9 Queer Analysis

KEY CONCEPTS

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION
GENDER PERFORMATIVITY
HETERONORMATIVITY
QUEER THEORY
REPRESENTATION
SEXUAL OTHERING
SEXUALITY
VISIBILITY

Unless you lacked a reliable internet connection in September 2007, you were probably one of the millions of people who watched Chris Crocker's impassioned video defense of pop singer Britney Spears's widely maligned performance at the MTV Music Video Awards. His "Leave Britney Alone!" video, where the MySpace celebrity howled, gnashed his teeth, and generally blubbered on for over 2 minutes about why we should appreciate Spears's "talent," quickly rocketed to the seventh most popular video on YouTube at the time, with over 92,000 comments.[1] As of this writing, the original video has been viewed over 23.5 million times.[2] For those who didn't catch the original YouTube broadcast or its simultaneous showing on Crocker's MySpace account, the mass media quickly picked up the video and featured it on pop culture round-up programs like VH1's *Best Week Ever*. The short even inspired a variety of parodies, including some by "bonafide" celebrities like actor Seth Green, that also circulated online.

More significant than the content of the video, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is the resulting visibility and public recognition of Crocker himself. Many viewers who further investigated Crocker's other online videos were puzzled by his playful take on gender and sexuality. Crocker regularly appears to his fans in shocking blonde hair extensions and dark mascara around his eyes, and the star's MySpace account features a series of glamour shots with Crocker sporting wigs, dresses, and wedge platform heels. This refusal of traditional gender norms, coupled with the star's open discussions of his homosexuality, has understandably accrued equal amounts of adoration and admonition from viewers. However, whether one praises Crocker's originality or finds his performance morally

reprehensible, he is undoubtedly one of the most recent and widespread sites of ambiguity and "queerness" in the media.

This chapter looks at the interplay between media texts and the notion of queerness, or purposeful ambiguity surrounding gendered and sexual norms. We place this chapter at the end of the section on media texts because in many ways it is the most difficult to conceive of as a textual approach. The perspective of Queer theory, discussed at length below, does not lend itself to easy definition as an analytical perspective. Rather than a perceived weakness, though, this lack of coherence is Queer theory's contribution to critical media studies. Generally speaking, Queer media scholars attempt to understand how media texts, as significant outlets of cultural discourse, contribute to the ordering of human understanding surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality. The specific notion of queerness in this perspective – of ambiguity, performance and play – becomes a powerful way to refuse this structured understanding. This refusal in turn challenges prevailing cultural norms and the power relations that they reinforce.

This chapter is roughly divided into three major thematic sections, which we label "visibility I", "visibility II," and "invisibility." The first, visibility, takes up the project set forth in Chapter 8 (Feminist Analysis) by looking at traditional sexual stereotypes in the media. Here we consider how images and representations of heterosexuality and homosexuality, replicated across media and throughout time, create a binary understanding of sexuality that privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes homosexuality. The third section, invisibility, is our term for considering the work of two pioneering Queer theorists, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and the influence their research has had on understanding how the very *idea* of a thing called "sexuality" functions to inscribe people into relations of power. In this section we consider how the disruptive perspective of queerness laid out in these works can be used to analyze media texts for the ways that they naturalize or make invisible the highly constructed links between gender, sex, sexuality, and the family. However, before we consider Queer analysis of the media, it is important to have a general understanding of Queer theory. We lay out the major tenets of this perspective below.

Queer Theory: an Overview

Queer theory is an interdisciplinary perspective that seeks to disrupt socially constructed systems of meaning surrounding human sexuality. **Sexuality** is an enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction toward others based upon their gender or sex. Americans traditionally interpret sexuality according to the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary; the fact that even "alternate" forms like bisexuality are understood in reference to this binary speaks to its primacy. Queer theorists assert that this traditional understanding misrepresents the full spectrum of human sexuality. Individual sexuality is fluid and difficult to categorize, and as a

result the rather simple categories we use to name sexuality can never fully represent an individual's actual, varied sexual drives. Queer theorists work to expose the shortcomings of these labels and show how they work to support systems of social power and privilege.

Let us pause here and consider the full meaning of the above paragraph. A woman who prefers to have sex with men is not inherently heterosexual: she is simply a woman who has sex with men. Growing up in American society, this woman likely took part in the institutions and stories circulating throughout the culture that taught her such attractions and behaviors are properly called "heterosexual." Unconsciously, she probably adopted that word, "heterosexual," in order to identify herself. *But there is no actual connection between that word and her individual sexual drives and practices.* Instead, heterosexuality (and homosexuality, for that matter) is a cultural construction that functions as a heuristic, a mental shortcut, which people draw upon to describe their sexual drives. While *sexuality* is particular to each individual, the social constructions of *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* are cultural categories humans use to make sense of their sexuality. Key to our discussion of the media is how these categories function in society: just as mistaking gender expectations for inherent biology gives rise to sexist social systems (as we discussed in Chapter 8), assuming that the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary represents human sexuality results in the unequal distribution of social power. Put another way, *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* are cultural constructions like *masculine* and *feminine*. They allow for the social classification, essentializing, and (dis)empowerment of the groups that identify with them.

