings with it the threat of disempowerment, if we observe Laura Mulvey's argument that looking is an empowered act (2009). In 2005 *GQ* (*Gentleman's Quarterly*) magazine featured an article about the footballer Freddie Ljungberg and his modelling career. The focus throughout is on explaining and defending Ljungberg's decision to model; the author writes that Ljungberg accepted the offer to advertise for Calvin Klein 'with circumspection' as 'the idea of using his body to sell underwear' was 'weird' and 'embarrassing'. Ljungberg himself is quoted as saying "I had to spend a very long time thinking about it". This comment is reproduced as the featured quotation accompanying the image of Ljungberg's body in one of the Klein photographs, as though his semi-naked body cannot appear without accompanying explanation (T. W. 2005, 34). Even within the pages of a style-led magazine such as *GQ*, Ljungberg's decision to model clearly requires justification.

Another problem with the display of an attractive and athletically fit male body is that it engenders homoeroticism in a way which the display of a female body does not or, more accurately, not one that is acknowledged by or is troubling to heteronormative notions of femininity. Thus, the Conservative journalist Amanda Platell, in an impassioned attack on the advertisement, is able to refer to the Armani Beckham as a 'soft porn star', a 'gay teenage wannabe', 'gay erotica' and 'narcissistic' (2007), whilst approving in the very same piece of Eva Herzigova's famous 1990s' Wonderbra adverts for delighting both men and women, unaware of the obvious double standard she employs.¹⁹ In a piece which asserts compulsory heterosexuality ('I like the male figure as much as the next woman'), Platell objects to

Beckham 'lying seductively back' with 'legs akimbo'. Such is the violation of the heterosexual matrix by Beckham's sexually available reclining body that Platell experiences moral panic, as well as the paranoia which Anthony Easthope suggests is one of the three 'mechanisms of homophobia' (1990, 105), as she questions Beckham's suitability as a parent: 'what kind of a father – of *three boys* – exposes himself draped across the world's billboards in his posing pouch' (original italics). But Beckham's greatest crime for Platell is his pleasure in his own body: 'The awful thing is you can see that Beckham truly loves it [posing for the camera], just as he truly loves himself. This is narcissism made flesh.' Whilst Eva Herzigova's pleasure in her own body and sexuality is liberating for herself and those who view her, such pleasure is too strongly coded as feminine for Platell to endure a self-loving Beckham. David Coad, in his examination of the 'metrosexual' in sport claims that one of the changes evident in male underwear advertising across the twentieth century is 'the positive portrayal of seductive passivity in a masculine context' (2008, 113). Similarly, Whannel notes that 'Men's bodies are now far more commonly objectified in representation, and there is a greater sexualisation of these bodies, most markedly in movies and in advertising.' (2002, 19). This occupation of previously feminine terrain – the sexualised body and an accompanying narcissism – is clearly what unsettles commentators such as Platell and Chiles.

Gregory Woods' suggestion that the most 'appreciative browsers' of men's underwear advertisements are straight women and gay men reminds us of the likely audiences of Beckham's Armani image (1995, 155). Similarly, Gill suggests that contemporary images of masculinity must not simply 'disavow homoerotic desire' but must somehow appeal simultaneously to gay men, heterosexual women and heterosexual men (2011, 35). Whoever the audience, Beckham seems to welcome the viewer's gaze. The transformation from the shy-looking Beckham of the late 1990s to his more recent self-assured presentations indicates his awareness of himself as an object of sexual desire. As Mark Simpson notes, there is 'a submissive photophilia to Becks. A certain passivity or even masochism about his displays for the camera, which seem to say "I'm here for *you*"' (2003).

