

## What Does It Mean to “Sound Gay”?

### *The (Accented) Voice as Surplus Jouissance*

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What does it mean to “sound gay”? Can one’s voice or speech really turn into an index, a “tell-all” for individual desires and identities that may not otherwise be obvious? David Thorpe’s 2014 documentary *Do I Sound Gay?* (*DISG*) tackles these uncomfortable questions and their essentialist implications head-on. It does so in a touching, humorous, and self-reflexive fashion while following the gay-identifying filmmaker’s own journey to better understand and develop a more salutary relationship with his own voice. This journey begins with Thorpe’s admission of his growing aversion toward his voice, and indeed, the “gay” voice in general. But by the end of the film, Thorpe is able to overcome his own internalized homophobia and reconnect with his voice, which he comes to see as a reflection of his individual and unique gay subjectivity. What *DISG* documents is this change in Thorpe’s attitude toward his voice. Initially a reason for the filmmaker’s homophobic self-deprecation, the physical voice finally becomes a means for a restorative gay self-assertion.

In this chapter, however, I argue that Thorpe’s documentary also contains a critical textual “voice” that offers a far more ambivalent account of the gay voice. In fact, in my reading, this account remains quite resolutely at odds with the film’s celebratory ending. I contend that, even as Thorpe ends his journey with a redemptive reading of the *individual* gay voice, the journey itself prompts a rethinking of the materiality of that voice as a raced, classed, and gendered “prosthesis”—an attached or implanted object that comes from outside the (socially situated and speaking) body but also becomes a part of that body. The critical textual voice of *DISG* further demonstrates that this prosthetic quality of this raced, classed, and gendered gay voice—whose materiality takes shape both *outside* and *through*

*the utterance of the speaking body*—is inextricable from capitalism’s thoroughly exploitative system of value production.

One illuminating lesson offered by Thorpe’s film is that the materiality of the gay (or “gay-sounding”) voice comes primarily from its *accent*—acquired speech habits that are often read as “not-straight” even as such readings frequently do not align with the speaker’s sexual identity. That is, if the physical voice seemingly offers up “truths” about the (male) speaker’s sexuality, it is the speaker’s accent that becomes the actual bearer of these truths. While the accent and its truths are heard in and through the physical voice, they are not reducible to that voice.

Here the critical textual voice of Thorpe’s film goes even further. It also reveals why the gay-sounding accent needs to be heard as a prosthetic object that is simultaneously vilified and emulated, denigrated and commodified through U.S. capitalist mass media—from Hollywood cinema to prime-time television to Disney cartoons. While every gay-sounding voice has an accent, that accent does not belong uniquely to any one voice. On the contrary, mass-mediated commodification ensures that the gay-sounding accent becomes a portable object, a seemingly superfluous entity that carries a certain surplus value and surplus enjoyment that one voice can extract from another voice. And the extraction of this value and enjoyment becomes possible not despite but because of the partially otherized and contradictory status of the gay-sounding accent, which at once signifies a feminine or “unmasculine” alterity and the promise of racial and class privilege. In its most trenchant moments, then, *DISG* asks its viewers to think of the multiply mediated and ideologically complex gay-sounding accent as a useless and yet essential vocal excess that is repeatedly staged and sold to feed an entropic system of capitalist exchange.

To make this argument, this chapter proceeds in three sections. In the first, I demonstrate that although the film closes with a celebration of the individual gay voice, the interviews that the filmmaker collects along his journey (and the manner in which he organizes them) collectively create a powerful textual voice that urges us to interpret accent as a racialized, gendered, and classed prosthetic object that is distinct from the physical voice to which it attaches itself. In my reading, the film’s approach to the accented voice as a prosthesis converges strikingly with psychoanalytic and Marxist theorizations of the “partial object,” specifically Jacques Lacan’s concept of the *objet petit a* (object little) *a*. A brief second section then dwells on the *objet a* and outlines its role as surplus value in the context of commodity capitalism. Finally, the third section returns to *DISG* to examine how its textual voice represents the gay-sounding accent as a mass-mediated *objet a*, one that generates surplus value and surplus *jouissance* (enjoyment) through decades of cinematic and televisual tropes and labors of queerness that are also regulated by the inequities of race and class. This section also reflects on the critical exposition that the film leaves unfinished as well as its ideological elisions.

