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Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 2, Winter 2014, pp. 117-121 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0005>



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IN FOCUS: Queer Approaches to Film, Television, and Digital Media

Introduction

by PATTY AHN, JULIA HIMBERG, AND DAMON R. YOUNG, editors

It is a tragic coincidence that the Queer Caucus of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) was asked to curate a special “In Focus” on current approaches in queer media studies at the same time that we were devastated by the news of Alexander Doty’s untimely passing. Doty was a cofounder of the caucus and—both by the example of his scholarship and through his career-long commitment to mentoring—he helped make queer media studies what it is today. At a memorial event at the 2013 annual meeting for the SCMS, members from the community reflected on Doty’s immense intellectual and personal legacy. Corey Creekmur’s poignant tribute, adapted here, reflects on the distinctive qualities that made Doty such a formative figure in the field. Foremost among those qualities is courage—the courage, as Creekmur puts it, of the Lion in *The Wizard of Oz* (a film on which Doty has offered perhaps the definitive queer analysis), not the courage of patriarchs but that of “sissies.” Doty’s courage was at once intellectual, personal, and pedagogical; it was the courage to forge a queer way of being in a world whose norms remain defensively, and sometimes violently, straight. It was also the courage to allow personal “investment” to register at the surface of his scholarly work. We open this “In Focus” with Creekmur’s contribution in dedication to Alex and his irreverent, generous, and brilliant “queer approach” to life and work.

In the spirit of Doty’s insistence that we acknowledge, thematize, and challenge our intellectual investments, the six feature essays presented here map idiosyncratic and personal trajectories rather than offering comprehensive overviews. The accounts of queer approaches to television, film, and digital media converge and diverge in focus as well as style, but they all invite us to reflect on the important developments that took place in queer studies, LGBT activism, and

the media industries in the 1990s.¹ It is often said (or thought but not said) that queer studies is a nineties kind of affair, and it is true that its rise in that decade was fueled by a sense of political urgency and fortified by its intersections with the media-driven activist movements that were also coming into their own. It was indeed in 1990 that Doty, Chris Holmlund, and a small group of friends and colleagues met together in Washington, DC, and proclaimed the birth of the Lesbian and Gay Caucus (soon to be renamed the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Caucus, then eventually the Queer Caucus). In its early years, the caucus sponsored landmark panels on HIV/AIDS, pedagogy, pornography, film theory, and, of course, questions of representation—all topics it continues to champion even as it has expanded its membership base along with its range of geographical focuses and methodological frameworks.

That same year, Teresa de Lauretis—a key film theorist—coined the term *queer theory*; the year 1990 also saw the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and—demonstrating the immense importance of cinema to queer theory's foundational analyses—D. A. Miller's essay "Anal Rope."² And if something queer was in the air, it was not just in the academy: this was also the moment at which the directors comprising a movement B. Ruby Rich would soon hail as the new queer cinema were busy making their first works.³ That movement formed—contemporaneously with the rise of queer theory—partly in response to the Reagan administration's murderous nonresponse to an epidemic that was disproportionately devastating gay, black, and immigrant communities across the United States.

The term "queer theory" also emerged just as LGBT representations and media production and distribution channels began to dramatically shift and diversify. The comprehensive privatization of the US media industries throughout the 1980s created a focus on minority marketing, which by the 1990s had become a common practice among corporations seeking to cultivate new markets. The increase of gay and lesbian representation in mainstream media worked in tandem with the emergence of a new queer market value in the film, television, and music industries. The year 1990, then, is also the year of the sensational release of Madonna's music video for "Vogue" (directed by David Fincher), featuring black and Latino and Latina dancers from the Harlem "house ball" community, which brought both praise for the singer's boldness and criticism for her exploitation of gay black and Latino subcultures. That same year, *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) turned those dancers into ethnographic

1 Of course, queer film and media studies did not begin in the 1990s: the rapid developments in that decade built on the earlier, foundational efforts of writers, including Parker Tyler, Richard Dyer (whose *Gays and Film* came out, so to speak, in 1978), Robin Wood, and Thomas Waugh, as well as Karla Jay, Esther Newton, Dennis Altman, and John D'Emilio, among others.