The system of inequity derived from the heterosexual/homosexual binary is called **heteronormativity** (or heterosexism). It refers to a diverse set of social practices that function to perpetuate the heterosexual/homosexual binary and privilege heterosexuality. Heteronormative social practices maintain the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality out of necessity. Remember that sexism rests upon the visible differences between men and women, and systems of sexist power seem to have some biological or physical component to support them. When talking about the social roles or powers of men and women, we can (for the most part) easily point to individuals that fill the categories of *men* and *women*. However, an individual's sexuality is largely a psychic or internal component, and clear outer manifestations tend to occur behind closed doors. As a result, heteronormative social practices must convince people that the distinct categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality do exist even if they are not as easily demarcated as biological sex. Furthermore, feminist scholar Adrianne Rich refers to the constructed institution of heterosexuality as "compulsive," in the sense that people (and women in particular) are coerced into identifying with the social definitions and norms of heterosexuality from birth.[3] Heteronormative practices encourage individuals to identify with heterosexuality from an early age and regularly re-convince people that it is mutually exclusive of homosexuality.

This binary must exist if heterosexuality is to be considered normal or desirable, the second function of heteronormative social practices. Homosexuality provides

an opposite and a point of contrast to heterosexuality. As Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pointedly puts it, "The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people."[4] In the same way that our understanding of "night" could not exist without "day," the norm of heterosexuality could not exist as a coherent category without homosexuality as its "abnormal" opposite. The process of stigmatizing homosexuality (or really any non-heterosexual practice) as abnormal to privilege heterosexuality is called **sexual othering**. We can see examples of heteronormativity and sexual othering widely in American culture. When people are asked to consider what the ideal nuclear American family looks like, they will often default to a picture of a husband and wife with two or three children. There are variations on this theme (the addition of a grandparent or pet, or increasingly a single parent), but the core image is almost always exclusively heterosexual. Here homosexual couples represent the abnormal, the other, and the non-ideal. Moreover, identifying as heterosexual in American society grants individuals easy access to a variety of social practices denied to others, including marriage, military service, insurance benefits, medical visitation rights, and more. Even the American-English language reveals the inequity. There are countless derogatory terms one can use to degrade a non-heterosexual person, and many of these words (like *gay*, *faggot*, or *dyke*) have become epithets that can broadly refer to anyone in a negative fashion. However, outside of select terms used at times by members of the GLBTQQIA (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, Questioning, Intersexed, and Allies) community (like *breeder*), there are no widely accepted words to ridicule heterosexuals on the basis of their sexuality.

The fact that Queer theorists attempt to destabilize the sexual binary and reveal heterosexual privilege does not mean that Queer theory is opposed to individual sexual practices or feelings that we would label heterosexual. Instead, as Michael Warner puts it in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, the word "'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal instead of the heterosexual."[5] In the same way that feminists work against sexist *systems* and not individual men (as we discussed in Chapter 8), Queer theorists work against the systemic normalization of heterosexuality and not individual heterosexuals. Originally a derogatory word, "queer" is often used now as an umbrella term to refer to any and all people whose individual sexualities do not fit into the traditional understanding of heterosexuality. "Queer" has also come to symbolize a rejection of clear sexual definitions in one's scholarship, interaction, and daily life.

In the research tradition that forms the basis of the following section on queer visibility and media representation, Queer theorists look at the ways in which popular media texts promote heterosexuality as normal and other forms of sexuality as deviant, abnormal, or "other." They are interested in understanding and critiquing the ways that media texts paint a picture of the world where sexuality fits conveniently into particular categories according to conventional meanings. Like feminists, they are politically committed to educating individuals about the falsity of sexual binaries and reforming the American media system. Although the focus on upsetting constants makes the perspective a difficult one to pin down, the

section on visibility will look at some of the important issues Queer theory has brought to light in relation to media representations of sexuality.