Williams claims that even in Taylor-Wood's *David*, where Beckham is asleep, this dynamic occurs: 'he seems to exude a knowledge he has been looked at' (*Newsnight Review*). This 'knowledge' is coded in visual culture as feminine; it underpins Mulvey's description of cultural femininity as 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (2009, 19), John Berger's earlier attention to women 'being looked at' (1972, 47) and Iris Young's description of women seeing themselves 'being seen' (2005, 63). It is also, Dyer argues, the reason women 'avert' their gaze in advertising images – their aversion acknowledges the gaze whereas men look 'either off or up', suggesting a lack of interest in the viewer and a denial of the gaze (1992, 267). The responses to the Armani image from Chiles and Platell, as well as Dowling, are therefore arguably prompted not only by Beckham's body being on display but by the impression that Beckham 'knows' he is being looked at, a knowledge culturally encoded as feminine. In the advertisement Beckham's gaze is ambiguous. His right eye is cast in deep shadow and can barely be seen whilst his left eye appears to look slightly away, not to a distinctly distant place as Dyer finds usually in images of men, but sufficiently averted to not quite make eye contact with the viewer. Beckham therefore gives the impression of looking directly at the viewer, with his face full frontal, but escapes an explicitly sexualised direct eye contact.

It is notable that in both Chiles' and Platell's negative responses to the advertisement one of the visual elements objected to is Beckham's pose. Platell complains about Beckham's 'legs akimbo' (2007) and Chiles complains that Beckham's legs are 'as wide open as the hole in England's defence' (2007). In gendered discourse, open legs are often shorthand for female sexual availability. Superficially, Chiles' and Platell's complaints might seem to be about the inappropriateness of Beckham displaying his genitalia (the size of which Chiles repeatedly comments on) but if we consider Calvin Thomas' argument that homophobia often works to counteract female penetrability (2000, 25), then the objection to Beckham's visible crotch can be seen not merely as sexual prudery but as the disavowal of the feminine which often characterises homophobia – Chiles even evokes an orifice ('the hole').

As is apparent, my discussion of the Armani advert has focused not only on the image itself but on responses it has invited. Nikki Sullivan notes that 'Queering popular culture involves a range of reading/writing practices' (2003, 189-90). I would suggest that such queering is done not only through critical analyses but unintentionally through tabloid responses. Dowling's response is clearly one that overtly queers the Armani Beckham. However, I would argue that Platell's and Chiles' responses also represent a queering of Beckham's image, Platell repeatedly rendering Beckham as 'gay' and Chiles presenting Beckham as an affront to working-class heterosexual masculinity.

My argument in using the Armani image is not that it is inherently queer (it may or may not be) but that it has attracted queered responses, whether openly, as in the case of Dowling, or through attacks which construct a queer Beckham, as in the case of Chiles and Platell. Nikki Sullivan suggests that 'queer' does not necessarily function 'as a label that one can appropriately (or otherwise) apply to (the essence of) a particular text' but instead 'can be used as a verb ... to describe a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them.' (2003, 192). This process has clearly been at work in responses to the Armani advertisement, even those that do not at first glance seem 'queer' and by authors who would dissociate themselves from any such notion.

The importance of interpretative practices as queer, rather than any inherent and stable queer quality to the Beckham Armani, was highlighted by responses to Beckham's successor – Cristiano Ronaldo – in the Armani underwear advertisements.²⁰ Matthew Todd, editor of the gay magazine *Attitude*, found a certain campness in the Ronaldo Armani images and claimed that the shoot would benefit from Ronaldo being made to look more 'butch' (quoted in Slater 2010). In a similar vein, the *Daily Mail* claimed that in comparison to Ronaldo's advertisements, Beckham's Armani images 'now seem the epitome of red-blooded masculinity' (Slater 2010). Here Beckham is re-cast as the more masculine (in this case more 'heterosexual') of the two footballers, indicating the relational and shifting nature of the terrain on which masculinities are constructed.

Beckham as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity?

