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Sticky: The Vazaleen Posters

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Sticky: The Vazaleen Posters

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Abstract

Vazaleen was a monthly serial queer party in Toronto founded by artist and promoter Will Munro (1975–2010) in 2000. Munro commissioned Toronto-based artist Michael Comeau (1975–) to create many silkscreen poster advertisements for these parties. His designs include an array of typographic treatments, references to popular culture and queer icons, and vibrant colour schemes. This article discusses these posters in relationship to Michel Foucault’s theory of the heterotopia, Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis of advertising, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s writing on camp.

Résumé

Vazaleen était une fête périodique *queer* à Toronto, fondée en 2000 par artiste et promoteur Will Munro (1975–2010). Munro a commandé à l’artiste torontois Michael Comeau (1975–) la création de nombreuses affiches publicitaires sérigraphiées pour ces fêtes. Les designs de Comeau comportent une gamme de traitements typographiques, des références à la culture populaire et aux idoles *queer*, et des modèles de couleurs vibrants. Cet article expose les affiches de Comeau en relation avec le concept de l’hétérotopie élaboré par Michel Foucault, l’analyse sémiotique de la publicité de Roland Barthes, et les écrits sur la culture *camp* d’Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Vaseline is: a sticky petroleum product used for moisturizing; a potential lubricant for sexual encounter; and a Toronto-based serial queer dance party founded by Canadian artist Will Munro (1975–2010) and contributed to by the city’s queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and Queen Street scenes. As Munro explained, it was developed as an alternative to the “prefabricated ghetto culture” of Toronto’s gay strip—Church Street—and it offered a venue for queer socialization,

erotic exploits, and leisure.¹ Eventually renamed Vazaleen with a “z” due to a threat of lawsuit from the company Unilever, which owns the rights to the product Vaseline,² this pivotal queer party first appeared in Toronto’s nightlife and cultural circuit in January 2000, generally occurring on the last Friday of every month until Munro announced what appeared to be the end of the event in 2006. In 2002, the party moved from El Mocambo, on Spadina Avenue, to the venue Lee’s Palace, on Bloor Street. This shift in location also marked a change in ambience. At this second venue, many forms of visual culture were integrated into the parties: projected onto the space’s expansive walls were Super 8 and 16 mm pornography, 1953 footage of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II,³ and film works by artists Graham Hollings, Kenneth Anger, and Marcel Duchamp.⁴ Other party activities and performances included go-go dancing, lube wrestling, and—perhaps most famously—bobbing for butt plugs. In brief, this was a frenetic, polymorphic space of movement, image, sound, and sensuality.

Vazaleen remains an important touchstone in Canadian queer urban subcultures because of its self-organization, politicized partying, and erotic, ecstatic frivolity. Through Vazaleen, many musical performers and DJs established themselves or added to their notoriety in Toronto and internationally, including Peaches, the Hidden Cameras, Gentleman Reg, and Carol Pope. There have been sporadic revivals of Vazaleen since 2007. Because Munro frequently provided “communal Vaseline containers” in the toilets of one Vazaleen venue,⁵ one can say that this series of parties provided social lubricant, and even sexual lubricant, to its participants. Munro apparently chose the event’s original name “Vaseline” as an homage to French writer and activist Jean Genet (1910–1986), who was arrested for possession of Vaseline while in public; in the 1950s, an assumed subversive use of Vaseline was as a lubricant for anal sex between men. Vaseline is also a material used in maintaining a device involved in the creation of printed matter: the letterpress. This convergence of Vaseline’s

¹ John Palmer, “Courting the Queen of Vazaleen,” *Fab*, 19 December 2002, 32.

² Christi Bradnox, “Shout at the Devil: Will Munro Gets His Knickers in a Twist Over Lawsuit with Vaseline,” *Vice*, 8, no. 11 (2004): 16.

³ Palmer, “Courting the Queen,” 30.

⁴ Michael Pihach, “Vazaleen dries up,” *Fab*, 26 January 2006, 30; Graham Hollings, “Vaseline (aka Vazaleen),” *Lola* 9 (summer 2001): n.p.

