Queer Visual Culture Texts
James H. Sanders III
The Ohio State University

Abstract
As an autoethnographic study, this essay considers late 20th and early 21st century broadcast and film productions—those moving images that shaped the author’s understanding of the world. Examining that world through a queer theoretical lens, the author explores how media and visual cultural studies can serve as fertile sites for critically reading contemporary culture and understanding social change. The author also describes how visual art educators can open up discussions regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer subjects, and challenges such pedagogical practices as performances of social justice and commitments to human rights for all students.

In this essay I examine film and broadcast media’s production of social meaning, arguing that queer readings of these sites can be of service to arts educators and proponents of visual cultural studies who value social justice. This text is intended as a resource for students and instructors in higher education who may (not) have considered the significance of queer bodies of art and research, or the social, political and ethical implications of sustaining silence on gay and lesbian subjects and artists’ identification in film and television media.

I will open this essay by sharing my personal experiences with broadcast media and film—an autoethnographic (Pinar & Reynolds 1992, Pinar 1998) tale that locates my political and social standpoint. I will proceed with examinations of queer film and television productions and those who create, theorize, and criticize these cultural works. Employing content analyses (Jaejer, 1997, Gamson, 2003), this discussion will consider the moving image’s production of raced, classed and (homo)sexualized bodies. I will also focus on the relations between producers and consumers of queer media and the social impact of queer representations. I undertake this exploration deeply committed to human dignity, individual liberty and social justice.

Queer Readings of Mid-to-Late 20th Century Media
As a child of the baby boom, my life seems to have been defined by TV, film, and radio. Vividly I can recall watching the tubes cool down after manually switching off the family’s “9” Crosley console TV, wondering if I could see Felix (the cat syndicated 1954-1958) with his tail waving good-bye in the yellow glow. Amidst pinging of quickly cooling glass, I imagined Garfield Goose’s tap-tap-tapping (Frazier Thomas 1952-1980 on WGNI), wondering where he roosted for the night. Fractured Fairytales (1959-1961), The Three Stooges (Columbus’s syndication of their 190 shorts in 1959), and Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle (1959-1964) became my afternoon media staple. These seemingly irreverent, violent, and humorously troubling critiques of middle class values and cold-war crisis discourse have invoked my thinking about good and evil; thoughts at times difficult to reconcile with my lived experience and family viewing of prime-time media coverage of the Viet Nam War in the late 60’s.

Ozzie and Harriet (Nelson, 1952-1966), Father Knows Best (1954-1963), and Leave it to Beaver (1957-1963) were the programs that for me constructed what it meant to live in a “normal” middle class, Caucasian household. I often cross-read those media portrayals within and against fractured fairy tales and my experience of friends and families that surrounded me. Television broadcasts tried to teach me what it meant to be a heterosexual male child; obedient and respectful, strong, honest, powerful, handsome, white, able-bodied and courageous. But I also took from them a yearning to crawl into bed with Walley Cleaver; to be positioned between Dobie Gillis and Maynard G. Krebs (Dobie Gillis Show, 1959-1963) as they perhaps wrestled and roughhoused during the commercial; or to linger in the one bathroom shared by the Arthur McMurray and his boys (My Three Sons, 1969-1972). These serials, while overtly constructing what it meant to be straight, could nonetheless be read queerly. To do this, however, required I employ queer reading practices that reconceived the televisual narratives with those signs, signifiers and significant others that frequented my mother’s 24/7 truck stop.

As an adolescent in the early 1960s and an out-teen by my sophomore year in high school, I used multiple arts as media through which I could explore my alternate readings of normalcy; reading practices (un)intentionally tutored by neo-Marxist, publicly closeted gays, and early feminist classroom teachers and art specialists. Between 1964-1969 these educators introduced me to the plays of Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), Jean Genet (1910-1994), whose work was banned in the U.S. in 1951 for its portrayals of homosexuality; Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), Theater of the Absurd, the writings of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Allen Ginsburg (1926-1997) and beat generation poetry and jazz and art. Every spring, from middle school forward, I participated in an annual musical production by either Noel Coward (1899-1973) or Cole Porter (1891-1964). In the fall, I acted in serious dramas authored by Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) such as Our Town to works by William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Looking back on these adolescent cultural encounters roughly forty years later, I recognize that gay ancestors largely penned the productions I most revered. Regrettably, at that time, only a single dra-
held information by addressing the sexual identities of artists studied can expand their students’ art historic understandings and critical reading practices. My professors in art and literature in college encouraged my studies of gay and lesbian artists’ lives and supported my claiming of both a queer voice and political agency in the tumultuous 1970s. Unfortunately, provincial notions of morality increasingly may discourage teachers from creating full access to multiple forms of knowledge. I question if such explorations are encouraged or extended to students today within current cultural contexts of religious and political contagion.

