Gay Identity and Self-Reflexivity

Introduction

In the closing sequences of the autobiographical drama *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975, Thames Television, UK) actor John Hurt playing the role of Quentin Crisp (1908–99) tells an aggressive gang of youths who are threatening blackmail: ‘You cannot touch me now, I am one of the stately *hemos* of England.’ Here on mainstream British television, we are presented with a defining moment which would stimulate a shift in the representation of non-heterosexuals in the media. Quentin Crisp’s words iterated a new confidence in gay representation and personal storytelling. I argue that he was a new storyteller of gay identity, tracing yet rewriting stories which surround non-heterosexuals (see Figure 2.1). Also as a character representing himself within *The Naked Civil Servant* as a book (Crisp, 2007 [originally 1968]) and a television adaptation, and also through his later public appearances (and anecdotal and philosophical publications, see Crisp, 1981, 1984, 1997, 2008), he is an ‘intimate citizen’ (Plummer, 1997) attempting to reform social worlds through personal agency within entertainment media.

Consequently this chapter examines the emergence of new storytellers who for gay identity present self-reflexive visions of themselves within both factual and fictional media forms. Furthermore, it contextualises gay identity in connection with stereotyping, archetypal forms and disavowals, presenting a textual analysis of Mordaunt Shairp’s play *The Green Bay Tree* (1933). In examining the potential of self-reflexivity, this chapter initially explores the narrative potential of Christopher Isherwood, who as an openly gay man and a pioneer of semi-autobiographical fiction set a precedent and a theoretical model for the idea of self-storytelling and gay identity. Following this there is an examination...
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Figure 2.1 Quentin Crisp, pictured later in life when he lived in New York. Photograph © Phillip Ward. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Quentin Crisp Archives (crisperanto.org)

of Quentin Crisp, who as an autobiographer and raconteur (briefly discussed above) engendered a landmark event through the impact of *The Naked Civil Servant*; Ellen DeGeneres, who as a leading situation comedy actor offered a media spectacle through coming out within her own popular television series, and George Michael, who as an international pop star following his arrest for lewd conduct in a public place, exhibited a shameless and empowering identity in media confessions. In building this progression, the significance of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) is foregrounded in relation to emergence of queer identity, and its relationship to homosexual identity constructs. Also the impact of Peter Wildeblood (1923–99) is explored, revealing his significance as an openly gay man trapped in confessional and oppressive legislative domains.

Within these case studies, gay people speak about themselves, relating their personal identity issues and desires. This may be seen as part of a larger political connectivity: the progression of gay and lesbian identity