Queerness and Visibility I: Sexual Stereotypes in American Media

In maintaining a clear binary conception of sexuality, heteronormative systems persuade us to sort sexual practices and messages into one of two categories. This establishes a cultural understanding of sexuality where being "heterosexual" means displaying characteristics differently from those who are "homosexual." This binary understanding, in turn, leads to media stereotypes that exist in opposition to one another. We outline a number of these stereotypes below. It may seem strange to you that images of heterosexuality can also be stereotypes, since the word is commonly used to refer to images of marginalized social groups. However, this is exactly the point of Queer theory: any conception of sexuality is culturally constructed and distorting. That fact that heterosexual stereotypes don't appear to be constructions speaks to the power of heteronormative systems.

Natural/deviant

We have already discussed the normalization of heterosexuality and the stigmatization of homosexuality in this chapter, but it is important to understand how these meanings influence the content of popular media texts. The actual number of heterosexual and homosexual characters and personalities in American media is wildly disproportionate. Heterosexuality becomes natural simply by functioning as the overwhelmingly present type of sexual identity in popular media texts. In order to mark its 1,000th publication, the pop culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* dedicated an entire issue in 2008 to the "new classics" in American media, a collection of the best films, television shows, albums, and books in the last 25 years.[6] Out of the top 50 best television shows, a surprising number (20) contain non-heterosexual characters or personalities. However, many of these programs feature these individuals in secondary roles (*The Simpsons, Roseanne, Friends*), only in select seasons (*Survivor, The Real World*), or only occasionally (*Seinfeld, thirtysomething, NYPD Blue*). Other programs portray gay or lesbian characters in a stereotypical fashion (*South Park*), and many programs had limited reach on the cable network HBO (*Sex and the City, The Sopranos, The Wire*). Of the top 50 television shows in the last 25 years, only a handful could legitimately claim to regularly feature non-heterosexual characters in primary roles (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer, ER*), and only two focus extensively on the lives of homosexual characters (*Six Feet Under, My So-Called Life*). NBC's *Will and Grace*, perhaps one of the most popular television shows featuring queer characters, came in at number 53. With such slight

representation of non-heterosexual characters, it is clear that heterosexuality continues to remain the norm in American broadcasting.

Outside of frequency of representation, Hollywood has historically used homosexuality as a marker for deviance or criminality. Older films often link homosexuality to abnormal or antisocial behavior, in the process affirming heterosexuality as normal. For example, the shifty Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) in the noir thriller *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is coded as homosexual with effeminate voice, mannerisms, and impeccable dress. The sexual dimension of the character is unimportant to the plotline except to signal to audiences that the character is homosexual, abnormal, and therefore untrustworthy or dangerous (which, in the course of the film, turns out to be true). Similarly, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) tells the story of two young men (played by John Dall and Farley Granger) who strangle a former classmate in an attempt to prove that they can get away with murder. They go so far as to lock the body into a chest, transform it into a table, and invite guests over to have dinner, including the boy's mother and a beloved former teacher (Jimmy Stewart). Although the murderers' homosexuality is never explicitly expressed in the film, the dialogue between the two was enough to catch the attention of censors and audiences alike at the time.[7] The connection between "deviant" homosexual feelings and murder crops up in other Hitchcock films as well, including his much-lauded *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

Although the tendency to associate homosexuality with deviance and criminality is largely a thing of the past, we still see vestiges of this formula in contemporary films. The evil character Scar in *The Lion King* (1994) is a good example of this marking.[8] Compared to the masculine and brave king of the pride Mufasa, Scar is skinny and rather effeminate with a sculpted mane, limp paws, and "a feminine swish in his walk."[9] His eyelashes are long and sit atop rather colorful eyes, which are reminiscent of cooing Hollywood starlets of the 1930s. In the film Scar ruthlessly kills Mufasa and drives young prince Simba away from the pride in order to secure his place as ruler of the African savannah. Again, it would be a stretch to say that Scar is homosexual, but his character certainly echoes some of the earlier Hollywood visual cues that link homosexuality to evil. Other contemporary films that more explicitly link queerness to deviance and abnormal behavior include *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994).

Monogamous/promiscuous

On top of drawing clear distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the American media also tend to characterize the very nature of these categories by linking heterosexuality to monogamy and homosexuality to promiscuity. Think quickly: how many popular romantic comedies in the last decade can you name? Now, how many of those movies ended with two main heterosexual characters entering a monogamous relationship by the end of the film? Give yourself bonus points if you can think of films where the relationship was monogamous *but not* one of

marriage. In truth, the entire genre of the mainstream American romantic comedy relies on the eventual, monogamous coupling of heterosexual characters, and the genre supports the long-standing stereotype that associates heterosexuality with monogamy.