## THE GAY ACCENT AS A PROSTHESIS

In his well-known essay “The Voice of Documentary,” Bill Nichols makes an important distinction between the voices “recruited” or “observed” by a documentary film and the film’s “textual voice.” If the recruited/observed voices are typically those of the subjects interviewed by the filmmaker, the textual voice is less an actual voice and more “the style of the film as a whole (how its multiplicity of codes, including those pertaining to recruited voices, is orchestrated into a singular, controlling pattern).”<sup>1</sup> For Nichols, an aesthetically and socially powerful film is one that does not conflate its textual voice with its interviewed voices. The textual voice, as the edited and structured “argument” of the film, emerges through but is also at a critical distance from the recruited voices.

This relationship between the two kinds of voices, however, takes a more complex and paradoxical form in *DISG*’s part-autobiographical and part-sociolinguistic exploration of the gay voice. On the one hand, the film asserts its critical textual voice by organizing a range of recruited voices in a manner that unsettles hetero- and homonormative assumptions about the gay voice, even as some of the recruited voices mirror these assumptions. On the other hand, the on-camera presence of the filmmaker and his voice-over together function as a recruited voice that ultimately also becomes a textual voice championing the individuality represented by every gay voice. This ideological contradiction within *DISG* needs to be acknowledged and explored further simply because what I am calling the unsettling of the gay voice—or, more specifically, the treatment of a particular *accent* as a socioeconomically driven prosthesis that is distinct from the physical voice (more on this below)—is both suggested by the film’s textual voice and kept in check by its individualist ending.

The film’s desire to unsettle the essentialism behind its titular question can be gleaned from its opening montage of recruited voices. As several interviewees (located in London, New York, and Paris) respond to this question posed off camera, what stands out is a lack of consensus. Even as a number of interviewees agree that Thorpe’s voice *does* sound gay, several others separate this voice from the filmmaker’s sexual identity, hearing it instead as “artsy-fartsy,” “intellectual,” “metrosexual,” “nasal,” “slightly melodic,” or “creative.” The fact that these responses vary by location and the sociocultural backgrounds and identities of the interviewees also draws our attention to the crucial role that listening or reception plays in the naming of this voice.<sup>2</sup> The critical textual voice inviting us to interrogate the “essence” of the gay voice emerges through the film’s careful juxtaposition of these varied (albeit urban and Anglophone) recruited voices.

For a significant portion of the film, the filmmaker also positions himself as a recruited voice that viewers must distinguish from the film’s critical textual voice. As a recruited voice, Thorpe begins by admitting to the self-loathing linked with his perception of the gay voice. “Why did we all insist on sounding like a pack of

braying ninnies?” he asks in a voice-over right after we see a group of men—in this instance, actors playing gay men—chatting loudly on a train to a beach town on Fire Island. This “reenactment” of stereotypical gay speech early in the film separates Thorpe’s voice from the textual voice that unfolds through the filmmaker’s intellectual and analytical efforts to move past his self-loathing and internalized homophobia. And the interviews that Thorpe conducts with speech therapists Susan Sankin and Bob Corff, speech scientist Benjamin Munson, and linguist Ron Smyth best represent these efforts to distinguish the textual voice from the anxieties and normative assumptions that Thorpe articulates in his own voice.

The interactions with Sankin and Corff together reveal the exclusionary and homogenizing ideologies lurking behind exercises designed to make so-called gay speech (or *any* speech for that matter) “normal.” If Sankin’s advice that Thorpe avoid rising inflections (or “upspeak”) and nasality to make his speech more “neutral” initially sounds harmless, Hollywood voice coach Corff’s description of that neutral speech as the “standard American melody” that “middle America” associates with the authoritative male voice reveals the heavily gendered nature of these exercises. Here *DISG*’s textual voice teaches us (and Thorpe) that the heterosexist valorization of the “straight” voice and the naming of the “gay” voice are heavily reliant on a masculine/feminine binary.