⁵ Pihach, “Vazaleen dries up,” 30.



associations and uses come to bear on the Vazaleen promotional posters designed and created by Michael Comeau (1975–).⁶

Comeau established the Penny Arcade Print Shoppe with Tara Azzopardi and Michael Viglione in Toronto's Kensington Market in 2000; it was the site of his first conversations with Munro about poster design for Vazaleen. He is an active artist currently living in Toronto, who self-identifies as an "introverted comic nerd for

⁶ In keeping with Vazaleen's frenzy of participants and references, throughout this paper I refer to dozens of artists, musicians, and contributors to the parties' scene without analyzing or describing in detail their individual practices. These people have vivid practices of their own, and the reader is encouraged to research their work further; the decision to limit such commentary has been made to respect the available space in this publication, as well as to retain the focus on Comeau's work.

hire.”⁷ Comeau studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) between 1995 and 1999, overlapping with Munro’s time at the institution, and has been mythologized as a character in the graphic novel series *Scott Pilgrim* (2004–10), created by artist Bryan Lee O’Malley. A second mobilization of Comeau’s identity and artwork—specifically the Vazaleen posters—appears in the graphic novel *Hungry Bottom Comics* (2012), by the Canadian artist Eric Kostiuk Williams, who was inspired to create the work after seeing Munro’s retrospective exhibition at York University. Since Comeau integrated many redrawn characters from the Marvel Comics universe into the Vazaleen posters, it seems particularly fitting that Comeau’s own posters would be reinterpreted in this graphic novel format.

Comeau’s posters for these events were often vibrantly coloured, cheaply printed silkscreen images that featured overlapping references to popular culture, queer iconography, and punk print cultures. Between 2001 and 2008, he designed and printed more than sixty Vazaleen posters. These little-studied pieces of printed matter deserve further attention and contextualization. Content and aesthetic vary from poster to poster, but they can be characterized as frenetically composed collages of elements drawn from popular culture, including hand-drawn and photographic images of such diverse figures as fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld, artist Leigh Bowery, singer Marlene Dietrich, actor Mr. T, Barbie, Popeye, bloodthirsty vampires, and blood-covered prom queens. Event information is often scrawled in a frenzy of marks or in an array of fonts resembling anything from an LED calculator display to the logotype for the heavy metal band Megadeth. The objective of my discussion is to situate and analyze Comeau’s Vazaleen posters as unique forms of hailing, which attempted to target and draw in specific audiences through a complex process of coding and decoding.

Roland Barthes’s pivotal semiotic analysis of a pasta advertisement demonstrates that the language of advertising is “emphatic,” highly deliberate, and legible according to the consumer’s prior knowledge of a system of codes.⁸ Barthes refers to the “coded iconic,” or connoted, meaning that rests latent in such advertisements, which remains indiscernible to the uninformed reader of the advertisement.

⁷ Michael Comeau, telephone interview with the author, 25 August 2017.

⁸ Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 153.

The dominant colours of a particular pasta ad that Barthes discusses, for instance, are red, green, and white—colours used to connote a connection to the Italian flag and therefore to the purported authenticity and genuine “Italianicity” of the product.⁹ The Vazaleen posters are advertisements that present especially exciting forms of visual culture because the coded iconic information they contain is often highly complex and difficult to discern, but also because the imagery and text used is coded to be read by a specific minority audience: people who want to experience a queer environment. Unlike Barthes’s now-infamous Panzani pasta ad, which is designed to speak to the broadest possible audience of consumers, the Vazaleen posters are designed to be legible only to a relatively small group of marginalized people (although many people who did or do not identify as queer did attend the parties). While not all the posters included photographic imagery (Barthes’s analysis gives particular attention to the photographic), his model is still useful for isolating the coding of Comeau’s messaging.