This is not to say that heterosexuals in the media are always monogamous. MTV's *The Real World* would be far less interesting if that were the case. However, it is important to take frequency into account when looking at this stereotypical binary. Media images of promiscuous heterosexuals certainly exist, but they represent one of the many varied ways of "being" heterosexual in the American media. Homosexual characters show up less often in American films and television shows, but when they do they often exhibit a "hyper-sexual" drive that encourages coupling with multiple partners. The lower frequency of homosexual characters in the media coupled with their often inflated sexual appetites results in particularly damaging, stereotypical images.

An example of this hyper-sexuality is the short-cartoon series *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, which ran intermittently on *The Dana Carvey Show* and *Saturday Night Live* between 1996 and 2007. Although clearly poking fun at other male/male super-hero duos like Batman and Robin, *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* nevertheless taps into cultural stereotypes that link queerness to an insatiable, almost perverted sex drive. The cartoon bristles with homosexual innuendo as it follows the adventures of super-heroes Ace and Gary. For instance, the duo's super-vehicle is shaped like a giant phallus (complete with laser beam that fires from the faux urethra). When not using the phallus-mobile, the two travel by flying through the air as one in a pose reminiscent of anal intercourse. In different episodes viewers watch as the duo disables a threatening pterodactyl by "deep-throating" its beak, breaks into an evil robot by pushing through its rear end, and celebrates their regular victories with a congratulatory pat on the rump. While the duo may be ambiguously gay, they are clearly hyper-sexual.

The image of promiscuity is the case even in supposedly GLBTQQIA-friendly programming like Showtime's *Queer as Folk* or *The L Word*. Although *Queer as Folk* represents an unprecedented televisual foray into queer representation by focusing on the lives of a number of complex gay and lesbian characters in Pittsburgh, PA, some members of the GLBTQQIA community have criticized the show for its regular depiction of anonymous sex.[10] A disclaimer runs at the beginning of every episode announcing that the show represents only a portion of American gay culture. However, its depiction of racy sex scenes between strangers (and "hook-ups" in public places) certainly feeds popular understandings of hyper-sexuality and promiscuity among homosexuals. *The L Word*, a program that follows the lives of a group of lesbian friends in Los Angeles, reinforces this trend by prominently featuring "The Chart." The Chart is a physical map within the storyline maintained by the character Alice (Leisha Hailey) that depicts the various (and voluminous) interconnected sexual affairs between the characters on the show. Again, although *The L Word* depicts homosexual individuals as nuanced, interesting, and complex people, the regular reference to The Chart as a plot device certainly echoes stereotypes of promiscuity.

Gender clarity/gender ambiguity

Perhaps one of the most glaring stereotypes surrounding sexuality in the media blends the concepts of gender laid out in Chapter 8 with sexual norms. Although there is no absolute association between a person's gender (masculinity/femininity) and sexuality, media texts often portray heterosexuals as having definite gender roles and homosexuals as having unclear ones. Heterosexual male and female characters in the media tend to fulfill clearly masculine and feminine roles. Homosexual characters tend to shift unpredictably between classic and opposite gender roles, or they blend aspects of masculinity and femininity in original ways. While Queer theorists celebrate this sort of gender fluidity as a way to eradicate sexual classification (as we will discuss in the next section), the ambiguity often results in a certain level of discomfort in mass audiences toward gay and lesbian personalities. In other words, gender androgyny tends to result in a threatening, unsettling sense that "things are not quite right" with queer characters and personalities.

There are countless historical instances where mediated gender ambiguity has caused discomfort among American audiences: David Bowie's original stage performances, reaction to Neil Jordan's 1992 film *The Crying Game*, news commentary surrounding Rosie O'Donnell's coming out, etc. However, Bravo's hit television series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is a particularly salient example because it relies on the interaction between clear heterosexual gender roles and ambiguous homosexual ones. Each episode of *Queer Eye* follows the Fab Five (a group of gay men who specialize in refined living) in their attempts to make over a hapless, heterosexual male so that he may in turn impress a doting wife or girlfriend. The show implies that the male subjects of these makeovers are often too masculine to care (or indeed even know) about how to groom themselves, choose fashionable clothing, or comprehend the details of interior design. Their heterosexual female counterparts, the wives and girlfriends on the show, enact complementary feminine gender norms by coaxing their partners into getting a makeover and showering them with praise by the episode's conclusion. In short, "men are men" and "women are women" on *Queer Eye*.

