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*Modern Family* – Modern? Gay Stereotypes through Non-Verbal Communication

*Modern Family*, a new “mockumentary-style” sitcom on ABC, features the lives of three families: Jay Pritchett, his young, Colombian wife, Gloria, and her son, Manny; Phil and Claire Dunphy (daughter of Jay) and their children Haley, Alex, and Luke; and Mitchell Pritchett (son of Jay), his partner, Cameron Tucker, and their adopted Vietnamese daughter, Lily. The three families interact throughout the show, whether through family functions or chance encounters around the neighborhood. In the episode, “the Bicycle Thief<sup>1</sup>”, three separate plot lines run throughout the episode. Jay and Gloria plan a trip to Napa Valley while Manny’s biological father takes him to Disneyworld; Phil tries to teach Luke a lesson with the help of a bicycle; and finally, the focus of this paper, Mitchell and Cameron take Lily to her first “toddler’s playclass”. Interestingly enough, amidst current heated topics of gay rights, especially marriage, Mitchell acts as a sensor for his more “flamboyant” partner, asking him to dress more conservatively, tone down his mannerisms, and watch his vocalic communication for fear of “being judged as the only gay parents there” by the rest of the group. Through these types of non-verbal communication, Mitchell hopes to turn the typical stereotypes of homosexual men on its head in order to communicate messages of familial responsibility, appropriateness, and stability to the other members of the playclass.

Much like clothing is a stylistic representation of the person, costumes in media presentations can “furnish perspectives into the worldview of subcultures and ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> This episode can be seen free of charge at [www.hulu.com](http://www.hulu.com).

groups...as well as represent identity” (Silverblatt 144-5). Therefore, the way that the two men present themselves to the group via clothing can provide clues as to what type of people they are. Mitchell immediately takes issue with Cam’s choice of shirts, a mauve paisley button up with a pink shirt underneath, as soon as Cam enters the scene: “Wow. Paisley *and* pink. Was there something wrong with the fishnet tank top?” Because pink is traditionally a color worn by females, it is certainly something more effeminate, which is a characteristic associated with gay men. In addition, the pink triangle is a popular symbol for gay rights, thus further incriminating the two men as homosexuals. Despite his sarcastic comeback of “Fine. You know what, I’ll just go put on a pair of khakis, maybe a polo shirt, and everyone will think that we’re a couple of straight golfing buddies who decided to have a kid together”, Cam acquiesces and changes his shirt into something more neutral, a green polo.

As the three enter the playclass, Cam attempts to reassure Mitchell that “they’re going to love us; let’s just be ourselves” to which Mitchell responds, “Or, a slightly toned-down version of ourselves”. Because “gestures refer to the act of moving limbs or body as an expression of thought or emphasis” (135), they can typically add a bit more drama and excitement to the speaker’s overall presentation. Grand flourishes and, again, traditionally effeminate gestures, constitute other characteristics of the stereotypical gay man. In an effort to “tone it down”, Cameron introduces himself without using any gestures whatsoever. In another example, he gently bobs back and forth to the music during the “hello dance”, and, when it is his turn to dance with Lily, tells Mitchell “ yes, I know, tame down my natural gifts and dance like a straight guy”. During their dance, he clearly holds back, taking very deliberate steps and swinging his arm up and down in a

very simplistic way. Once he sits down after the dance, however, he tells Mitchell, “I feel dirty”.

Another aspect that Cameron “tones down” is his vocalic communication, or “the quality of the voice that conveys meaning, independent of the meaning of the words spoken” (149). Instead of talking in a higher pitched voice, which is his usual style, and also another stereotypical characteristic of gay men, he speaks in a formal, steady style, introducing himself in a deeper voice as “Cameron”. In a later scene, he makes small talk with one of the other mothers, and they end up discussing Meryl Streep in *Mama Mia!*. After the other mother declares that she did not care for Streep in this particular role, Cam, in his attempt to conceal his disagreement, speaks very evenly when he disagrees, “Yes, she was okay”. The difference between the way he delivers this particular line and his normal delivery is highlighted when the scene cuts to a solo interview of Cam talking about Streep. His voice here has a melodic quality, even infused with emotion as he chokes up after mentioning *Sophie’s Choice*.

In conclusion, non-verbal cues can reinforce certain stereotypes about a culture or sub-culture. In this particular case, however, the stereotypes are not portrayed but disguised in order to present a different image to others. This false image, however, does not impress any of the mothers at the playclass. In fact, by Cam acting less “gay” than he normally does, the non-verbal behaviors of the mothers take this to be abnormal or strange. As Mitchell finally concedes to letting Cam be himself, Cam dances uninhibited in front of the whole group amidst cheers. Thus, while the traditional non-verbal characteristics of the gay man traditionally have been interpreted negatively to some in

mainstream society, *Modern Family* presents them in a positive, and, thus one could argue, modern light.

## Works Cited

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