Sample Syllabus: Queer Film and Video

Course Description:

This class explores how LGBT and queer identities, lives, and communities have become visible in and to mainstream America through the media of film and television. In turn, we will also examine how media representations of LGBT and queer Americans have shaped conversations of what it means to be gay/queer in the United States.

As our class moves through the history of film and television toward the digital age, we will discover that queerness has always been at the heart of these media even in times when LGBT stories and characters were supposedly invisible. We will also focus on how being able to discern queerness often relates to "seeing" (or not) race, as the histories of sexuality and race are closely entwined in American culture. We will examine a wide range of texts, including classical Hollywood films, a variety of TV shows, activist documentaries, and online videos. In our discussions, we will pay particular attention to the normalization of LGBT identities in and through the media.

Course Goals:

• Understand how media representations shape and reflect LGBT lives and communities
• Recognize the strong interdependency of sexuality and race in media representations and in American culture in general
• Expand academic research and writing skills through an independent research project and ongoing participation in our class blog

Assignments:

Class blog:
Our class blog serves as a hub of conversation and interaction throughout the semester. You will post several assignments to the blog and use the comment feature to discuss each other's work.

Assignment #1: Reading responses
You are required to post a response to one reading per week. Your blog post should offer a short but thorough engagement with the central ideas presented in the reading. In addition, you are required to read your classmates' reading responses and comment on at least one person's blog post per week.

Assignment #2: Spotlight on the Media
At one point during the semester, you will host a special blog post that looks at current LGBT/queer representation in film, TV, or on the web. You can pick a specific issue (for examples, lesbians on TV) or a specific film, TV show, or website. Your post should provide a comprehensive look at this issue/text and you should make use of the possibilities of online publishing by including images, video, and links in your post.
Assignment #3: Research Project
The central assignment in this class will be an original research project on a topic of your choice. In class, we will discuss the various stages of this project and you will also meet with me to discuss your research and draft. You will post the final version of your project to our class blog.

In terms of format, your research project can take the traditional form of an essay, or you can choose a more experimental format by, for example, making a short documentary, designing a website, or assembling a photo essay.

Assignment #4: Mini-Conference
In the last week of our course, we will have a mini-conference during which you will present your research. You will appear on a panel with one or two classmates whose projects resonate with your own; as a group, it is your task to find overlaps and divergences among your projects in order to craft strong panel presentations.

Grade breakdown:

- Participation: 10.00%
- Reading responses: 20.00%
- Spotlight on the Media: 25.00%
- Research Paper: 30.00%
- Mini-conference: 15.00%

Schedule:

Week 1: Foundations: What is Queer Visibility?

Central questions:
- What does "queer visibility" mean when we talk about the media?
- How do and can we see queerness in film and television?
- How have queer representations changed over time?

Screening: The Celluloid Closet. Story by Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman and Sharon Wood. HBO, 1996.

Readings:
Meeting 1:
Meeting 2:
- Kohnen, Melanie. "All That Visibility Allows, or, Mapping the Discourse of Queer Visibility."

**Week 2: Classical Hollywood Cinema**

**Central questions:**
- How was queerness visible in film during the Production Code era when Hollywood studios banned any overt depictions of homosexuality?
- How do representations of queerness rely on cultural notions of whiteness?

**Screening:** *All About Eve*. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Twentieth Century Fox, 1950.

**Readings:**

Meeting 1:

Meeting 2:

**Week 3: Representing Gay Liberation**

- How did the events of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the early gay liberation movement in the 1970s impact media representations?
- How do representations of LGBT history shape how we think of LGBT and queer identities in the 2000s?

**Screening:** *Milk*. Dir. Gus van Sant. Focus Features, 2008.

**Readings:**

Meeting 1:

Meeting 2:
**Week 4: Queer(ing) Television**

- How did early television, the so-called "domestic" medium, engage with queerness?
- How did TV render the familiar (and the familial) strange and thus invite reflection on the meaning of family and suburbia?

**Screenings:** Episodes of *Bewitched* (1964-1972); *All in the Family* (1968-1979)

**Readings:**

   **Meeting 1:**

   **Meeting 2:**

**Week 5: Screening the AIDS Crisis**

- How did the AIDS crisis of the 1980s change perceptions and representations of LGBT and queer Americans?
- How did activist groups like ACT UP (Aids Coalition To Unleash Power) change and redefine queer visibility?
- How did the mainstream media represent HIV/AIDS?

**Screening:** ACT UP videos; *An Early Frost*. Dir. Jon Erman. NBC Productions, 1985

**Readings:**

   **Meeting 1:**

   **Meeting 2:**

**Week 6: The Gay 90s?**

- How can we understand the so-called "explosion of gay visibility" during the 1990s as a turning point for LGBT and queer representations?
- Who was included and excluded from this supposedly new visibility?
**Screening:** Episodes of *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998); *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006); *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000-2005)

**Readings:**

Meeting 1:

Meeting 2:

**Week 7:**

- How does recent Hollywood cinema address transgender lives and identities?
- How do films like *Boys Don't Cry* repeat and represent tropes of rural America?
- How have ideas about space and place shaped ideas of LGBT and queer communities?

**Screening:** *Boys Don't Cry*. Dir. Kimberly Pierce. Fox Searchlight, 1997.

**Readings:**

Meeting 1:

Meeting 2:

**Week 8: Queer TV after 9/11**

- How have cultural conversations about LGBT and queer Americans changed after 9/11?
- How do these conversation relate to the inclusion of LGBT characters and stories as normal/regular features of TV programming?

**Screening:** *Brothers & Sisters* (ABC, 2006-2010); *Glee* (Fox, 2009-present)

**Readings:**

Meeting 1:

Meeting 2:

Week 9: Going Digital

• What does queer visibility look like on the internet?
• Has the emergence of Web 2.0, with its emphasis on do-it-yourself media outlets like YouTube, changed the production and circulation of queer media images?

Screening: It Gets Better Project videos; other screenings based on class consensus/recent developments regarding LGBT and queer visibility on the internet.

Readings:
Meeting 1:
• Alexander, Jonathan and Elizabeth Losh. "'A YouTube of One's Own?' 'Coming Out' Videos as Rhetorical Action." In: LGBT Identity and Online New Media, 17-37.

Meeting 2:
• Gray, Mary L. "From Websites to Walmart: Youth, Identity Work, and the Queering of Boundary Publics in Small Town, USA." In: LGBT Identity and Online New Media, 288-299.

Week 10: Research Presentations/Conference