The origin story of Comeau’s first Vazaleen poster, which he related in an interview, illustrates how this messaging was generated. Comeau and Munro met at a punk rock venue prior to 2000, and quickly developed a rapport. Munro asked Comeau to incorporate a found photographic image of drag queen Divine into a second found image of a television set, and to overlay text advertising the party. With this limited design brief in hand, Comeau made several decisions: the colour palette is electric pink and a rich blue, suggesting a fusion of archaic codes for masculine and feminine; the type treatment for “VASELINE” is handwritten, with irregular kerning and awkward letter proportions, giving the impression of a low-budget, DIY event. Comeau’s television set image appears to have been lifted from a mid-twentieth century advertisement. Indeed, the poster’s format resembles a circular flyer promoting the latest sales at a department store in suburban North America: an arched arrow containing the text “special guest” points toward the name of the event’s featured performers, Tracy and the Plastics. The image of the television is interrupted, however, by an apparent act of vandalism: the text chiselled on top of the television set reads “rock n’ roll quee quee bar.” Comeau selected and inscribed this text, drawing on his own familiarity with the contemporary skateboarder derogatory slang “quee quee” for “queer.”

⁹ Ibid., 153–54.

Distinguishing this event as both “rock n’ roll” and queer would have marked it as unusual because, in the early 2000s, the sonic environment of most gay and lesbian bars on Church Street would have been saturated with dance music—and rarely, if ever, punk or rock music. Other than the location outside the gay village, Munro’s parties were revelatory in their fusion of queer, gay, and lesbian cultures and punk, glam, and rock music. It would be absurd to suggest that Munro invented these connections, but his party overtly opened up social space in which these identities could celebrate the sexual and bodily potential of these musical forms. What is more, through the depicted device of the television, the poster inserts a drag queen into the space of the suburban home, suggesting that queer culture and drag were no longer confined to Toronto’s gay village some two kilometres due east of the party venue, but were already present in or invading the archetypal suburban site of the nuclear family (represented by the television set), and, of course, the environment of El Mocambo itself—a venue on the edge of the hippy-ish Kensington Market, very near to the University of Toronto’s St. George Campus and within blocks of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Returning to Barthes’s ideas, it is clear that without the appropriate decoding skills, many coded iconic details of this poster, such as Divine’s identity as an influential drag queen, actor, and queer icon, would remain a complete mystery to the uninformed viewer. Notorious, in part, for a performance in John Waters’s film *Pink Flamingos* (1972), Divine represents a particular style of drag that is tied to bawdy humour and even scatology; the presence of this figure in the poster thus suggests that Vazaleen, too, will manifest such values. After creating this first poster featuring Divine, Comeau was given the freedom to interpret the party themes as he saw fit, with minimal direction from Munro. According to Comeau, most of the design briefs amounted to short conversations by telephone to establish the theme, performer, date, and other basic information. From time to time, Munro would offer verbal feedback on the designs after their printing, including mild criticisms for Comeau such as “that’s a bit het” (i.e., heteronormative).¹⁰

Munro’s artistic aesthetic related to the themes present in these posters. In his art practice, he connected with and drew from the

¹⁰ Comeau, interview. “I’m looking at one in particular, the Screen Club one, March 2004, and it was like a very classic horror kind of thing of a woman screaming and a man’s face lording over her, and ‘that’s pretty het,’ as Will would say.”

legacies of the artist collective General Idea, the artist Tom of Finland, and macramé. He created crafty BDSM chambers lined with spider plants, and antiquarian revisionist images that reimagined leather daddies as pharaohs. Since his death, Munro and his art practice have been the subject of several detailed accounts, exhibitions, and monographs, including *Will Munro: Total Eclipse* (2010) at the AGO, *History, Glamour, Magic* (2012) at the Art Gallery of York University (Toronto), solo exhibitions at the commercial gallery Paul Petro (Toronto, 2011) and La Central Galerie Powerhouse (Montreal, 2011), Sarah Liss's extraordinary oral history project *Army of Lovers* (2013), and a twenty-four-minute Bravo documentary titled *The Artist's Life* (2003). The network that surrounded Munro and Vazaleen continues to exist and remains in conversation to this day through several forums, but perhaps most actively via an invite-only Facebook group called "Honouring the Heart of Will Munro." The group recently announced that he was posthumously awarded the LUX Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2019. Photos of the Vazaleen posters and parties abound on this Facebook group, amid discussions grappling with Munro's ongoing importance. The ArQuives (formerly the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives) in Toronto maintains an extensive Will Munro fonds, which contains ephemera associated with the parties such as handbills and posters, as well as news articles profiling and celebrating Vazaleen as an audacious environment for non-normative expression of gender and sexuality, as well as Munro's artistic practice and lifetime of activism. Will Munro's mother, Margaret Munro, and brother, Dave Munro, donated many Vazaleen show cards and posters to the ArQuives and the Art Gallery of Ontario. The AGO has a collection of 165 posters related to the various parties Munro organized and promoted between 2000 and 2009; sixty-three of these were created for Vazaleen. Art Metropole and the Art Gallery of York University also hold many of these same Comeau-designed Vazaleen posters in their collections. I first visited the ArQuives in 2017 to consult this material, which includes dozens of newspaper clippings associated with Munro, a small collection of business card-size handbills, and several dozen posters by Comeau. This archive and my interviews with Alex McClelland and Michael Comeau, two key contributors to Vazaleen's visual identity, form the foundation for my study. The corpus analyzed here includes twenty-eight posters from the ArQuives' Will Munro fonds and digital documentation of some sixty more on Michael Comeau's website. This study has additionally benefitted from my own earlier