Contemporary Media Politics

Today’s students face many (un)contested wars, including an escalating ideological war waged against sexual minorities. Recent discriminatory crusades have denied dignity and basic human and civil rights to those whose unions do not fit the majority-defined notion of marriage. As in the 1960s, active disinformation campaigns are used to win public sentiment—with slogans like “defense of marriage” hiding claims to heterosexual privilege and denials of equitable health, economic, and legal rights to families headed by same-sex couples. Leveraging fear by connecting sexual minorities to child molestation, or offering homophobic (mis)readings of religious scriptures continue to serve as effective strategies for (mis)shaping public attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Ignoring the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality as a disorder in the mid-1970s, or the more recent civil liberties legislation of other first-world nations, U.S. citizens seem hypnotized into an acceptance of federally forwarded falsehoods about sexual minorities. Our sciences and research are seemingly held hostage to political ideologies (Lather, 2003). Public education is increasingly nationalized and concurrently privatized (No Child Left Behind/charter schools and vouchers). And yet rarely are such abuses of power questioned by our “free” press—leading one to ask; where are those commercial voices of liberal ideology, like that of Edward R. Murrow examined in Goodnight and Good luck (2005)?

Even without the repressive 1950s television and motion picture codes, or McCarthy era red baiting, U.S. television networks continue to operate within heteronormative frameworks. Rather than accepting a homophobic pundits’ retort on the nightly news as balanced reporting, art educators could question why no queer activists are invited to respond to every heterosexual issue in the news. Contemporary artists and critics can and do call such media practices into question—performing their commitment to democracy through works engaged in moral and ethical discourse (e.g., Gómez-Peña & Fusco, Wojnarowicz). In the interest of proliferating varied readings of visual representations of sexuality, art educators could also address such artists’ works, as well as discuss popular media productions of meanings with students—guiding their examinations and supporting them in developing critical reading practices. In the next section I explore visual cultural critics’ and artists’ products that could serve as (re)sources for educators who consider addressing the challenges I have just posed.

Unpacking Visual Spectacles for Social Change

As Crimp & Rolston (1998), Kluzašek & Morrison (1992) document, U.S. broadcast news coverage of media spectacles by ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) disturbed the deadly silence surrounding social and medical neglect of issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the late 1980s. Confrontations staged by ACT-UP (of which Crimp was an active member) and recirculated in print and television drew public attention to a health crisis disproportionately impacting gay men and third world countries. Creating news by organizing marches and acts of civil disobedience, they transformed people with AIDS and their supporters from victims to active agents acting-out in order to save lives. In leafletings cities, developing highly recognizable signs and phrases like SILENCE = DEATH beneath the pink triangle (the Nazi’s marking of homosexual men), those organizing to demand changes in health care and medical research policies appropriated both a lethal stigma and advertising techniques that served their social aims. These provocative interventions illustrate the power of the visual and theatrical performance to save lives. Openly discussing such controversial subjects in the arts classroom can help ensure that students understand the power of the visual performance.

Tavin & Anderson (2003) have called attention to the ways advertising and entertainment industries (Disney in particular) prey on children through beguiling messages on both small and large screen. Advertising targeted to teen and adult markets appeals to a consumer’s social sense of self, presenting products as physical manifestations of status and/or performances of a desired lifestyle or social/political standpoint (Giroux, 1994). News, television sitcoms, dramas and children’s programs also help define the viewer’s social understandings of normalcy and success—representations that are almost always straight. Working with students to unpack and question the ways media construct social and sexual norms and consumer behaviors is a challenge that visual cultural studies and art educators are encouraged to accept.