If the recruited voices of Sankin and Corff represent social agents that facilitate conformity to the norm, those of Munson and Smyth are deployed more directly in the service of the critical textual voice. Munson and Smyth represent sociolinguistic expertise that reveals why the gay voice (in the U.S. context at least) does not solely emanate from gay-identifying men. For instance, Smyth points out in his interview that a man *sounds* gay in both straight and gay social contexts when he makes vocal choices typically associated with women—especially using “clearer vowels . . . *s*’s longer, *p*’s clearer, overarticulating the *p*’s, *t*’s, and *k*’s.” Gay-sounding male speech is thus speech modeled on this “typical” female speech and vocal habits. The gay-sounding male speaker, for overdetermined sociofamilial reasons, has learned and/or chooses to speak by giving more weight to normalized female speech and vocal habits.<sup>3</sup>

Here we begin to see the role that the concept of accent plays in the naming of the gay-sounding voice. If “voice” (among other things), names an embodied sonic utterance that may or may not be meaningful, “accent” names an acquired “way of speaking” that includes a recognizable style of pronunciation, stress pattern, and tempo of speaking. Crucially, the specificity (and, frequently, the social marginalization) of *an* accent emerges only through its comparison with “unaccented” speech. In reality, this unaccented speech also has an accent that is “inaudible” because its particularities have been privileged and naturalized as the “norm.”<sup>4</sup> What Munson and Smyth identify for Thorpe’s viewers, then, is *the accent that makes possible the naming of the gay-sounding voice*. This gay-sounding accent that seemingly “outs” the speaking voice is the product of a set of linguistic and vocal

habits as well as their comparison with a “neutral” accent, or vocal habits that heteronormativity reads as “straight” and “masculine.” Implicit in these expositions of both the normative masculine accent and its feminine or gay-sounding deviation is also an assumption of whiteness, to which I will turn shortly.

After both Munson and Smyth emphasize the formative role that conscious and unconscious emulation plays in an individual’s fabrication of a recognizable gay accent, Thorpe is compelled to rethink his desire to alter his own voice. His quest for a straight voice has to grapple with the fact that the straight *and* gay aversion toward gay-sounding speech is not just internalized homophobia but also a form of misogyny. It is here that *DISG* acquires a textual voice that argues for a nonnormative and nonessentialist approach to accent as an acquired prosthesis, as something that is simultaneously inside and outside the body that speaks or “dons” that accent.

Indeed, such an approach also surfaces in the film through the recruitment of several nonexpert voices. For instance, in a segment where Thorpe interviews subjects who witnessed his coming out, a friend notes, “Right when you first came out, you were sounding super queen and it reminded me of when I first came out. I went and bought a black leather jacket.” Another friend admits that she was annoyed when Thorpe took on this entirely new voice, this new accoutrement to display his sexual identity: “I didn’t give a shit that you were gay. But it bothered me that you had changed your voice. . . . And so, for me, this was like an imposter’s voice.” Toward the end of the segment, Thorpe himself confesses to this imposturing in voice-over, noting that, as an out gay man, he made a conscious effort to sound like a “witty aristocratic homosexual.” The artifice that Thorpe’s friend had noted in his voice was, in fact, his survival strategy. Accent was the vocal elitism that Thorpe felt he could perform as a defense against homophobic derision and violence: “I had spent so long feeling scorned. It was time to scorn back.” Because of the class position and potential socioeconomic freedom it connoted, Thorpe’s gay accent became, paradoxically, the means of being not merely the object of contempt but also the object of envy of a less privileged straight majority. This diagnosis of the gay accent as the donning of a pleasurable and dandy “costume”—which Thorpe not only narrates but, also, performs visually by putting on a white dress shirt, bow tie, cummerbund, and wig before proceeding to pose elegantly with a lit cigarette—suggestively places its prostheticization within complex social hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and class.

Additionally, I would argue that the image of Thorpe—a visibly *white* gay man who is emulating an aristocrat who also appears to be white—brings to the surface an insight that is implicit at various other points in the film, which is that racial hegemony plays a significant role in the social construction of both the straight and gay accent. We should note here that the “standard American melody” associated with “masculinity” is also upheld by a largely white “middle America.” As well, the vocal habits deviating from this norm, and associated with upper-class

femininity and/or homosexuality, are represented as the habits of white bodies. It isn't entirely clear if the filmmaker reinforces or exposes this hegemony when, shortly after the film starts, he casts only white men to represent the "pack of braying ninnies" on the train to Fire Island. We can thus say that, with the appearance of the "witty aristocratic homosexual," the textual voice of *DISG*—positioning itself at a significant distance from the voices we actually hear on the screen—provocatively argues for the need to see the gay-sounding accent as a product of multiple inequities that characterize the U.S. social structure. Racial, gendered, classed, and sexual hierarchies shaping this structure also inflect the construction of this accent as a prosthetic entity.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the critical textual voice also makes clear that the prosthetic gay-sounding accent plays contradictory roles within the highly stratified social structure. While the accent can certainly be a cause for social stigma or derision, it can also signify a predominantly white subcultural capital that counters that derision. By the same token, alongside being the source of injury, the gay accent-as-prosthesis can also become a subcultural commodity and therefore a source of pleasure and capital-bound enjoyment, or *jouissance*.