In the final section of this essay I wish to turn my attention to examining the relationship between images of Beckham and what, following Robert Connell (2005), has come to be known as 'hegemonic masculinity'. Cashmore and Parker (2003) offer an account of Beckham's image as progressive in terms of contemporary masculinities, claiming that his 'inclusive popularity should be seen as a positive step in terms of the masculine norms which he clearly transcends and the subversive trends and behaviours he explicitly displays' (225). Given the institutionalized homophobia of football culture,²¹ appearances of a homoerotic Beckham might certainly be seen this way, notwithstanding the problematic nature of the idea of the 'positive' in this context. Similarly, Whannel suggests that Beckham's adventurous sartorial style and his image, 'with its edge of insouciant foppishness, served as a goad to the homophobia of the football culture' (2002, 204). However, Rahman (2004) has offered a more problematised account of Beckham's position in relation to hegemonic masculinity by drawing on queer theory to explore the degree to which Beckham's public images disrupt hegemonic ideas of masculinity, a question which is well worth asking.

In a feature on Beckham in 2002, *GQ* magazine claimed that he is 'surely, the only heterosexual male in the country who could get away with being photographed half-naked and smothered in baby oil ... and still come over as an icon of masculinity' (Bilmes 2002, 265). The comment refers to their own photoshoot of a previous issue (June 2002), shot by fashion photographer David LaChapelle. The claim that Beckham 'gets away with' his homoerotic images betrays the imperative that men in certain professions and of certain classes conform to a hegemonic heteronormative masculinity. As Whannel notes, 'Sport for boys has, since the mid-nineteenth century, had a close association with the inculcation of the values of dominant masculinity' (1999, 253). Sport, especially a traditionally working-class and highly physical team game such as football, forbids the expression from heterosexual men of either homosexuality, or of camp or queered masculinities, which would be permissible in say the entertainment industry. For example, the comedians David

Walliams and Russell Brand both have reputations as heterosexual 'red-blooded' 'ladies' men' but rely on camp in their performances and, in the case of David Walliams, much homoerotic banter.²² The England and Chelsea footballer Graeme Le Saux faced continued and severe homophobic abuse, prompted, according to him, by his reading of the *Guardian*, his dislike of heavy drinking (Le Saux 2008, 6) and an interest in the arts (Barkham 2010). Such censure demonstrates the persistence of homophobia in footballing culture. Against this backdrop, it is clear that Beckham has disrupted, to a degree, the traditional expectations of how a white working-class sportsman should appear and behave, an observation which supports Cashmore's and Parker's progressive thesis. However, such a summation of events suggests that Beckham's visual queering distances him from hegemonic masculinity and is always oppositional when in fact the picture is more complicated. Beckham's queer imagery may raise eyebrows in the tabloids, but he is still held up by many as an example of hegemonic masculinity. GQ's observation that Beckham is 'an icon of masculinity', despite having posed in an overtly homoerotic photoshoot for them earlier that year (in June 2002), is congratulatory rather than incredulous and is part of their justification of why he had been awarded, for the second year running, their 'Sportsman of the Year' award. Self-promotion notwithstanding, GQ's comment reinforces John Beynon's claim that hegemonic masculinity, despite its connotations of singularity, has several variants and is not static – it can be expanded to include new forms and is therefore mutable (2002, 17). This is precisely what has happened with Beckham. Such an expansion should not be seen as straightforwardly progressive though, a broadening of the scope of masculinity to include previously shunned versions, even if this appears to be the case. One of the reasons Beckham 'gets away' with his queer images is that, despite the tabloid jokes, he is largely believed to be heterosexual. Dowling, in the *Sun* article discussed, claims: 'If Becks really was a closet homosexual, there is no way he would dare to do things that looked so gay.' (2007). Similarly, GQ editor Dylan Jones claims that Beckham 'is in touch with his feminine side, but he is so obviously heterosexual that he can afford to be' (quoted in Rahman 2004, 228). Such comments are telling of the degree of proscription for