The niche marketing of network and cable television, like that of the fashion designer or corporate brand, seeks to develop consumer loyalty to given represented lifestyles. These lifestyles, entertainment and fashion industries are codependent with those media corporations that create and recirculate seemingly unstable standards of physical and social desirability. Pitched products are positioned as the consumer’s means for acquiring social position, including (as many beer commercials have done) defining the straight, butch gays. Gay and lesbians also constitute a defined market, and one that is not outside of this dynamic (Baudrillard, 2001). Increasingly seen as a specialty or growth market for manufacturers of health, travel and luxury services, advertisers and consumer corporations now outwrite queer publications and encourage the proliferation of specific queer identities in order to create new specialty markets.

The social and legal marginality felt by gay and lesbian peoples is repeatedly refuted by countless slick magazines and tabloids brimming with advertisers eager to capitalize on gay and lesbian DINK (double income, no kids) households (Champagn, 1995). Antiviral drug manufacturers, fashion, travel and entertainment producers purchase space in targeted queer publications, building gay industries through the depiction of consumer goods and services. Advertising services and health care products are promoted through representations of buff bodies, bulging crotches, big breasts and/or butch dyke images, utilizing the same positioning practices as employed in straight media. These ads seemingly define what it means to be queer and like marketing to straight folk, feature nearly unattainable body images. Other advertisements may use irony, camp and burlesque and must be read against the grain to get the message that marketers have in mind. Such practices represent risks taken by advertisers and advertising executives who are dependent on the often jaded and cynical reading practices of sexually marginalized groups. (See Cleto, 1997 and Dyer, 1992 for a discussion of camp in gay cultural productions.)

Broadcast, motion picture and advertising industries create market demand for queer and straight folks alike, in part constructing the consumers’ reading of social reality through their products. Each in complicit in supporting the status quo, such are art educators when failing to instruct students in how to critically read visual cultural texts and cross-platform promotions, including product placement in major motion pictures and media personality
spokespersons. Media commentators and critics like Henry Giroux (1994), Douglass Kellner (1995), Peter McLaren (1997), Stuart Hall (2001), and Neil Harris (1990), among others, critique corporate media practices and consumer behaviors, affirming the need for critical visual cultural literacy. These authors’ texts may be of estimable value to art educators engaging in critical visual reading practices with their students and colleagues.

Turning from news, fashion and consumer products to the history of feature film, in the section that follows, I will explore gay and lesbian's role in movie pictures as seen through the eyes of critics and historians in both film and media studies. I will then review how gay and lesbian subjects are represented in films, and how film and television products multiply address issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

Queer Theory Applications for Teaching/Reading Cinema in Visual Cultural Studies

The arts, and specifically media products in visual culture may serve as resources for arts educators seeking to challenge the workings of heteronormativity. Study of historic films and filmmakers—those who established many motion picture storytelling techniques and methods still employed today—can yield a deeper understanding of the contributions made by gay and lesbian actors, cinematographers, screenwriters, and producers (Brakhage, 1962; Such study may also call attention to the political and social technologies historically deployed to reinforce sexual norms; those that if not successful in appearing to straighten out the sexually deviant cinematographer, simply made them disappear.

There are certainly precedents for analyses that make queer visible, such as Stanley Brakhage’s late 1960s lectures at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. While not centrally concerned with gay and lesbian studies, Brakhage (1972) openly acknowledged the contributions of early gay filmmakers, from Serge Eisenstein and Orson Wells to Alfred Hitchcock, and the social and political challenges they faced as their identities were revealed. Brakhage’s nonjudgmental identification of these artists is noteworthy given contemporary psychiatric attitudes toward (homo)sexuality as a pathology and form of mental illness. In identifying connections between gay filmmakers and their aesthetic and narrative developments, he challenges public social and political readings of their sexual performances, and how they shaped the development of film.

It was Vito Russo’s (1987) ground-breaking Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality and the Movies, however that first intensely focused a public gaze on the gay subject within film. His seminal textual playfully illustrated the queer filmic gestures of cross-dressing in comedies from silent films to more recent big name blockbusters. Russo critically examined the impact of self-censorship, the Hays Committee, the motion picture rating system and the film industry’s response to the witch-hunts of the House on Un-American Activities—political movements that denied work for many of Hollywood’s most brilliant talents of conscience. Vito Russo and Richard Dyer (1992) are among many media theorists to note Hollywood’s historical patterned representation of gay and lesbian characters as tragically flawed—almost always being killed off, institutionalized or straightened out by movies end—if represented at all. They also discuss those coded filmic gestures that writers, filmmakers and producers used to create and enable alternate readings by gay and lesbian viewers “in the know.”