Unfortunately, the textual voice that presents the accent as this paradoxical object is silenced or buried when the film finally closes on a surprisingly individualist note. Moving away from its own radically queer efforts to see the gay-sounding accent as something that is at once subjective and social—and therefore not merely a property of the gay subject—*DISG* ends with a rather homonormative message, with Thorpe claiming his voice as a sign of his gay individuality. After months of normalizing speech therapy, about which he has been ambivalent throughout the film, Thorpe enthusiastically tells his friends that he has finally moved past his aversion toward his voice, regained his confidence, and is now able to "get into that head space of like, rah-rah-rah, sound gayer, be gayer, go gay." Somewhat inexplicably, meticulous self-governance in the form of vocal training leads to an individualist "solution" to the inequities of gender, class, and race that give rise to and sustain the gay accent. A friend reassures Thorpe that "your voice is who you are. It's from your personality, and we love that." Several gay male interviewees—including the white activist Dan Savage, the white TV personality Tim Gunn, and the Asian American actor and activist George Takei—rally around the filmmaker to similarly reassure him of the authenticity and uniqueness of his voice. Savage, for instance, asks Thorpe, "What's wrong with sounding like you are who you are? Sounding like a gay man? Having a gay voice?" In this way, the essentialism stirred up by the film's titular question is partially put to rest through a collective lionization of the singular gay accent. This is where the textual voice becomes indistinguishable from the neoliberal humanism that the edited arrangement of the recruited voices evokes. This is a humanism that celebrates the gay filmmaker's individuality by disavowing his racial and class privileges. The relationship between Thorpe's voice and his social positionality—his whiteness,

metropolitan location, and Anglophone cultural capital—suddenly and inexplicably becomes irrelevant.

But what would happen if, instead of capitulating to the ending of the film, we linger in the space where the nonnormative textual voice alerts us to the double valence of the gay-sounding accent, to the derision and the enjoyment that it produces as a commodity? From within that contradictory space, how might we begin to see accent as an object that does not so much “belong” to the individual as it is put to work prosthetically in a commodity economy? Before addressing these questions through Thorpe’s film, I will ask the reader to bear with me as I digress a bit and introduce briefly the seemingly unrelated psychoanalytic concept of the “partial object,” or what Lacan calls the *objet (petit) a*. More specifically, it is the role of the *objet a* in the production of *jouissance* or enjoyment under commodity capitalism that I would like to tease out before returning to the prosthetic gay-sounding accent in Thorpe’s film.

#### THE VOICE AS THE *OBJET A*: FROM THE “VOID” TO “SURPLUS *JOUISSANCE*”

In his book *A Voice and Nothing More*, cultural theorist Mladen Dolar offers a striking formulation of the voice that is somewhat contiguous with *DISG*’s representation of the accent as a prosthesis. Drawing on Lacan’s notion of the *objet a*—which represents idealized qualities that a lover sees in the beloved and that are often tied to “organs” or “partial objects” such as the breast, the penis, and the voice—Dolar asks us to see the “object voice” as an appendage that lies between the body and language without being subsumed by either of them. As Dolar writes, “What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body.”<sup>6</sup> The first clause in Dolar’s sentence resonates with our ongoing discussion of the prosthetic accent—the voice as *objet a* is a shared material entity, at once individual-physical and sociocultural. But in the second clause in Dolar’s formulation, the voice as *objet a* is quite unlike the accent as prosthesis since it turns into a dematerialized entity, an emptiness that is between the body and the language but does not actually exist in either of them.

Indeed, Dolar’s second assertion relies heavily on Lacan’s theorization in the 1960s of the voice as *objet a* as an ontological blankness or emptiness that makes speech possible but also remains outside speech. In fact, from this position the voice as *objet a* cannot be reduced to empirical voices. As Dolar goes on to explain, “For what Lacan called *objet petit a* . . . does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them . . . it is just a void . . . the voice is not somewhere else, but it does not coincide with voices that are heard.”<sup>7</sup> The *objet a*, therefore, is a nonhistorical or transcendental “void” that appears to be removed from sociopolitical norms and thus the materialities of the

empirically uttered or heard accent, timbre, and intonation. The regional accent, for instance, becomes merely "a norm which differs from the ruling norm" that can be codified and described.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the voice as *objet a* remains utterly incompatible with such norms and illusions of identity, meaning, and self-presence.

