

David Halperin on “How to be Gay”

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David Halperin, who delivered the featured lecture at the “Epistemologies of Desire” workshop, is no stranger to controversy. Conservative legislators have long attacked his “How To Be Gay” class at the University of Michigan. Halperin’s lecture by the same name (all are part of a broader project examining the sexual politics of a cultural form) addressed the same fundamental question as does his class: how do sexual desires lead to culture? By examining this relationship between sexual desire and broader cultural patterns, Halperin pushed the conference discussion beyond the issues of the formation and regulation of individual desire.

Halperin, who is W.H. Auden Distinguished University Professor of the History and Theory of Sexuality, began his lecture with the dual observations that gay men are often described as having particular cultural preferences (musicals, clothing styles, and Mini Coopers) but that many resist the idea that there is a specific “gay culture.” Drawing on this observation, he asked what is the logic behind the association of certain cultural objects with gay men. Halperin described “gay culture” as consisting of certain genres of discourse, focusing particularly on camp as a type of performance. Following this definition, a performance might be part of gay culture whether or not the performer identified as gay. Halperin argued that subscribers to gay male culture first and foremost treat their own suffering as an object of parody. Gay male culture thus becomes a way to deal with political powerlessness. By making fun of gay male suffering, camp implies that no one deserves recognition at the cost of others’ shame. Camp attempts to create a world of horizontal rather than vertical relations. However, Halperin later identified a tension in gay male culture between beauty and egalitarianism. While camp seeks to legitimize all gay male desire by eliminating hierarchy, camp also depends on the continued existence of some idea of what defines beauty. Halperin concluded his lecture by suggesting that many gay men today reject “traditional” gay male culture, and that gay pride may be seen as a different solution to the challenge of political powerlessness than was camp.

In his prepared response, Gender Studies Professor Nick Davis complicated Halperin’s argument by questioning the definition of gay male culture. While the idea of camp as a utopian (gay) vision may be appealing, it also is not accurate to describe it as only gay. Davis questioned how Halperin’s argument would change if he recognized that the actors involved in camp may not think of themselves as producing gay culture. Questions from the audience similarly probed how much self-critique is exclusively gay and whether that claim is necessary for Halperin’s project.