While Russo’s early demise (1946-1990) predicted the more recent proliferation of queer filmic representations and literary scholarship, I expect him would celebrate the film’s growth at the turn of the century. He would likely note, however, that these images still rarely develop beyond the stereotypically comical, campy character (To Wong Fu, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, 1995) or the tragically sex and drug obsessed able-bodied, middle-class white subject, be they lesbian or gay (High Art, 1998; Queer as Folk, 1999-2005). Yes, Home Box Office has made some headway in their made-for-TV specials, from the Matthew Sheppard-based Laramie Project (2002) to Jessica Lange’s and Tom Wilkinson’s sensitive portrayals of transgender transitions in Normal (2003), or Angels in America (2003, based on Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize winning 1993 drama), but by-and-large Hollywood still persists in portraying the gay subject as the deviant other—whether it be an exotic lesbian murderer (Bound, 1996), the self destructive aging queen (Gods and Monsters, 1998), or the tragic love story of cowboys on the down-low depicted in Brokeback Mountain (2005). Fortunately other narratives are also being critically acclaimed, from TransAmerica (2005), to Breakfast on Pluto (2005).

Race, Queer Film Studies, and Visual Products

Siobhan Somerville’s (2000) examination of “The Queer Career of Jim Crow: Racial and Sexual Transformation in Early Cinema” in chapter two of Queering the Color Line, affirms that alternate (i.e. non-Caucasian) early twentieth century film narratives not only dared to openly construct questions about gender and sexual inversions, but also the construct of race. Her exploration of the Vitagraph 1914 film adaptation of Florida Enchantment is a remarkable piece of scholarship that methodologically assembles a transdisciplinary argument regarding inextricably interrelated and social constructs of race and sexuality in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Compulsory heterosexuality has been not simply parallel to discourses of racial segregation but integral to its logic: to disrupt naturalized constructions of racial difference involves simultaneously unsettling one’s relationship to normative constructions of gender and sexuality as well. (p. 137)

Somerville’s Duke University-published media history is a groundbreaking work that is consistent with that institution’s commitment to gay and lesbian studies.

But there are more recent films, many critically acclaimed, which deal with the intersections of race, queer sexual identification, and class issues that I will briefly describe. These, I suggest, are visual cultural products that could be used by educators introducing queer issues in their art classroom.

Recently even big name actors like Robert DeNiro have been willingly involved in examinations of homophobia. Portraying a New York city cop paralyzed by a stroke in the “R” rated film, Flawless (1999), DeNiro’s character gets speech therapy from a drag queen/pee-op male-female transsexual who lives in the same tenement—a character whose resilience in the face of abuse speaks volumes about the strength of character required of the oppressed. My Beautiful Laundrette (1985), the “R” rated film that brought Daniel Day Lewis to widespread popular attention, examines intercultural tensions, poverty, class struggle, homelessness and crime while unfolding a tender and sadomasochistic love story between a Pakistani immigrant and Lewis as a homeless, handsome, hunky west-end punk. As an accessible form of postcolonial critique, the film reaffirms Ableove (2003) and Hawley’s (2001) arguments that gay and lesbian liberation organizations and queer activists have consistently shown concern for race and class struggles.

Other films exploring ideological and political warfare across race and sexual identity include such critically revered films as Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985), The Crying Game (1992), or Before Night Falls (2000). While each confronts transgender concerns, these films move beyond gay camp and effeminity to consider revolutionary politics. All three films address straight revulsion to the queer subject and the emotional trauma that enables resolution between queer and straight characters—affirming human capacity for compassion across sexualities, and acknowledging character strength across socially constructed differences. Watermelon Woman (1996), a film introduced on the video...
Queer Films and Cultural Critiques on Class Concerns

While few and far between, there is the rare "PG-13" film that affirmatively addresses the converging issues of class and (homo)sexualities. Perhaps the most endearing of these is The Sum of Us (1984), a film featuring matinee idol, Russell Crowe as an Australian rugby-playing plumber who is gay. Crowe's character lives at home with an accepting single father who comically sustains an overzealous interest in his son's love life. Grappling with the challenges of developing meaningful same-sex relationships in a culture that renders gay men incapable of sustaining emotional commitments, Crowe rearranges his life to lovingly care for a mute and paralyzed father who suffers a stroke minutes after his middle-class heterosexual fiancée leaves him for not divining and/or denouncing his gay son. The film, set in Sydney, Australia, provides an interesting inversion of common knowledge about family acceptance and class attitudes toward homosexuality.