That is, except for the Fab Five. In contrast to the heterosexual couples they transform, the Fab Five form a continuum of gender norms on the show that resists easy classification of masculinity. Media critic David Weiss claims that in the Five we see a multiplicity of gender performances that confound and blend traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity.[11] For example, the flamboyant fashion expert Carson will sometimes refer to himself in feminine terms (comparing himself to famous female stars like Annette Funicello or Ellen Degeneres, for example). The grooming expert Kyan, on the other hand, regularly attempts "manly" bonding with the heterosexual subject through a proliferation of high fives and the use of the word "dude." The various gender performances of the Fab Five give the impression that homosexuals are less clear in their gender orientation, especially in comparison to the relatively straightforward gender roles of the heterosexual couples on the show. While some scholars have claimed that the show escapes stereotyping by presenting viewers with multiple ways of being masculine, it still participates in

distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual individuals according to gender clarity and ambiguity, respectively.

Like images of gender, the various sexual stereotypes we see in the American media contribute to a social system defined by restricted sexual expectations. The oppositional images of natural, monogamous, secure heterosexuals and deviant, oversexed, androgynous homosexuals supports the notion that there are only two ways of being sexual (and that those two ways are nothing alike). These images are detrimental to queer individuals by making them seem bizarre and threatening. However, they also harm heterosexuals by laying out a somewhat limited life script. Heteronormative practices lead to a system where non-heterosexuals overwhelmingly bear the brunt of discrimination and hatred, but they also make it difficult for heterosexuals who may wish to resist the doctrines of marriage, having a family, and leading "the good life" to do so. In this way, stereotypes of sexuality permeate and structure the lives of every individual.

Queerness and Visibility II: the Problems with "Positive" Representation

Thus far we have discussed some of the many sexual stereotypes that characterize heterosexuality and homosexuality in the American media. Deconstructing these stereotypes is an important first step in understanding the representation of sexuality in media. However, another important area of research within queer visibility looks at how increasing numbers of apparently non-stereotypical representations continue to influence heteronormative systems of power. Although there are more media images of queer individuals today than ever before, it is important to understand that **visibility** (the number of queer characters present in the media) and **representation** (the way that those queers act, feel, and engage in storylines) are two different concepts. The reduction of queer stereotypes in the media does not necessarily result in an increase in politically potent images. Instead, these images often enact heteronormative social systems in other, less visible ways.

Kevin G. Barnhurst represents queer visibility in the media as a paradox.[12] In other words, increased visibility of certain non-heterosexual characters, personalities or themes always overlooks others. As certain aspects of queer life become more prominent in the media, others are necessarily ignored. Visibility results in invisibility. The drama of the coming-out story, for example, often dominates many of the media texts that feature homosexual characters. The centrality of coming out to homosexual existence in the popular consciousness (and the accompanying themes of risk, tears, secrecy, etc.) obscures the simple problems that homosexuals and heterosexuals share every day as humans. In a way, coming out as a dramatic moment becomes a new way to "other" homosexuals. The same could be said for what Barnhurst calls "professional queers:" official media liaisons and heads of GLBT organizations, queer journalists, etc. As the American population becomes more

accustomed to seeing these "types" of gays and lesbians in the media, it becomes easier to overlook the activities of queer people in their everyday lives. Barnhurst's framework is important to consider because it reminds us that increased visibility is not always diverse visibility. Some aspects are always obscured.

Other scholars have pointed out that particular examples of queer visibility are not always as progressive as they might initially seem. One of the most prominent examples of media visibility in recent memory is the simultaneous coming out of comedian Ellen DeGeneres and her character, Ellen Morgan, on the popular television show *Ellen* in 1997. DeGeneres's decision caused a firestorm of controversy, but media critics also hailed it as a milestone in the representation of sexual minorities in American television. After all, Ellen Morgan was not criminal, oversexed, or terribly masculine: she was simply a funny woman who happened to be attracted to other women. And yet, as scholar Bonnie J. Dow has pointed out, the representation of lesbianism on *Ellen* was still problematic.[13] The show positioned Ellen's newfound sexuality as an issue which heterosexual family members, friends, and co-workers learned to accept (or didn't). In short, it constructed homosexuality as a problem and source of conflict. The show went on to poke fun at Queer politics for being too "radical" and instead focused on homosexuality as an exclusively personal issue (which, in reality, it is not). In portraying lesbianism predominantly through the reactions of straight characters on the show and ignoring the potentially threatening dimension of Queer politics, "*Ellen* was a sitcom about a lesbian that was largely geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals."[14]

We see a similar logic at work in the 1978 French film *La Cage Aux Folles*, which was unexpectedly well received by American audiences and resulted in the release of an American version in 1996 (*The Birdcage*, starring Robin Williams and Nathan Lane). The film tells the story of a young man who invites his future in-laws over to dinner in order to meet his parents (who happen to be a gay couple). Media scholar Larry Gross claims that this "gay" film was popular with heterosexual audiences because it supports heteronormative systems even as it appears to challenge them.[15] Rather than forcing the conservative in-laws to face the truth about their son-in-law's alternative family structure, one of the young man's fathers instead dresses in drag and introduces himself as the man's "mother" at dinner. This reification of heterosexual pairing, coupled with the fact that the gay couple is devoid of physical intimacy in the film, results in a narrative with a homosexual surface and a heteronormative core.