encounters with the work in situ, as installed in various locations in Toronto in the early 2000s.

There has been significant misunderstanding regarding the authorship of Comeau's posters, both in some of the literature and in their popular reception. Generally, these posters have been bracketed by the posthumous accounting for and celebration of Munro's artwork, and, by extension, he has more than once been named erroneously as the artist responsible for creating the posters designed by Comeau. Even the AGO, in one exhibition, misattributed Comeau's posters to Munro—an error that Comeau discretely pointed out to museum staff. In addition to such episodes of confusion regarding authorship, the Vazaleen posters are sticky, difficult objects of study. To my knowledge, and based on reports from the Munro estate and the AGO, very few publicly accessible collections have Comeau's posters in their holdings. This scenario significantly limits opportunities for scholars, artists, or the public to study and reflect upon these important ephemera. However, this challenge is certainly not unique to Comeau's posters; much ephemera and printed matter tied to queer conviviality and activism has eluded collections and archives. The ArQuives, like other archives associated with gay, lesbian, queer, Two-Spirit, and trans identities, is an underfunded institution which manages nonetheless to provide vital support for scholarly work. Wakimoto, Bruce, and Partridge identify such issues in their important study of queer archives in California. To support their research, they draw on Andrew Flinn's discussion of radical archiving, discussing how many examples of printed matter associated with queer conviviality were produced with extremely limited or non-existent budgets. What is more, the works on paper created through such affordable means necessitate archival processes and storage techniques that present serious budget hurdles for archives which, too frequently, are chronically underfunded.¹¹ Though "ephemeral" in material quality, Comeau's posters and others like them have an ongoing value, and the spaces that preserve such works for study and reflection face various conservation challenges. Raegan Swanson, executive director of the ArQuives, commented

¹¹ Diana K. Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, and Helen Partridge, "Archivist as activist: lessons from three queer community archives in California," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 293–316; Andrew Flinn, "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011), article 6.

on such challenges as presented by the Vazaleen posters and similar works: “As a small organisation [*sic*] it is often hard to get full copies [of] posters and ephemera from community events. We have few staff and we rely on community members to donate items from events they have held or events they have been to. This can lead to information about copyright and other important data to get lost in the process. It can also lead to the same [kinds] of material being donated over and over, leaving some groups underrepresented in the collection. While we are trying to be more active in our collecting, this type of ephemera will always be difficult to collect.”¹²

The majority of these posters are multicolour silkscreens using Speedball inks, ink concentrates, and sometimes house paint on newsprint or other lightweight, affordable papers, such as white cartridge, newsprint, yellow Manila, and brown craft papers. A small number of the screenprinted posters were further embellished by being fed through a photocopier. Their aspect ratio and scale (often 18 x 24 inches) are suited to pasting on lampposts and telephone poles. Such flimsy, fragile papers may represent an archivist’s nightmare, but they are ideal for absorbing wheat paste and other glues, allowing for durable adhesion to fixtures in public space. They were designed to stick. To this day, there are doubtless many scraps from Vazaleen print materials remaining adhered to mailboxes, phone booths, and toilet stalls. The posters held at the ArQuives have never been moistened with glue, yet they remain strangely sticky in three other, central ways. First, they were used to attract attendees (like sticky flypaper). Second, their imagery can be difficult to perceive, interpret, and situate due to chaotic mark-making, overlaid imagery, or colour contrasts. And third, these posters, as interpellative tools, remain soaked in affect. Through interpellation, Vazaleen’s paper trail of printed matter is, to borrow a phrase from Sara Ahmed, “sticky, or saturated with affect.”¹³ A portion of this affective situation relates to the tragedy of Munro’s death at such a young age (even if Comeau was responsible for most of these poster designs). The ArQuives also preserves a daunting quantity of letters, tributes, and obituaries for Munro—which, in several cases, also seem to be tributes to Vazaleen, a dearly loved social event in Toronto. In my research, interviews, and writing for this article, I encountered a complicated