The English postmodern feminist writer, Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1987) also deals with class struggle and lesbian representation while grappling with religious fundamentalism and people of (and without) faith or hope. The film version, also set in Great Britain and released in 1990, won critical acclaim for its portrayal of "strength in the face of adversity" (for a more detailed description see www.jeanettewinterson.com or visit the www.IMDB.com website). Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina (1992) released in its "R" rated movie version in 1996 and starring Angelica Houston and Jennifer Jason Leigh, grapples with the brutal realities facing white trash in the south. While only alluding to a lesbian subtext in this openly queer author's narrative, the references are nonetheless clear to one willing to work through the depictions of abuse, child molestation, and betrayal.

A hysterical "white trash" comedy confronting familial relations and homophobia in Texas is the "R" rated, Sliding Lives (2000, Regent Entertainment), starring Delta Burke, Bonnie Bedelia, Bebe Bridgess, Beth Grant, Leslie Jordan, and Olivia Newton John. In truly queer camp tradition, the film critiques injustice, immaturity, and emotional insecurities while making you laugh. An entertainingly irreverent instruction in ethical and moral behavior, the language in this cult favorite may make it inappropriate for K-12 students, but it can serve as a fun text for those in higher education willing to consider this outrageous visual cultural product.

Susan Raffo, in Queerly Classed (1997) challenges the misconception that working class people are more likely to be less tolerant of gay and lesbian family members, than middle and upper class families. The autocritical chapters in her text Trouble middle upper and middle class lesbian writers' class presumptions and their failure to consider the support systems of rural working-class lesbians. Earlier works of fiction by Rita Mae Brown (Rubyfruit Jungle, 1973 and Six of One, 1979), respectively explore the challenges of a working class lesbian's childhood, and those intergenerational understandings of (homo)sexualities across social classes in the south. Art educators may find it both enlightening and entertaining to consider one or more of these varied texts, as each uniquely examines the social constructions of class and sexuality.

Queer Media Products and Critiques of Religious Fundamentalism

More recent films with middle-class gay subjects that incorporate humor or the formulaic Hollywood romantic plots that problematize religious intolerance include the 2003 "PG-13" rated film Saved starring McCauley Caulkin, and C. Jay Cox's "R" rated, Latter Days (2003). Respectively these films confront homophobia within (Baptist) evangelical private schools, and religious homosexual intolerance within the Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints. Saved only marginally focuses on the gay subject, using it to structure the film's slapstick comedy. The film opens with two Christian youth divulging secrets under water, and a handsome teenage guy confessing, "I think I'm gay." In scenes that follow, his girlfriend, "using her body as a tool of the lord," seduces him into sex in order to "heal him." Predictably, it doesn't. His parents discover gay porn under his bed and have him institutionalized, she gets pregnant, hiding the pregnancy from her single mom (who is having an affair with the minister/school principal), and tries to reconcile her loss of faith or interest in being part of the elite girls "god squad." Multiple narratives unfold during the movie (including the rebellious coming of age story of a wheel-chair bound McCauley Caulkin), and in true Hollywood form, there is a happy ending.

Latter Day more seriously examines the cultural tension between the religious devotions of the young Mormon missionary and the licentious appetites of a shallow, middle-class Los Angeles gay circuit boy. Betting friends can bad his new missionary neighbor, the twink Hollywood waiter finds his values quickly called into question by the young elder. After being caught in a single kiss, the young missionary is sent home in disgrace to be disowned by his parents and sent to an asylum for re-programming (for a more serious examination of the Ex-Gay Ministry see the 2004 First Run Productions release of One Nation Under God). The promiscuous pining waiter left behind searches for meaning, volunteering for an AIDS lunch delivery service and recording his loss and remorse in his journal. The film sustains several stories of betrayal that intersect at its climax, and despite numerous stock characterizations it still constitutes one of Hollywood's few gay romances with a happy ending.