Thus, we can see that the mere presence of positive queer characters or themes does not guarantee the unproblematic representation of sexual minorities in American media. Visibility and representation are not synonymous, and the prominence of queerness does not always guarantee an absence of heteronormativity. Media texts that feature queer characters have grown increasingly complex in the ways they represent sexuality, but many of these contemporary texts are both positive and damaging as Barnhurst's paradox suggests. In attempting to fully understand how these images function in complex ways to both help and hinder Queer politics, it is important to consider the tradition of Queer theory outlined in the next section on queerness and invisibility. Theorists in this vein of scholarship address

how any representation of definite sexuality, and indeed the very concept of sexuality at all, is problematic for individuals.

Queerness and Invisibility: the "Deployment of Sexuality" and Gender Performativity

In this section we address the work of two foundational scholars in the realm of Queer theory, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, as a way of introducing Queer theory's emphasis on destabilizing sexuality. In discussing these theorists, we do not mean to represent their work as exclusively or definitively "Queer theory;" in fact, these ideas only became foundational to Queer theory many years *after* they were published and adopted into the perspective. Instead, we address them here because the works of Foucault and Butler are both important historical contributions to the way we understand sexuality as a social or **discursive construction**. "Invisibility" is our guiding metaphor in this discussion of queerness because it aptly describes the conclusions of both Foucault and Butler, namely that sexuality is a social construction made invisible, natural, normal, and indeed "biological" by its discursive aspects. This conclusion runs counter to the traditional conception of sexuality that we defined at the beginning of this chapter as an innate, personal, internal quality possessed by everyone. However, viewing sexuality from this perspective fundamentally shifts our understanding of how sexuality operates, which in turn opens up new avenues for resistance. It is in the work of Foucault and Butler that the notion of queerness primarily gains its political, disruptive edge.

Michel Foucault and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: an Introduction*

Michel Foucault was a twentieth-century French philosopher interested in understanding how discourse, or the collective language and symbol systems employed by a given culture/society, enables certain ways of acting and knowing. His work, including *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), focuses on how specific social arrangements allow for human beings to understand and negotiate systems of knowledge like lunacy, medicine, and imprisonment. In other words, our particular understanding of concepts like "madness," "healing," or "justice" are not simply objective constants that human beings discovered at given moments in history. Instead, constellations of factors at specific moments in history gave rise to discourses of madness, healing, and justice, and these discourses in turn mask their discursive nature to appear normal and reasonable.

One of Foucault's last subjects of investigation is of particular importance here. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: an Introduction*, Foucault lays out a theory

of discursive sexuality.[16] Rather than conceive of sexuality as a constant quality of humanity, Foucault proposes a theory of sexuality as a discursive construct that allows people to conceive of a thing called "sexuality" as an innate or biological quality. He begins his inquiry into the history of the idea of sexuality with a simple question: Why, in relation to the subject of sex, do we constantly claim that we are repressed? Foucault admits a personal suspicion of the widely held belief in the "repression thesis," which contends that humanity is still subject to the prudish Victorian decorum of the nineteenth century in relation to sex and sexuality. He claims that it has an erroneous and unchallenged interpretive hold over how we come to think about sexuality and ourselves as sexed beings. In actuality, Foucault claims, at exactly the moment when we began to think of sexuality as a thing improper to discuss openly, there was a concurrent explosion of discourse surrounding sexuality in religion, medicine, and politics. At exactly the moment when sexuality was becoming a private, hidden thing, religious leaders were calling for greater detail in the devouts' confession of sexuality, and doctors were investigating and categorizing sexual behaviors for the first time. Thus, Foucault contends, the repression hypothesis, that widely held explanation for sexuality, is in fact a product of a greater discursive power that "did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals."[17] Particular historical negotiations of power made the very idea of individual sexuality possible and coherent.