Such an asocial and nonhistorical approach to the *objet a* is, however, untenable if we turn to Lacan's later writings. By the late 1960s Lacan had become interested in aligning his own thinking on enjoyment, or *jouissance*, with Marxist critiques of commodity capitalism as an oppressive and a self-generating system. And a redefinition of the concept of the *objet a* was central to Lacan's dialogue with Marxism.

The redefinition begins in *Seminar XVII*, where Lacan also rethinks the relationship between *jouissance*, or enjoyment, and the (in)ability of signification to produce enjoyment. If, in Lacan's earlier thinking, the signifier and enjoyment were frequently opposed to each other, from this seminar onward, *jouissance* becomes a culturally mediated experience that results from the subject's encounter with signifiers—the physical manifestations of signs, such as sound, the printed word, the image, and especially the body.<sup>9</sup> That is why in this text Lacan refers to the signifier as "an apparatus of *jouissance*."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, for Lacan, *jouissance* is an effect of a certain inadequacy or incompleteness of the signifier. In fact, what is experienced as *jouissance* comes from a surplus remainder, or "waste," that is produced *because the signifier is lacking or not enough*. The signifier produces the desire for an excessive or surplus enjoyment because it does not fully satisfy and, in fact, evokes a sense of loss or deprivation. And, for that very reason, the desiring subject keeps returning to that which elicits only a partial satisfaction. As Lacanian psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič puts it, "What it [*jouissance*] does...is necessitate repetition, the repetition of the very signifier to which this waste is attached in the form of an essential by-product."<sup>11</sup>

At this juncture, the *objet a* becomes another name for the waste or surplus *jouissance* generated through the subject's continual movement in the signifying chain of commodities. No longer the dematerialized void that we see in earlier Lacan (or in Dolar), the redefined *objet a* is very much a product of the material effects of the repetition of socially grounded signification. As Lacan describes it in *Seminar XVII*, "It is in the place of this loss introduced by repetition that we see the function of the lost object emerge, of what I am calling the *a*."<sup>12</sup> Effectively, signifiers that stand in for commodities or idealized objects beyond reach also evoke the *objet a*, engendering a feeling of loss and a desire for enjoyment at the same time.

It bears repeating that under capitalism the *objet a* is surplus *jouissance* that *must be converted into surplus value*. That is to say, it cannot simply be a waste or a loss that remains unaccounted for. As Lacan writes, "On a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called accumulation of capital begins."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the final analysis, the *objet a* emerges as that which appears to be a form of waste, excess, or unassimilable otherness but is, in fact, smoothly integrated into capital's regime of surplus value. As philosopher

Samo Tomšič points out in his reading of Lacan, “In capitalism, object *a* becomes the defining feature of every commodity on the market and makes the exchanged objects appear as vessels of surplus-value.”<sup>14</sup> The *objet a* becomes that which masks the incompleteness of the signifier. As surplus enjoyment, it shifts the consumer’s focus from the exchange value of the object to pleasure from the surplus value of the object.

But how, exactly, is the *objet a* manufactured by the hierarchical signifying operation that is commodity capitalism? What is the relationship between the surplus value that the *objet a* generates or becomes and the social inequities that also characterize capitalism? We can now address these questions by returning to Thorpe’s film and taking a closer look at its representation of the gendered, classed, and racialized production and reproduction of the gay-sounding accent.

#### SURPLUS JOUISSANCE FROM THE MASS-MEDIATED GAY ACCENT

As noted earlier, the critical textual voice of Thorpe’s film invites a reading of the gay-sounding accent as a prosthesis, as something that the individual takes on or acquires through repetition and mimicry. But this mimicry, *DISG* suggests, is heavily mediated through mass cultural objects and the capitalist ideologies they reify. For instance, in the segment where Thorpe admits to imitating what he heard as the accent of an elite gay man, the linguist Ron Smyth recalls how he started being called a “sissy” as a child once he began to “talk like the little rich boys on television shows.” Smyth’s sound bite is followed by a clip from the famous “gin scene” in the 1958 film Hollywood film *Auntie Mame*, where the orphaned but wealthy and white Patrick Dennis (played by the child actor Jan Handzlik) precociously asks his trustee Dwight Babcock if he would like his martini “dry or extra dry.” On display in this scene are both an opulent living room and Dennis’s verbal sophistication and clear enunciation as he offers bartending advice to Babcock: “Stir, never shake, bruises the gin.” Thorpe’s own performance as a dandy in *DISG* immediately follows the clip from *Auntie Mame*, along with his voice-over confession that “I was too naive to note that by embracing an upper-class voice, I was embracing a well-worn stereotype.” Inserted between the two confessions, Handzlik’s speech and accent—which are, in fact, not his alone but also the product of Hollywood’s ideological imperatives—are thus posited as representatives of a white “upper-class voice” that is created, in part, *by* mass media. Part of the work of this boyish “queer” accent, Thorpe’s viewers gather, is to communicate whiteness, class privilege, and class mobility as emulative ideals to young and adolescent viewers.<sup>15</sup>