¹² Raegan Swanson, email correspondence with the author, 3 September 2019.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 11.

web of affect interconnecting members of Munro's social network. I have met collectors and colleagues who have one or more of these posters, and other memorabilia, sequestered in drawers or exhibited on walls. Clearly there are as many responses to Vazaleen as there were attendees, and, as *aides memoires*, the affective climate surrounding these posters is humid with feeling and association.

While it is impossible to separate these posters from such associations, this paper does not attempt to analyze Munro's significant contributions to Canadian contemporary art and Toronto's nightlife, but focuses instead on Comeau's contribution to Vazaleen's visual identity. Additionally, there exists an extensive and superb series of handbills in the ArQuives' collection created by artists such as Cecilia Berkovic and Alon Freeman, and sociologist Alex McClelland (who was, for a time, Munro's boyfriend). These handbills are so multitudinous that they deserve a separate analysis. However, it must be noted that McClelland and Munro co-designed and produced Vazaleen's earliest visual identity, beginning in 2000. Early promotional materials created by these two, which featured Photoshop collages of popular culture figures such as Salt-N-Pepa and artworks by Marcel Dzama, were created on a business card printer at a rate of \$99 for a thousand cards. The website www.1001fonts.com was a recurring source of typographic elements for McClelland and Munro, including many fonts common in heavy metal and punk album art. McClelland described how he used the photocopier at his father's architecture firm to create, with Munro, the first promotional material for Vazaleen: sheets of glittery grey cardstock ornamented with illustrations of men in leather caps surrounded by the event information.¹⁴ These details demonstrate that from the beginning, the aesthetic of the event was to be DIY, copyright-reckless, and perverse, and that the production methods would be, necessarily, affordable or free. This starting point was fundamental to how the party evolved, and Comeau's work could be seen as a response to these early promotional images. At the very least, McClelland and Munro's promotional materials and Comeau's posters both depict the capped leather daddy, and the material strategies in both strains of production are DIY, low-cost, and punk-oriented.

Vazaleen was just one event organized by Munro, who was also responsible for organizing and promoting several other serial parties, including Love Saves the Day (a house music night at The Beaver,

¹⁴ Alex McClelland, telephone interview with the author, 25 August 2017.

a Toronto venue), Miserable Mondays (which featured the music of The Smiths), Moustache (a strip night), and Peroxide (an electroclash night). These parties were promoted through posters, handbills, and other object-multiples, including floppy discs decorated with venue information. One unattributed author claims that when exhibited, the posters for all these events “documented a particular kind of coming of age for Toronto’s queer community.”¹⁵ Even if they are linked integrally into a much larger network of images, performances, music, and sociality associated with Munro’s aesthetic, Comeau’s design and illustration strategies for the Vazaleen posters need to be approached on their own terms.

While the parties have been quite extensively studied, critiqued, and contextualized in the popular press and the news weeklies, as well as some scholarship, and while Munro’s own practice has been the subject of significant scholarly and curatorial interest, much less attention has been given to the works of printed matter that circulated in Toronto (and beyond) to promote these important parties. This may be due, in part, to the posters’ ephemeral nature and limited print run: most of Comeau’s posters were printed on non-archival newsprint and in very limited numbers—usually under 250 prints for each event, with 200 distributed and around fifty kept for the artist’s archives. Comeau’s personal website has a massive archive of high-resolution images documenting each poster he designed for the event, yet this remarkable digital collection has no institutional home and has received limited scholarly attention. An important exception is Ken Moffatt’s essay “Dancing without a Floor: The Artists’ Politic of Queer Club Space” in the edited collection *Troubling Masculinities* (2012), which does discuss Vazaleen and Comeau’s posters. In some quarters, ephemera are deemed too fleeting to be taken seriously, which limits their study. Where ephemera are tied to revelry, drink, and dancing, not to mention queer, lesbian, gay, and gender non-conforming explorations of eros and conviviality, there may be other, even more troubling biases against the study of objects like the Vazaleen posters. Finally, aesthetically speaking, Comeau’s is a deliberately disorderly corpus in terms of mark making and visual codes. Comeau adopted and rejected commitments to stylistic conventions with remarkable frequency, and it is therefore a (deliberately) aesthetically discordant corpus.