Foucault spends much of *The History of Sexuality* tracing the development of sexuality as a coherent discourse, showing how our modern understanding of sexuality is in fact merely the latest iteration in a history of understandings. For example, prior to the advent of detailed religious confession and the rise of medical discourses surrounding sexuality, sexual practices were only coherently recognized in relation to marriage: "the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it . . . the moments when one demanded it[,] . . . its frequency or infrequency, and so on."[18] Of course, people knew of the existence of sexual acts outside of the martial union, and many of these acts were considered amoral or even illegal, but they were only conceived of as a vaguely associated group of individual *acts* in opposition to the specific relations of marriage. This slight distinction leads to some strange interpretations by modern standards. For example, in this prior understanding of sexual practices, one could not "be" a homosexual. A man could certainly have sex with another man, but this was merely an act, an individual instance, and not a quality of identity. However, with the rise of religious, medical, and political discourses surrounding sexuality in the seventeenth century, the notion of homosexuality became a coherent classification of people. As Foucault puts it pointedly: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."[19]

Foucault sees this transition in understanding sexual practices in the light of marital relations to a focus on the individual as a historical conflation of the *deployment of alliance* and the *deployment of sexuality*. The deployment of alliance is the historical tendency in almost every society to understand the social fabric according to relationships, namely "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of

kinship ties, [and] of transmission of names and possessions."[20] The deployment of sexuality is the more recent historical tendency to understand individuals as possessing a sexuality, primarily through "the sensations of the body, the quality of the pleasures, and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible these may be."[21] Foucault claims that the deployment of sexuality historically became entangled in the deployment of alliance at the site of the family. The family, existing as a result of the deployment of alliance, suddenly became the site of regulation of sexuality through regular interaction with the discourses of sexuality in the fields of religion, medicine, and politics. This makes sense if we consider the fact that the family is the only node or place where all of the major themes of sexual attention/fascination of the last 300 years – the various manifestations of the sexualites of women and children, the interaction of the couple, the existence and source of sexual "perverts" – converge.

But where did the deployment of sexuality originate? Foucault posits that this deployment of (individual) sexuality in circulated and shared discourse, or sexuality as we understand it today, was in fact the result of an act of power by the bourgeoisie or ruling class as a means of distinguishing themselves. "With the investment of its own sex by a technology of power and knowledge which it had itself invested," Foucault writes, "the bourgeoisie underscored the high political price of its body, sensations, and pleasures, its well-being and survival."[22] The concept of sexuality and the protections and attentions it affords were merely the most recent form of class maintenance, a function that notions of bloodlines and titles had supported in prior aristocracies. Only after being firmly instilled as a quality of the upper class did the concept of individual sexuality spread to lower working classes, extending the protection granted by a discourse of sexuality as a way to maintain a healthy, reproducing workforce in a rapidly industrializing world. And, with the spread of sexuality to the working class, the bourgeoisie developed another strategy to differentiate themselves: repression. Suddenly, the ruling class differed from the working class "not by the 'sexual' quality of the body, but by the intensity of its repression."[23] For Foucault, the repression hypothesis is not the explanation of sexuality in its contemporary form; sexuality and the repression hypothesis both spring from a much larger system of discourse and power.

Does Foucault's history of sexuality in/of discourse mean that our own sexual attractions and orientations have no basis in ourselves? Is sexuality a lie? In short, yes and no. These are difficult questions to answer clearly. Foucault believed that discourse ordered all knowledge, especially of ourselves, but discourse would also not exist without individuals to enact it. More productive questions regarding Foucault's history, especially for Queer theory, would be: How does Foucault's unique understanding break the concept of sexuality free of binaries that inscribe people into unequal relations of power? How does Foucault's conception of sexuality as a negotiable discursive construct, rather than internal, constant component, allow for more playful, disruptive understandings of sexuality? One of the most significant developments of Foucault's theory of discursive sexuality in line with these questions is Judith Butler's work on gender performativity.

Judith Butler and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

Judith Butler is a Professor of Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her scholarship broadly addresses questions of discourse and its various intersections with theories of poststructuralism, feminism, gender, queerness, and performance. In such works as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), and *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* (1997), Butler questions both the role of language/discourse in structuring our understanding of identity and how people can artfully engage language/discourse in order to reveal (and possibly resist) the machinery of this structuring. We are most concerned here with the theories she puts forth in *Gender Trouble*, arguably her most famous and important contribution to Queer theory. In it, Butler contends that gender, rather than a coherent component of identity incorporated through socialization, is in fact a bodily performance of discourse that exists only because people believe it is significant. Put differently, in the traditional manner of understanding gender, people behave in certain ways because of a cultural construct called "gender" which they have internalized into their identity. In Butler's view, gender only exists because people *act* as gendered beings. Actions that are supposedly the output or manifestation of an inner quality called "gender" are in fact the only force that constitutes any concept of personal gender in the first place. This is the major premise of Butler's theory of **gender performativity**.