*DISG*, however, goes further, alerting us to two popular cinematic tropes through which male homosexuality in particular comes to be repeatedly audiovisually coded and commodified as social refinement and urbanity on the fringes

of the heteronormative social order. Film historian Richard Barrios acts as the expert recruited voice here, introducing Thorpe's viewers first to the figure of the "pansy" and then to the sexually ambiguous villain of classical Hollywood cinema. The pansy, Barrios points out, emerges in the 1920s and 1930s as the "wise knowing character" whose voice was "something to emulate because he did seem to be on top of most situations." And the stereotype of the dangerous queer, Barrios observes, took its shape from the character of Waldo Lydecker (played by Clifton Webb) in the 1944 Hollywood film *Laura*: "Snide, supercilious, superior . . . it's sort of this torturous jealousy. Is he jealous of the male character or of the woman character? But he does it all kind of through his voice as much as anything else." Again, even as neither the filmmaker nor the recruited voice of Barrios mentions race, it is noteworthy that these gay-sounding villains, as bearers of class privilege, are all white.

The interview with Barrios also reveals how Webb's character continued to influence even the voices of highly popular and well-remembered villains in several Disney animated features, such as the bloodthirsty Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953). Some of these voices also represented "nonwhite" cultures, like the ferocious but suave Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book* (1967), who was, in fact, voiced by the white British actor George Sanders. Barrios's sound bite in this segment is followed by carefully chosen clips from more recent Disney films, further suggesting that the stereotype of the evil and sophisticated queer was alive and well even in the '80s and '90s and continued through the voices of the pernicious Ratigan in *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), the power-hungry Jafar in *Aladdin* (1992), and the nefarious Scar in *The Lion King* (1994). In this way, Thorpe's film clearly delineates the mass-mediated commodification of what is heard as the white, privileged, gay-sounding voice, one that consumers—queer and straight—have learned to enjoy and render as other at the same time. Implicit here are the centrality of accent, intonation, and delivery to the construction and reception of these voices.

In the context of our discussion of the *objet a*, *DISG*'s emphasis on the popularity and enjoyment of this genre of accented voices raises the crucial question of the capacity to commodify labor, or what Marx calls "labor power." When the Hollywood or Disney spectator enjoys the vocal performance of a gay-sounding and frequently white actor, what they consume is the commodified labor power of these actors. Put differently, it is by consuming the labor power of these actors that the spectator can enjoy, desire, and extract value from the actor's voice. But given that the non-heteronormativity of these voices remains entirely at the level of connotation—something that is not explicit but must be heteronormatively decoded through the vocal habits that, combined with the character's physical appearance, mannerisms, and/or costumes, are read as queer—labor power here is required to produce an intangible and affective *excess* for which it is not paid. It is the white-sounding elite accent that carries this excess, producing spectatorial enjoyment and attraction to the performing voice, the character whose voice it

is, and, by extension, the commodity that is the Hollywood or Disney film. This, we might say, is an indescribable affective *surplus* value that the gay-sounding accent—attached either to the elite-appearing white body or to the white-sounding voice—adds to the film-as-commodity. Thus, if the *objet a* is that which makes the commodity appear as the container of surplus value, *DISG* begins to signal to us how the mediatized gay-sounding accent tacitly operates as one such container in a predominantly white and heteronormative Anglophone mass culture. Effectively, the textual voice of the film begins to narrativize how the gay-sounding accent as the *objet a* is constructed as otherness that also can be covertly converted into surplus value through its promise of class privilege and/as whiteness.