2 De Lauretis organized the conference "Queer Theory" at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990, thus effectively coining the term. See de Lauretis, ed., "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," special issue, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Representations* (1990): 114–133.

3 B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," *Sight and Sound*, September 2, 1992, 32.

subjects.⁴ Of course, Doty was among the many media scholars who remained suspicious of too-pat bifurcations between the “mainstream” and the “subcultural”; Madonna was one of his many beloved divas, and he proclaimed that his avid consumption of network television as a child profoundly shaped the feminist analytic he would take up in his scholarship. Perhaps queer media studies arose alongside the multiplication of media platforms precisely because it allowed for an expansive methodological approach to thinking about the vexed, often contradictory range of representations that were emerging at dizzying speeds both in underground film scenes and across mass culture.

In television, unprecedented deregulation produced fundamental shifts throughout the industry, including ownership concentration, channel proliferation, and branding. What Ron Becker calls “gay TV” of the 1990s emerged in this industrial context; landmark moments like Ellen DeGeneres’s coming out on national television, the success and popularity of *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998–2006), and the premiere of Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) reflected some of the changes in regulatory and financial structures within this historically domestic and heteronormative medium.⁵ The launch of LGBT-dedicated cable channels in the United States and Canada simultaneously exploited the segmenting potential of narrowcasting, thus reinforcing hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nation, and marked a new era of visibility and political recognition.

These same deregulatory shifts also forced queer studies to reckon with the globalization and digitization of many national and regional economies outside the United States. The dense multidirectional flow of capital, intellectual property, media content, and labor made it increasingly difficult to think about media and sexuality as tethered to a single national culture, domestic infrastructure, or even technological platform. With the rapid globalization of regional media industries in the 1990s, scholars institutionally based in the United States and beyond tracked a growing body of queer transnational media that challenged normative ideas about kinship, family, intimacy, and empire in ways that did not legibly cohere with the global market or with a US-based politics of “coming out” and visibility. A queer approach to media theory and practice has suggested possibilities for challenging—through critical analysis—overlapping structures of patriarchy, nationhood, citizenship, heteronormativity, and the machinations of neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, the intersection of queer theory and digital media studies has produced a range of new critical approaches to thinking, beyond the text, about academic publishing, the classroom, creative practice, social

4 Debates about the politics of race, appropriation, and subversion in *Paris Is Burning* were famously taken up by Judith Butler and bell hooks contemporaneously with the film’s release: bell hooks, *Z Magazine* (June 1991) and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Ann Cvetkovich also engaged with the differing modes of feminine subversion and performance in “The Powers of Seeing and Being Seen: *Truth or Dare* and *Paris Is Burning*,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 155–169. For a current revisitation of some of the complex issues raised by Livingston’s film that situates it in relation to the history of drag balls and the emergence of queer theory and critical race studies, see Lucas Hildebrand, *Paris Is Burning* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013).

5 Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

networks, and media environments and infrastructures, sometimes under the umbrella term *digital humanities* (we like to think of this as a queer appropriation of that term).

As the issues, approaches, and investments that inspired the formation of the Queer Caucus find themselves repeated, refracted, displaced, assimilated, critiqued, and reanimated in new generations of scholarship, this “In Focus” tracks some of the enduring connections between the challenges and questions we face now and those that have come before us. In the post-millennium, what new questions confront queer studies of film, television, and new media? Many of the essays emphasize the ways industrial and technological contexts shape the intersection of media and sexuality. They remind us that media belongs to and is a product of “the market,” even as media texts and media forms themselves suggest modes of being that escape the market’s inexorable determination. In some ways, this is a bit like academic research itself, which is both dependent on and somehow ideally transcendent of the institutional contexts that sustain it. The essays grapple with this imbrication of text and context, institution and extra- or anti-institutional imagination, sexuality and its mediating forms. The term *approaches*, with its emphatically plural declension, lends itself (we hope) to an anti-teleological sense of where queer media studies has been and where it is going. In keeping with this pluralism, and given the different ways the term *queer* has come to be used, we have left definitions of *queer* open to each author to explain and contextualize with respect to her or his own specialized interests.