Unlike the ironic and happy opening of the relentlessly critical Christian narrative in One Nation Under God, the 2001 documentary Trembling Before God, seemingly seeks to repair the hidden worlds of gay and lesbian Orthodox and Hasidic Jews.
Wrestling with conflicts among deeply held religious beliefs, same-sex desire, and those multiple professional, social and political communities in which subjects lived, the film seems less a staked standpoint than an unresolved argument. Both films provide critical-insiders' analyses of the ways that organized religious groups ostracize gay and lesbian peoples of faith—often represented by others who still bear the scars of their displacement.

Intermission

I take pleasure in describing these media products, and am pleased that my own gay son has films, novels, and televised images that address, support and affirm his same-sex identity. I am even more pleased that he can deconstruct these representations, and talk about their emotional impact. Having these widely circulated popular media texts today cannot, however, undo the sense of isolation, guilt, rejection and social dis-ease that many have experienced as gay adolescents without them. Knowing that these films are available for current generations, and hopefully those that follow, provides some solace, but in the process these youth may also become even more visible targets for homophobic aggression and oppression.

While encouraging art educators to discuss these media representations of gay and lesbian subjects in their classrooms it is important to note that great care must be taken to not force young people to claim a sexual identification or political positions. Presenting the material to an assumed audience that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identified youth, without calling attention (or allowing attention to be called) to any one class member's identification can go a long way toward building a safe classroom. Collaborating with colleagues or teachers in other disciplines to discuss the same media representations from, perhaps social studies, history, language arts, or civics perspectives can also help ensure the art educator is not placed in an isolated and indefensible political position. Getting a principal or a department chair's backing and feedback before beginning such study can also help ensure a teacher's safety.

In addition to televised and motion picture representations and texts of scholars critically reflecting on queer representations in broadcast media, educators are encouraged to explore the life histories and works of artists whose same-sex desires are now frequently researched and discussed by art historians, aestheticians, and social theorists. These texts provide art educators with the raw materials needed to disrupt silences around homosexuality, but these too must be handled with sensitivity. Rather than attempt to explore the significant bodies of research on gay and lesbian fine artists, I instead will briefly turn to television media theorists who explore queer media products in ways that can be adapted for the arts classroom.

The Revolutionary Queer will not be Network Televised

Stephen Tropiano's (2002) _The Prime Time Closet_ thematically organizes Television's 20th century queer products—those even more pointedly examined by James Keller in his (2002) _Queer (un)friendly film and television_. The former provides an interesting timeline of gay and lesbian issues or characters first entries into episodes of _teledramas_, sitcoms and soaps, openly recognizing and referencing Russo's earlier text. Tropiano notes the patterned representation of hysterically tragic or dismissively comic characters in most early televised portrayals. He also documents the slow and gradual shifts in these renderings, toward those more lovable (and straight acting), trendy and fashionable characters in _Will and Grace_ (1998-2005), with its seemingly never ending stream of guest appearances by pop idols, rock stars, and divas. Tending toward a more superficial discussion of the social acceptability of queer entertainment products, _The Prime Time Closet_ nonetheless hints at the generational divisions now defining socially shifting attitudes towards the queer subject.

Keller's (2002) in-depth analysis of television and film/video products employs literary and sociological methodologies to call attention to the ways masculinity and heterosexuality are inextricably linked and constructed in media products. Keller's analysis of _Will and Grace_ calls attention to the ways Will's character (played by a heterosexual male) is more popularly received by audiences because he is the more butch or stereotypically masculine of the two regular gay characters. Jack (played by a self-identified gay man), on the other hand, is portrayed as campy, catty, effeminate, immature, and witty—and usually the butt of many jokes.

Steven Capuato's _Alternate Channels: The uncensored story of gays and lesbians on radio and television_ (2000) considers the electronic media writ large. Offering a different take on queer productions, Capuato looks at the financial foundations of the broadcast industry and commercial interests that have been rewarded (or bankrupted) by their commitments to increased visibility and audible presence of gay and lesbian persons and viewpoints. Phyllis Johnson and Michael Keith's _Queer airwaves: The story of gay and lesbian broadcasting_ (2001) considers the economic interests of all electronic media—from talk radio to queer networks and cable productions. Both Capuato and Johnson and Keith consider the growth of targeted advertising to the widely acclaimed gay and lesbian market and the dynamic that has supported not only the growth of television and radio, but also glossy magazines and local gay tabloids across the U.S.