Also significant here are the reflexive performances in Thorpe's film that render unstable the distinction between the mediatized accented voice and the empirical accented voice. There are several moments where Thorpe mimics in voice-over the upspeak and lisping of some of the Hollywood actors—such as Webb in *Laura* and Tyrell Davis (another white British actor) as the “effete” dance instructor Ernest in *Our Bette*s (1933)—as we see and hear them on screen. This performative mimicry, which simultaneously puts on display the Hollywood actor's voice and Thorpe's voice, is not simply parodic or self-deprecating. Instead, it comes across as a laying bare of Thorpe's consumption and emulation of the accent as the *objet a*. Effectively, what Thorpe performs is a kind of self-commodification by prosthetically donning the *objet a* as surplus value. As Barrios also points out in his discussion of these mediated vocal stereotypes, “Consciously or not, we still use these or parts of these voices and these images in our everyday lives in our persona, without knowing.” *DISG*'s textual voice here seems to echo Mara Mills's recent provocation that “mediated queer voices have been naturalized along with their technological platforms” as well as Sarah Kessler's invitation to hear the “sonic materiality” of the gay-sounding voice as a mediatized trope.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, one question that is also “silently” raised by Thorpe's mimicry and Barrios's interview: would this “donning” of the voice be as smooth or straightforward for the queer spectator-consumer who lacks the racial and/or class privileges of the filmmaker and the film critic?

Limited as it might be in its reflexivity, this account of the accent as the *objet a* also continues into *DISG*'s segment on “camp” as a subcultural style. The segment, where Smyth defines “camp speech” as “acting very gay on purpose for fun,” begins by reminding viewers that (white) U.S. comedians like Wayland Flowers, Paul Lynde, and Rip Taylor became popular through their non-heteronormative performances on prime-time television. These are actors who, as Barrios notes, “mainstreamed the whole idea of camp” in the 1970s and 1980s. Several clips of these television actors—of, for example, Flowers performing with (and speaking as) his female puppet Madame; Taylor sashaying through a crowd in a feathery coat; and Lynde playing an ambisexual sheikh in a 1976 Christmas special—foreground the mainstream commodification of the camp aesthetic. In all these

examples, camp speech emanating from white male bodies is another name for the gay-sounding accent: vocal habits that most commonly combine with linguistic content, bodily gestures, and/or costumes of white actors to create an audiovisual ensemble that audiences are encouraged to read as gay or non-heteronormative. Here, too, accent is the white queer excess that prime-time television simultaneously others and celebrates.

*DISG*'s critical reading of camp speech, however, begins to morph once Thorpe's own voice intervenes to claim a subversive space for these camp celebrities for their ability to disrupt the normativity of mass media and to embolden gay men of his generation. As we watch home video footage of Thorpe talking over the phone in his drag persona, the filmmaker's voice-over recalls how, as a "freshly liberated gay man," he realized that "camping it up could be liberating." That is, while seeing camp as labor power that has been crucial to the production of mass culture, *DISG* also suggests that we hear camp accent as a means of exposing a certain instability or indeterminacy *within* the "normativity" of mass culture. The "straight accent" of mainstream culture, the film seems to argue at this point, is not that straight after all, especially if we take into account all the individual camp accents acting as labor power behind that culture.<sup>17</sup>

And, yet, such a celebration of camp's individuality and volatility, we should also note, ignores how playful parodies of or performative "disidentifications" with mainstream values are not necessarily inimical to the workings of racialized capitalism.<sup>18</sup> It is true that camp—and especially camp represented by U.S. drag ball culture and performed by doubly or triply marginalized subjects such as working-class queers of color simultaneously emulating and parodying white femininity, as chronicled by the well-known documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990)—creates meaningful localized acts of resistance and subversion. At the same time, as Phillip Brian Harper compellingly argues, these acts "do not represent the same investment of capital—both economic and social-symbolic—as do other types of cultural production, of which [the middle-class white filmmaker] Jennie Livingston's film is a primary instance."<sup>19</sup> In other words, an abiding hierarchy persists between the value of the camp labor and the value of the mainstream commodification of that labor, a hierarchy that both reflects and keeps intact the same racial and classed inequities the camp labor sought to critique. As bell hooks points out in her critique of Livingston's film, it is the ruling-class patriarchal whiteness subtending consumer capitalism and mainstream media culture that ultimately "undermines the subversive power of the drag balls, subordinating ritual to spectacle."<sup>20</sup>

