## Queer Matters: A Response to Robert Fulford

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What are we to make of robert fulford's attack on Jes Battis? It would, of course, be easy to point out the simple mean-mindedness of an attack on a junior scholar who has no access to the sorts of forum that are Fulford's bread and butter. It would be easy to point to Fulford's manipulation of basic facts, such as making it seem that Battis is living the high life on government largesse when, in fact, the scholarship money available to PHD students barely covers basic living expenses. It would be equally easy to point to the rhetorical trickery by which Fulford makes Battis's use of his salary as a postdoctoral fellow into a near accusation of malfeasance with government money.

These are all feasible strategies for a possible response to Fulford on the rhetorical level. The problem is that, while perhaps emotionally satisfying as a form of riposte, they do little to get at the basic problem behind this kind of journalism. Why are people so happy to jump on the bandwagon when it comes to criticism of the arts and humanities, of cultural studies, and of queer studies of any ilk? Why are they so reluctant, at the same time, to attack the sciences? I suppose the latter is primarily a perception of benefit, a lingering discourse that suggests that the "ordinary person" may somehow receive some sort of direct or indirect profit from scientific

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research. This suggests something of a lack of familiarity with the kinds of projects funded by NSERC, perhaps because the language of the sciences is frequently so obtuse to non-scientists that many people haven't the foggiest idea what is being funded. Although, having gone to NSERC's website, I must say I found it disturbing how little basic science is being funded and how much funding is dedicated to projects that, not to put too fine a point on it, are primarily about improving corporate profits.

So perhaps one of the reasons that SSHRC and humanities topics are so vulnerable to these sorts of attacks is that they are readily accessible, rather than the opposite. After all, even the most obscure title in the humanities can hardly live up to anything involving "estra-1,3,5(10)-triene-3,16 $\alpha$ ,17 $\beta$ -triol." Then again, I suppose most people don't spend a lot of time trolling NSERC's website or surely we would have heard Fulford or a counterpart objecting to spending public money on something like "Use of deheated yellow mustard to control E.coli 0157:H7 in uncooked fermented sausages and dry cured ham" (which, by the by, received \$187,300 over three years). It certainly seems that we live in an era where public discourse, at least in the kinds of newspapers for which Fulford writes, expects the humanities to be accessible to laypeople in a way in which science, medicine, engineering, and even business are not. Specialized vocabulary is permissible in those areas but is apparently loathsome when researchers are looking at culture.

My visit to the NSERC website also reminded me strongly of the university in Australia where I did my PHD, which each year held a half-day research showcase in which four carefully chosen doctoral candidates were allowed fifteen minutes apiece to present their research to the town's celebrities. However, the only students allowed to apply for this event were those in science, health studies, computer science, and food science; the preferred topics were thus things like the mechanics of the strapless bra and ways of improving the tomato sauce on mass-produced meat pies (this was Australia, after all). By comparison, my research, which looked at the conditions which make it possible for lesbian and gay people in Canada to feel that they belong to the nation, was deemed unimportant. So was all research from either the Faculty of Arts or the Faculty of Creative Arts. So was research in the social sciences, including work by a colleague of mine who was looking at depression and suicide amongst Australia's Vietnam vets. By all means, let us have a better meat pie!

1 I cite this example not because I am opposed to this particular study but rather because it seems likely to attract a similar sort of opposition in the reactionary press.

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Which brings me back, by a somewhat circular route, to one of the problems that I encountered in reading Fulford's fulminations against Jes Battis: it reminded me rather strongly of an earlier Fulford piece, this one occasioned by the publication of Peter Dickinson's *Here is Queer*. After all, it is not just that Fulford is attacking the humanities and any area of cultural studies; it is also that he is specifically targeting queer work. And it is very precisely the queerness of both Battis's and Dickinson's work that seems to inspire him, if one can use that term.

Of course, Fulford's own definition of queer theory ("an academic discipline that prides itself on finding gay subtexts in apparently heterosexual stories") is an excellent indication that he has grasped the subject not one whit. Yet, despite its occasional excessive use, in the early days, of the language of "ludic postmodernism," queer theory is not really all that difficult to understand. It seems to be precisely the possibility that we might think about thought, rather than merely thinking, or that we might think about the thoughts expressed in a text, rather than merely thinking about whether or not it is a pleasurable aesthetic experience, that seems to be most off-putting to Fulford and his ilk.