homosexual men as the perception in both of these claims is clear – Beckham can ‘afford’ to look ‘gay’ because he is not. In an empowered position afforded by his heterosexuality, Beckham can perform ‘queer’ in ways unavailable to homosexual male athletes, pointing up the limitations of hegemonic masculinity’s assimilation of queerness.²³ Whilst it may initially seem surprising that Le Saux’s cultural interests were somehow more subversive than appearing in overtly homoerotic photo shoots, the latter is clearly performative, a part of Beckham’s branding exercise and commercial portfolio, whilst the former is an actual lived reality and therefore more threatening to hegemonic masculinity.²⁴

One might suggest, therefore, that whilst Beckham’s apparent ongoing interest in queer imagery is in many ways remarkable considering the continued homophobia of his profession,²⁵ the concession that is afforded him is done so precisely because he already fulfils, even exemplifies, conventional aspects of masculinity. As Rahman notes, ‘The modes of representation around Beckham suggest new meanings around how it is possible to be, and be seen as, a masculine figure in our culture, provided that the core elements of hetero-masculinity are securely anchored.’ (2004, 228). Rahman suggests that in his chief persona of working-class white male ‘done good’ through hard work and perseverance, and in his role as a sportsman, married with three children, Beckham ‘is an almost hyper-traditional symbol of masculinity’ (2004, 228). In this way, what Nikki Sullivan calls the ‘institution of heterosexuality’ (2003, 121) is left largely intact by Beckham’s images, despite their apparent queerness.

Conclusion

Given that we have seen him cast as a princess, a ‘gay lover’ and a ‘dykon’, it is clear that images of Beckham, like no other male sports figure of recent years, offer and invite imaginative play for hetero- and homosexual audiences of both sexes, as well as the scripting of alternative male subject positions by his viewers. Beckham’s production of queer images signals the persistence of compulsory heterosexuality (as does footballing culture in general), if we consider that it is precisely his privileged position as a heterosexual that

allows him to occupy such territory. However, his continued status as 'masculine' despite his appearance in 'queer' images points to the changing and flexible nature of contemporary values surrounding masculinity. In 1998 the well-publicised photograph of Beckham in a sarong prompted the kind of cultural resistance to cross-dressing which Marjorie Garber explores in *Vested Interests* (1992). Nearly ten years later, the Armani advertisements provoked the same kinds of debates about manliness and effeminacy but this time within a more evidently queered discourse, suggesting simultaneously a more acknowledged homoeroticism and homophobia (Gill claims that 'in an earlier era even the homoeroticism' of advertisements such as the Armani Beckham 'would have been disavowed entirely' (2011, 39)). Queered discourses now clearly take place within the space of the tabloid press. Such discussions matter; as Whannel notes, sport is an 'entrenched bastion of patriarchy, and hence the ways in which masculinities are produced by its practices are of specific significance' (2002, 10). The presence of Beckham's performative queered images has wider implications for the field of visual culture; the responses provoked by the Armani advertisement indicate the type of monitoring of male sexuality present in popular tabloidized culture, taking us beyond a discussion of the objectified male to consider the specific regulatory discourses prompted by the display of a self-loving attractive male body. Whilst images of men might be seen as sexualised in the way that those of women have traditionally been, there are certain aspects of such a sexualisation, for example narcissism, which seem to pose specific problems for a heteronormative idea of masculinity.