¹⁵ Sarah Liss, “This is a love letter to Will Munro,” *The Grid TO*, 28 June–4 July 2012, 41–44.

The imagery, typography, and formats of Comeau's posters point to a set of source materials comprising an entangled network of popular culture and contemporary art phenomena, including Marvel Comics, erotic photography, and the cinema of John Waters, among many other sources. The typography was often custom-created by hand for each event, and Comeau developed and drew on an extensive archive of print material from a range of sources, including illustrations from a second-hand 1960s encyclopedia, copies of *MAD* magazine, and illustrated advertisements for children's toys such as Barbie, which he would sample and imitate in pencil and pen drawings translated into print.¹⁶ In the early 2000s, Comeau worked at The Beguiling, a Toronto bookstore specializing in graphic novels, and he cites this locale, and the comic culture it supported, as further influences on the Vazaleen posters. Here he encountered *shoujo* manga, a genre of Japanese graphic novel designed for young women readers which often narrates same-sex romantic encounters between men. In my interview with Comeau, he specifically cited the eleven-volume *shoujo* series *Happy Mania* (1996), by Moyoko Anno, as a source to which he frequently turned in developing print materials for Vazaleen. This account is only a partial—yet complex and even contradictory—list of influences and references. The dizzying quality and even incoherency of this collection of images, alongside Comeau's clashing, vibrant colours, was surely a deliberate strategy in his work—and one which evidently aligned with Munro's vision for Vazaleen, since Comeau was so routinely commissioned to create these posters.

Reflecting on these properties, Comeau's posters can be said to form a heterotopian print environment wherein divergent source images coexist in order to communicate the hectic and energetic sexual, social, and spatial environment of Vazaleen. Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia is helpful in discussing the complicated relationship between Vazaleen, its visual identity, and the city in which it was situated. Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces "which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which ... all the other real arrangements that can be found within a society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned ... In contrast to the utopias, these places which are absolutely *other* with respect

¹⁶ Comeau, interview.

to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias.”¹⁷

Perhaps it is Foucault’s use of the term “other,” and his focus on spaces pushed to the margins or outside of normative daily life, that have made the heterotopia such a recurring model in queer theory. If queer life can be imagined as a “counter-arrangement” to compulsory heterosexuality, the appeal of Foucault’s model in the present discussion becomes even clearer since Vazaleen and other spaces like it have nurtured environments in which queer action and thought are lubricated and made manifest. Ken Moffatt also draws on Foucault’s definition of heterotopia to discuss Vazaleen, characterizing it as “a place where signs, languages, interpersonal relations are incongruous, disordered, and multiple.”¹⁸ I want to add to Moffatt’s contribution by claiming that the Vazaleen posters themselves equally create such an atmosphere of disorder and thus serve as an alternative to heteronormative society—a heterotopia—by converging graphic elements that *confuse* conventional categories of straight and queer culture. One particularly charged example, promoting the 28 January 2005 edition of Vazaleen, combines a photograph of actor Michael J. Fox, an appropriated illustration by cartoonist Sergio Aragonés, an image of a mustached man clad in leather cap and jacket, and a speech bubble that reads, in part: “do my melons look ripe to you?” Dozens of other characters and images are peppered throughout this densely composed poster in overlapping shades and transparencies of pink, yellow, orange, and green. The chaotic visual environment seems to represent the very attributes of Vazaleen identified by Moffatt: “incongruous, disordered, and multiple.” Moffatt’s research identifies polyphony and multiplicity as two further important qualities of the Vazaleen events. He argues that the parties “allowed for an open interpretation of gender codes that allowed for multiple forms of rebellion.”¹⁹ Both in their divergent imagery and their overlapping, disordered pictorial spaces, Comeau’s posters manifest a similar, visually polyphonic environment. What is more, these posters allowed many marginalized people to imagine

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997): 352. Italics original.