By contrast to the queer dramas in film or cable, network television continues to feature gay or lesbian characters as subjects of humor, the but of jokes, and/or as performatively asexual beings. Billy Crystal's gay male portrayal on _Soap_ in the 1980s was, to my recollection, the first openly non-heterosexual character featured on network television. _Will and Grace_ (while having only one opposite sex roommate) in ways builds off of this earlier program. Building on the stereotypical connections between style, fashion and gay men, _Queer Eye for the Straight Guy_ today may be the most blatantly stereotypically deployed queer subjects offered by network television. The show, however, continues to be watched and openly discussed by viewers gay and straight, and as a trope it provides a safe vehicle through which heterosexual males can confront themselves as sexualized beings and fashion subjects.

There is, of course, no assurance that any, and certainly not many of the actors playing gay characters in televised programs are self-identified as a gay or lesbian. Their portrayals nonetheless help reposition the queer as a more visible and audible subject. Talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres' historic "coming out" as both a character and actor on the Emmy Award winning but short-lived (1993-1997) comedy series _Ellen_ paved the way for others to follow. Talk-show host Rosie O'Donnell not only followed suit, but also performed acts of social defiance (getting married in San Francisco and adopting children) on her program, helping assure that daytime television audiences understand gay and lesbian human rights issues. Human rights organizations have effectively exploited those few media characters that are openly gay and lesbian, and by working together toward social and legal justice both have benefited.

The arts and sexuality are bed partners in the 20th century. Art educators can make sure this relationship is not considered an indecent exposure, but a fertile site for critically reading contemporary culture and understanding social change. Aesthetic explorations can mount political challenges based in and upon the body and performed in ways that are distinctly queer, campy, biting, and intentionally outrageous (Cleto, 1999). This will not happen without effort, nor will it take place without art educators investing time in researching and
reading more on the subjects of LGBT artists and their concerns.

**Queer Research Openings and Closing**

There is a need for published museum research that considers the ways contextual (mis)information (wall labels, catalogues) and docent tour commentaries sustain heterosexual privilege. A second under-explored topic is visual culture's impact on adolescents’ identity formation, and in particular, teen perceptions of media images and their use of such visual data in creating their own visual representations of difference. These are areas of research that I anticipate may be of great value to educators in understanding their sexual minority students. Queer theory in dance and music education research as well seems wanting, though outside the primary concern of this readership. Finally, studies exploring students’ sexual knowledge and experience outside of school and its correlation to parents’ values and beliefs might offer educators a better grasp of what is considered “age appropriate.” Findings from such studies might help ensure that socially valuable concepts are introduced in a timely manner and not simply when the teacher thinks “the time’s right.”

In this essay I have argued for a queering of art education in the name of historical accuracy, social justice, and pedagogical possibility. In the opening pages and throughout the essay I shared autobiographical reflections and arts involvement in relation to broadcast and film media. Briefly surveying recent queer theoretical moves, seminal studies and scholars’ (hom)sexual products, I have tried to develop this essay in ways that would be of service to art educators willing to broach subjects of (homo)sexuality. I cited and recommended texts of possible interest to proponents of visual art and cultural studies in education, noting queer resource groups in the arts and education that support social change and democracy.

While challenging performances of heteronormativity, I acknowledge that this cannot be accomplished or sustained without the development of coalitions of gay and straight scholars willing to work toward social justice. I have shared personal experiences as a queer parent and researcher, and described a broad range of texts that can help educators address varied representation of sexual subjects. I urge colleagues to make use of these resources, and to consider their potential impact on both the lives of their students and the health and vibrancy of their communities—recognizing that the lives of our students and generations to come are at stake.

**Endnotes**

1. I use the word “queer” in this essay as term inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, two spirit, transgender, inter-sex and asexual identities, and at other times deploy it to question categories of sexual identities as fixed states of being.

2. Heteronormativity is a term coined by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, and a concept similar to Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality—both calling attention to those social constraints on the proliferation of sexualities and construction of sexual aberrancy.

3. Gay and lesbian filmmakers and actors who become "too visible" may seemingly be made to disappear through discontinuance of government support (Eisenstein), acts of self-censorship in rewriting screenplays (Arsenic and Old Lace), and studio media spinning (James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Rock Hudson). These are but a few of the countless technologies of heteronormativity employed within the motion picture industry.


5. twink is gay-slang for a young or young looking, able-bodied (but slight) gay man.

**References**


Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James H. Sanders III, The Ohio State University, sanders.iii.1@osu.edu