It is around popular imagery that discourses of visual pleasure are often most readily articulated, as is evident in the constellation of responses around this particular Beckham image. Attending to these responses can tell us much about acceptable visual representations of masculinity. Whilst the 'visual pleasure' so firmly put on the critical map by Laura Mulvey in 1975 was a male heterosexual one, offered by the spectacle of the female body, the popularity of images of a queered Beckham indicate more varied forms of visual pleasure, albeit, as I have suggested, within certain hetero-normative limits. To talk of a 'queered' Beckham is not just to consider Beckham's appearance in homoerotic images but

to highlight the performative queering of images by both the producers and readers of those images. Photographic images of men's bodies do not simply effect a parallel discourse of men as objectified 'too', but point to sophisticated queered visual constructions and reading processes occupying mainstream arenas. The space for imaginative play and the range of subject positions articulated by viewers of Beckham's body suggest an interesting potential for images of the male body in popular culture. Beckham is clearly a privileged male body – his body is able to effect such discourses largely because of his hegemonic position. But this hegemony has developed to include an increasingly queer appeal, therefore troubling a heteronormative ideal and suggesting the potential of popular visual culture in constituting subject positions and imaginary desiring spaces.

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¹ See Stella Bruzzi (2000) for a discussion of Beckham's sarong-wearing, although her account involves a problematic approach to the notion of 'taste'.

² Not exclusively though, for example race can be 'queered' (see Chapter 4 of Nikki Sullivan (2003)).

³ His 'Is straight the new queer? David Beckham and the dialectics of celebrity' (2006) is a condensed version of this essay.

⁴ For example Rahman (2004) (*Labour History Review*), Whannel (1999) (*Leisure Studies*) and Cashmore and Parker (2003) (*Sociology of Sport Journal*). Cashmore and Parker set out to assess Beckham's 'popular cultural image' but their two specific case studies do not begin until over half way through the article and cannot be said to constitute sustained visual analysis. An exception to the lack of visually oriented studies of Beckham is Gill (2011).

⁵ NPG 6661.

⁶ The focus on Beckham as a beauty is shared by Julie Burchill, who describes Beckham as 'beautiful' and 'fragrantly feminine' (xv).

⁷ Howgate and Nairne also refer to the 'intimacy' of the work (2009, 6; 7).

⁸ 'Sporting Lives: Contemporary Portraits of Athletes and Olympians' ran in Room 37 from 12 July 2008 to 11 January 2009.

⁹ 'Champions: Portraits by Anderson & Low', ran from 30 October 2008 to 8 March 2009 in Room 40.

¹⁰ For sales figures see Fisher (2008) and Sibbles (2009), who suggests that sales of Armani male underwear rose by 150% in the period since Beckham's campaign was launched in 2007.

¹¹ Both Ramchandani (2007) and Gill (2011) focus on the importance of the crotch shot in the Beckham Armani advertisement.

¹² Posted 11 December 2007 at <http://www.menshealth.co.uk/chatroom/topic/310636>.

¹³ See Chapter 6, 'Gender and sexuality in tabloid Britain', in Martin Conboy (2006).

¹⁴ The term appears to have been first used by Mark Simpson (1994). He later described the metrosexual as 'a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis' (2002).

¹⁵ Doyle also suggests that Beckham is a model for drag kings.

¹⁶ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Out of the 55 forum comments the article attracted, several directly disagreed with Chiles and accused him and other forum contributors of being 'jealous'. Only a small number agreed that Beckham was being greedy and should instead be focusing on his job as a footballer or that the image was gratuitous in some way.

¹⁹ Ramchandani (2007) also refers to the Armani Beckham as 'art-cum-porn'.

²⁰ Ronaldo appeared from the Spring/Summer 2010 campaign.

²¹ Garry Whannel suggests that 'sexism and homophobia have been central elements in the role of sport in the construction of gendered identities' (2002, 11).

²² In the case of Walliams, this led *The Sun* to run a 'gay-o-meter' to help ascertain whether he is homosexual or not (finally laid to rest on 21 January 2010:

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/bizarre/2817696/David-Walliams-gay-o-meter-is-no-more.html>).

²³ See Toby Miller (2001) for a discussion of homosexual male athletes.

²⁴ Miller suggests that the hostility to Le Saux's cultural interests may be a 'displacement of class antagonism' (2001, 70).

²⁵ This interest could of course be seen negatively, as an exploitation of gay styles for commercial reward.