¹⁸ Ken Moffatt, “Dancing without a Floor: The Artists’ Politic of Queer Club Space” in *Troubled Masculinities: Reimagining Urban Men*, ed. Ken Moffatt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012): 127–42 (139).

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

places for themselves in the urban sphere via the party atmosphere of Vazaleen.

Foucault suggests that the mirror is an object that manifests the heterotopia, “since it makes the place that I occupy, whenever I look at myself in the glass, both absolutely real ... and absolutely unreal.”²⁰ The Vazaleen posters, too, function as a kind of mirror, wherein queer sexual misfits in heteronormative society are presented as monstrous and mutated. As a further example of this tendency, the poster for Vazaleen from 28 February 2003 is a hand-drawn rendition of the cover of issue 100 of Marvel’s *X-Men* comic. Rather than the standoff between superpowered mutants pictured in the original, Comeau has positioned an array of butch and femme queen bikers about to enact violence through gang war. When I interviewed him, Comeau stressed that in comic books, violence is frequently a substitute for sexual encounter, and that the *X-Men* in particular have been appropriated as icons of queer identity both because they are hunted for their non-normativity and because they achieve their “mutant” powers in adolescence. The *X-Men* narratives thus can be approached as parables attached to pubescence and adolescent exploration of eroticism, which Comeau is deliberately tapping into.

Taking into account the environment in which these posters were usually viewed—the streets of the city—this framework of the heterotopia has ramifications beyond the posters themselves. The Vazaleen posters existed, and still do exist, within a complex system of visual codes and cues, and were usually seen in dense urban environments adjacent to other print materials. In considering these objects in context, therefore, Irit Rogoff’s ideas are useful. She writes: “In the arena of visual culture the scrap of an image connects with a sequence of a film and with the corner of a billboard or the window display of a shop we have passed by, to produce a new narrative formed out of both our experience journey and our unconscious.”²¹ These posters inhabited a dense field of urban visual culture and competed with other forms of advertising to elicit responses from and affective engagement with queer audiences. While these posters were installed on lampposts, corkboards, and other such fixtures of urban life, they were also frequently removed and collected by eager aficionados of print culture and partying. Despite these chaotic visual

²⁰ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 352.

²¹ Irit Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. N. Mirzoeff (London: Routledge 1998), 16.

environments, a certain elect was hailed by these compelling images. The American art historian W. J. T. Mitchell urges his readers to regard “visual culture and visual images as ‘go-betweens’ in social transactions.”²² This nodal, intermediary, or brokering function of visual culture is at work in the Vazaleen posters, intended as they were to draw in diverse but very particular audiences—and, according to Comeau, to frighten off others. For instance, at one point there was noted an increasing homogeneity among Vazaleen participants as the parties became ever more dominated by gay men, and so Comeau introduced lesbian-affiliated icons of popular culture in an attempt to diversify the Vazaleen community. The punk sensibility of Comeau’s posters, including the irreverent appropriation of wildly divergent icons associated with many sexual identities, was surely one lure among many that contributed to the social makeup of the Vazaleen events.

A degree of irony is latent in many of the posters—even in those that seem quite heteronormative. Moffatt proposes that, “at times [Comeau’s] expression of maleness in the posters was so extreme as to be ironic.”²³ Comeau’s posters often bring together irony and eroticism. On occasion, their representation of male bodies veers toward the hyperbolic in terms of muscle mass, gesture, and garment—qualities that are used to convey, but also to challenge, conventional ideas of the “masculine” as a category. In many cases, these bodies are interrupted and confused by juxtaposed elements. In our interview, Moffatt discussed one poster advertising the 28 November 2004 edition of Vazaleen, hosted at Lee’s Palace. Its central image is a shirtless, beefcake male body whose thumbs are hooked effortlessly (even flirtatiously) on the waistband of his jeans. The head of this figure has been replaced with that of a unicorn, creating a hybrid, interspecies body. Posters such as this, Moffatt writes, “are so macho as to make one wonder whether they were masculine in a conventional sense.”²⁴ The significance of “masculine” is certainly challenged in this poster, but so too is the category of “human”; indeed, many of Comeau’s illustrations fuse human bodies with those of other animals, as well as machines. Focusing on the parties rather than the posters, Moffatt describes how “Munro

²² W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2002), 243.