In his objections to Here is Queer, Fulford is quite explicit about this in his argument about Dickinson's discussion of Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House. Fulford notes that, "After Ross was posthumously revealed as gay, critics swarmed over the book, searching for homoerotic themes —and did not come back empty-handed. Dickinson's analysis of that novel is not stupid or mean, but it contains no indication whatever that what Ross produced, out of his isolation and misery, was a minor masterpiece." Although Fulford manages to make queer approaches to Ross seem a little ghoulish (and reduces them to looking for "homoerotic themes" rather than understanding what it was like to be gay and live in that world), his real objection here seems to be that looking at the ideas—the thoughts—in the novel has taken precedence over making aesthetic judgments about it. And if we are not distracted by the process of deciding on a book's beauty or sublimity, there is always the danger that we might actually think about what it *says*, especially if what it says seems to us queer or inspires queer thoughts.

Not that Fulford is alone in this perspective. The idea of studying culture mainly for its aesthetic qualities has faltered from time to time but has never disappeared entirely. Of course, reading a novel or watching a film should be an aesthetic pleasure. But that some of us also get pleasure from the ideas in the text, that thinking about thought can itself be a pleasurable experience and not necessarily a frustrating one, seems to have escaped

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Fulford's frame of reference. By contrast, looking at texts for what they reveal about what it is like to live in a particular world can be exceedingly relevant, indeed even a potentially lifesaving experience. This is especially the case with queer novels and films: they teach isolated and distraught young people that they are not alone. Particularly for those in rural areas or in intensely homophobic environments, reading a novel or seeing a film that shows that another world exists can and does save lives; it is no secret that gay teenagers are at significantly greater risk of suicide when they are most isolated from contact with other gay people and especially when they genuinely believe that there is no-one else like them.

In his attack on Battis's work, however, Fulford comes much closer to a kind of full-blown homophobic panic about the place of queer studies in the academy and the world. After all, it is not only that Battis is engaged in this work but that it is being published and, worse yet, that it is being funded, which receives the brunt of Fulford's ire. Like same-sex marriage, the funding of queer studies in the academy indicates an acceptance of queerness, a failure to marginalize it, that is no doubt irksome to some. The funding of Battis's work, the publication of Dickinson's—these seem to carry in Fulford's writing precisely this kind of symbolic freight, a fear that the margins are becoming the centre.

Perhaps instead of taking Fulford's attack on Battis as an indication of a swing to the right in Canada, we should see it instead as a sign of deep anxiety that the world is changing, that these changes are not linear, and that they do not necessarily fall neatly along the lines of the political divide. So the story is one of both successes and failures: failures because the response to Fulford's article in the *National Post*'s own readers forum shows that many people, even those who are gay and lesbian, don't understand that studies in the humanities can have profound material effects by changing how people think. Successes because, after all, Dickinson's book was published, Battis's postdoctoral studies were funded, and I can continue examining what queer artists in Canada have to say about what it means to be queer here and now.

A deeper problem, though, is the danger that, as a country, we may be creeping ever closer to a mentality in which recognizing that someone else thinks differently is seen as an impossible and intolerable state. Certainly this attitude seems to have overtaken much of the media in the United States, resulting in a degree of near hysteria by media pundits confronted with anyone who disagrees with them. Fulford, at least, still seems to think that it is reasonable for someone like Jes Battis to do the work he does, so long as government funds are not attached, even though

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he finds the work silly. But somewhere out there, somewhere probably in the fundamentalist heartland of the American Midwest but possibly even in "tolerant, multicultural" Canada, a teenage girl is watching *Smallville* and realizing that, if Lex Luthor ♥ Superman, maybe her feelings really aren't the aberration or perversion she has been taught they are. Maybe knowing this will save that girl's life. And that thought should be a useful reminder that both queer studies and cultural studies are indeed doing work that has material consequences.

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