Thorpe's film, whose representation of the mediated gay-sounding accent as the *objet a* initiates a penetrating analysis of this hierarchy between the value of camp labor and the value of its spectacular commodification, could have avoided the final pitfall of redemption if its textual voice dug deeper into the question of enjoyment. For the surplus *jouissance* extracted by gay-identifying spectators from the gay-sounding accent as *objet a*—regardless of whether they occupy Thorpe's

exact positionality or not—isn't enjoyment in any simple sense. Commenting on the relationship between capitalism and surplus *jouissance*, Tomšič writes:

Surplus-*jouissance* is not some *jouissance* that would reach beyond another *jouissance*, in the sense that there would be a certain quantity of *jouissance* to which something more is added. The actual correlate to the surplus-*jouissance*, produced by the same discursive cut, is the lack of *jouissance*. . . . The capitalist relations of domination build on this double face of the surplus. Production goes hand in hand with renunciation, the "more" with the "no more."<sup>21</sup>

Surplus *jouissance* (and therefore the *objet a*) is produced in response to a cutting deprivation, dispossession, or negation that *defines* capitalist productivity. Capitalism's profoundly asymmetrical expansion of value is invariably accompanied by the marginalization and devaluation of certain groups and populations that are made more precarious and deemed more superfluous than others. Surplus *jouissance*, or what appears as the *objet a* for the devalued population, is derived from this precarity and, in that sense, from the very absence of any unadulterated *jouissance* without limits under capitalism. Thus, the mass-mediated gay-sounding accent that *DISG* brings into relief also generates enjoyment in camp-oriented viewers by implicitly inflicting on them (or reminding them of) abiding social exclusions and proscriptions, even as the material attributes of the accent congeal in the form of a spectacular aural commodity. Here we are forced to confront the fact that the ambivalent decoding of the mass media text—the messy "queer" combination of spectatorial pleasures and pains that media scholars often seem eager to defend—is, in fact, quite systemic and normative.

Finally, while considering the ideological boundaries of Thorpe's film, it is also worth noting its necessary omission of the non-metropolitan, non-Anglophone *subaltern* voice whose non-heteronormativity may or may not be legible as "gay" or "queer." How does one "sound" non-heteronormative without having access to the culturally commodified accoutrement called the gay-sounding accent? The working-class queer of color immigrant who has migrated to the Global North but does not speak English, or the non-Anglophone queer subject in the Global South—what are their sources of the *objet a* and means of voicing their queerness at home and/or in diaspora? I am not suggesting that the film should have answered these questions, but merely that the whole business of "sounding gay"—as reflective as it is of the workings of (U.S.) capitalism—is still socially and geospatially quite limited in its queerness.

## NOTES

1. Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," 27.
2. On this, see below as well as the editors' discussion of the "relations of listening" in the introduction to this volume.

3. Mara Mills has argued that this sexualized, gendered, and often racialized labeling and hierarchization of vocal habits date back to the “scientific” pronouncements made by Anglophone speech pathologists in the early decades of the twentieth century. See Mills, “Lessons in Queer Voice.”

4. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 41–42. See also the editors’ discussion of the “neutral accent” in the introduction to this volume.

5. We should note that the simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized connotation of accent in these moments is distinct from the film’s more obvious attention to accent as a form of racialization. Examples of the latter come from recruited voices like U.S. journalist Don Lemon commenting on his own “code-switching” from a “lazy” southern (Black) accent to a more “standard” (white) accent on television, and U.S. comedian Margaret Cho noting the efforts her father made to “rid himself of an Asian accent.”

6. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 73 (italics in the original).

7. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 73–74.

8. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 20.

9. On this earlier opposition between the signifier and enjoyment, see Zupančič, “When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value,” 155; and Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 47.

10. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 49.

11. Zupančič, “When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value,” 158.

12. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 48.

13. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 177.

14. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 215.

15. Daniel Harris makes a very similar observation while analyzing his own fascination with (white) refined British and Hollywood voices as a gay teenager in “homophobic, redneck” North Carolina. Like Thorpe, however, Harris avoids any explicit discussion of race. See Harris, “The Death of Camp,” 168.

16. Mills, “Lessons in Queer Voice”; Kessler, “The Voice of Mockumentary,” 149.

17. This approach to camp cultural production closely resembles that of Matthew Tinkcom in his book *Working Like a Homosexual*.

18. I am referring to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” as a politically enabling and performative strategy that neither fully accepts nor strictly opposes dominant ideology. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

19. Harper, “The Subversive Edge,” 97.

20. hooks, “Is Paris Burning?,” 155.

21. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 67.

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