Thomas Waugh and Matthew Hays take up some of these questions via a reflection on the challenges they faced in creating their Queer Film Classics series at Arsenal Pulp Press—a queer alternative to the BFI Film Classics—under whose umbrella eleven titles have been published since 2008. The series performs a “salvage operation” not only on overlooked works of queer cinema but also on a practice of close reading that, within film and media studies, has fallen out of fashion. Foremost among the “crises” they enumerate is the eclipse of modes of cinematic production that sustained both an earlier queer film culture and its critical (and scholarly) reception. How does this heritage translate, they ask, to the post-social media generation? Moreover, if queer studies—queer film and media studies in particular—was shaped around the critique of mass culture, it now faces the task of reorienting itself to a landscape in which neither “mass” nor “mainstream” cohere as categories. Thus, even as their own series pays heed to a queer art-film tradition and the modes of textual analysis fitted to it, Waugh and Hays celebrate new methods and critical formats to come.

With that goal of developing new critical formats in mind, the essays here by Lynne Joyrich and Quinn Miller explore the productive relationship that comes from bringing together queer theory with television studies. As Joyrich notes, queer theory and television studies may seem like an odd couple; there are indeed real tensions between television’s status as a—or perhaps the most—mainstream medium and queer theory’s defining goal of destabilizing all norms. Yet Joyrich argues that television’s anti-teleological temporality makes it an inherently, or at least potentially, queer medium. Her reading of *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012–2013) suggests that television’s ordinariness is perhaps also a site of its queerness and that the paradoxes of queer television studies both “frame and displace” televisual logic in potentially productive ways. Miller’s essay emphasizes the “oppositional” possibilities of what he calls “television

camp” and excavations of minor subtexts and background characters across media platforms. Through a reassessment of the queer potentiality of popular forms like the sitcom, and an examination of minor or marginal characters and actors who are often overlooked in standard forms of textual analysis, Miller calls for a rethinking of the formal and generic hierarchies that structure the fields of film, television, and media studies.

The last two essays examine some of the ways that queer theory has intersected with transnational media and transmedia studies. Audrey Yue’s contribution sketches out two major research models that scholars of queer Asian media have adopted. The first, more textually focused approach developed in response to the queer Asian cinema and media boom of the 1990s and examines the ways cinema and media texts decenter Western sexualities and cinematic norms. The second mode takes up questions of globalization and “queer hybridity” in the face of institutional and industrial transformations wrought by the denationalizing (though also reterritorializing) forces of global capital.

In her contribution, Kara Keeling observes that while a new generation of scholars is poised to grapple with the potential resonances between queer theory and new media, this is a convergence whose queer potentiality remains to be fully articulated. Thus, Keeling offers a speculative rubric that she playfully calls “Queer OS” to spotlight the emergence of a queer “common sense” for thinking about new media’s relationship to race, sexuality, the body, and material environments. In a way, we find ourselves returning to Doty’s claims that every text—though we might now want to say every medium—is always already (potentially) queer, or at least awaits a queer reading. Could we doubt that he was indeed on to something?

In closing, we want to note that many of the scholars who crowd into our annual caucus meetings were still in elementary school in 1990. Their projects also demonstrate an impressively diverse range of approaches. Some of them—like Nick Davis’s monumental work of queer film theory, reviewed in this issue—buck current academic trends by unashamedly engaging with high theory. Others, like Laura Horak’s work on cross-dressing in early silent cinema and Greg Youmans’s work on 1970s documentary, bring new rigor to queer historiography; still others, like Stephanie Hsu’s study of transnational audiences of serialized Korean melodrama, explore convergence culture in provocative ways.⁶ We are sure Doty would be thrilled to see that the newest contributions to the field demonstrate the same qualities of imagination, courage, and ingenuity that shaped his own work, even as he would applaud the diverse historical and theoretical frameworks that, in 1990, were still on the horizon of what was only beginning to cohere as a field. *

6 Laura Horak, “Landscape, Vitality, and Desire: Cross-Dressed Frontier Girls in Transitional-Era American Cinema,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 4 (2013): 74–98; Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011); Youmans, “Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer’s Films of the 1970s,” *Camera Obscura* 27, no. 3 81 (2012): 101–135. Hsu’s research on this topic is still in the works. See also Kyle Stevens, “Dying to Love: Gay Identity, Suicide, and Aesthetics in *A Single Man*,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 4 (2013): 99–120.