²³ Moffatt, “Dancing without a Floor,” 130–31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

imagined Vazaleen as a space in which all that is normally perceived as grotesque and abject is openly explored. The bodies of participants at Vazaleen are imagined to be open-ended and irregular rather than symmetrical and balanced.”²⁵ It is fruitful to consider further how Munro’s ambitions for the event and its participants are *pictured* in Comeau’s posters, which frequently do illustrate the grotesque in the form of monsters and hybrids—such as this muscled human/unicorn figure—which are unsettling and potentially erotic or fetishistic. In this instance, it would seem the beefcake/unicorn hybrid represents the gender-queer individual, or possibly the polyvocal, polysexual Vazaleen crowd in a broader sense.

Kitsch or camp imagery is at the core of Comeau’s poster design. In her discussion on camp, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that through negative processes of prejudice, queer people have a special, firsthand knowledge of shame, which in turn gives them special insight into identification with discarded camp objects.²⁶ This form of affect uniquely positions queer-identified people as empathizers for objects and images denigrated by heteronormative cultures. And yet, particularly through comic imagery, one also could say that heteronormative images are occasionally employed, but usually distorted, in these posters. Comeau presents a deliberate confusion of masculine and feminine as categories, and even confuses categories such as human, animal, and machine. With this in mind, there seem to be two strategies of hailing at work in these posters. First, the use of monstrous imagery has an interpellative value: “monsters” such as Frankenstein, werewolves, and swamp creatures depicted in Comeau’s posters are stand-ins for non-normative and queer people who may be interested in attending Vazaleen. The “monster” depicted on the poster is effectively a signal that society’s supposed “monsters” of gender non-conformity will be welcome at this party. In another example—a poster for the 28 December 2001 event—a symbol of normativity, the well-coiffed femme sweetheart, is restyled and tattooed with a Manson Family cross. She is covered in grotesque, overdrawn makeup overlaid with the text “makeover madness,” suggesting that Vazaleen’s remodelling of *maquillage* will be cultic and extreme. The colour scheme is a lurid combination of pale green and deep red—a reference to the

²⁵ Ibid., 133.

²⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–65.

Christmas festivities taking place just a few days before the party. In this poster, the normative is rendered convoluted to celebratory effect.

It is not that I wish to perform a gay iconological analysis of these posters to demonstrate something about the identity of the maker of these images. In fact, Michael Comeau identifies as straight. Comeau “came out” to me as straight during our interview—something I already knew. Commenting on misattribution of the posters by major institutions such as the AGO, Comeau explained: “I think people assumed that Will made them. I think people want to round up into the mythology of Will. And because I’m a straight person, people think they have to observe this divide between straight culture and queer culture. There have been queer exhibitions, and they want the posters but they don’t want my identity. That becomes an awkward thing.”²⁷ In considering these matters, I reflect on the research of Tom Folland, who writes about problematic approaches to Robert Rauschenberg as an apparently closeted artist supposedly outed by gay imagery in his work. Folland differentiates between a *gay iconographic approach*, which tries to explain or seek out the artist’s sexuality in the presence or absence of gay iconography in a given artwork, and a *queering approach to representation*, wherein “a queer effect” on viewers, participants, and validators of the art practice are studied.²⁸ It is the *queer effect* of Vazaleen’s posters that forms the lynchpin of my study, even if I have touched upon iconography in my discussion.

In the examples above, iconography, typography, composition, and use of language function together as hailing devices to draw queer and non-normative audiences into temporary or longstanding community. These “sticky objects” continue to draw audiences and attention. I hope that these posters, in their stickiness, may call upon certain readers and draw us together into a temporary intellectual and social community—which seems appropriate to the vision of Vazaleen as a radical enterprise in queer visibility, celebration, and gathering.

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²⁷ Comeau, interview.

²⁸ Tom Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration,” *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (2010): 349.

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