In order to fully unpack Butler's thesis, it is important to situate her argument within the context of feminist theory in the early 1990s. Reflecting later on the reasons she undertook the project of *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that "I found myself increasingly enraged as a graduate student and young faculty member as countless Feminist frameworks seemed either to elide or pathologize the challenge to gender normativity posed by queer practices."[24] *Gender Trouble* and Butler's theory of gender performativity is a significant Queer critique of mainstream liberal feminism's unconscious tendency to represent a category of people called "women." Upon this foundation feminism has built a theory of power and oppression based on unquestioned norms of gender and the "feminine" as a site of resistance. This concentration, for Butler, mistakenly critiques an effect of discursive power rather than discursive power itself, undercutting any true form of resistance and in effect reifying power relations between people in relation to gender and sexuality. Thus, she concludes, only by understanding gender *as discourse made bodily* can we begin to theorize resistance to power.

Butler begins *Gender Trouble* by outlining these arguments against mainstream feminism. "Feminist critique," she writes, "ought . . . to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power though which emancipation is sought."[25] In other words, considering women as a coherent category in fact creates women as coherent subjects and places them into a network of power in the first place. Here Butler reverses the traditional

distinction between sex and gender (addressed in Chapter 8), understanding sex as a product of gender instead of the other way around. For Butler, the discursive construction of gender in a culture – the ways in which a culture creates value and meaning surrounding gender – in turn establishes how that culture makes sense of sex. This may seem strange until one considers all of the ways that our understanding of gender influences the production of "sex" in our culture. The historical use of gender assignment surgeries for intersexed individuals, as well as the contemporary popularity of breast and penis enlargement procedures, reveals how gender norms in fact direct the sex of our bodies. More fundamentally, Butler asserts that the very understanding of sex as "biologically fixed" is a mythical product of our social construction of gender. Like Foucault, she contends that cultural discourse normalizes the idea of sex as biological in order to serve particular interests of power.

The primary way this normalization supports sexual inequity is the connection of gender and sex to desire through the idea of an individual identity: " 'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire."[26] At the same time, "the internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, . . . requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality."[27] In this way the concept of gender identity tacitly reinforces systems of heteronormativity by giving rise to two linear, parallel structures of sex/gender/desire (male/masculine/woman-desiring and female/feminine/man-desiring). It is Butler's aim to trouble the very foundation of gender that these systems of identity and heteronormativity are built upon as a way of throwing off the power relations they encourage. By overturning our understanding of the foundational "gender," Butler seeks to theorize new ways of resistance.

The bulk of *Gender Trouble* takes issue with and "rereads" various theories of gender differentiation and desire in feminist, anthropological, and psychoanalytic scholarship. The details of these original arguments, and Butler's subsequent rebuttals, are beyond the scope of an introduction to her work. However, the important claim put forth in all of these arguments is Butler's contention that the notion of gender functions as a discursive construct, much in the same way that Foucault forwards sexuality as a discursive construct. This notion becomes key in her theory of gender performativity.

As a way of understanding the existence of gender as discursive and the coherent existence of gender as performative, we would first like to consider two examples of the phenomena that Butler provides to approximate this double existence. In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, she compares gender performativity to the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Franz Kafka's short story *Before the Law*:

> There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence

that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomena it anticipates.[28]

At the end of the *Gender Trouble*, Butler provides another example in comparing gender performativity to Foucault's discussion of the human soul in *Discipline and Punish*:

> The figure of the interior soul understood as "within" the body is signified through its inscription *on* the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility. The effect of a structuring inner space is produced through the signification of a body as a vital and sacred enclosure. . . . In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such.[29]

In both examples, of the legal subject and the soul-possessing human, abstract concepts of discourse ("law" and "soul") intelligibly exist only *because* people act or embody them. We can only understand ourselves as legal subjects because we *stand* before the law, and we only know of our souls because the body is the important physical *presence* that signifies the soul's intangibility. It is the acting out of the discursive law and the soul *on the body over time* that in effect brings them into existence as aspects of identity and of the self. Butler contends that gender operates in a similar fashion. As a function of discourse, a constellation of meanings in symbols and words, gender is only an intelligible construct of identity *because* people act in gendered ways. There is no internal concept of gender that in turn influences the ways we act; cultural discourse inspires a repetition of actions that in turn give rise to the idea of a personal gender. The expectation of gender identity is the genesis of gender identity.

Does this mean, then, that bodies are merely puppets dangling on the strings of gender discourse? No, according to Butler. Understanding gender as performative introduces potentially new possibilities in combining issues of gender, sex, practice, and desire. Rather than conceptualizing gender identity in traditional formations of male/masculine/woman-desiring and female/femin/man-desiring, individuals can (and do) recombine these factors into original ways. These recombinations in turn disrupt the traditional gender binary and the heteronormative power structure that the binary supports. At the end of *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers the notion of drag as one example of this kind of disruption. Drag performances call attention to the lack of clear association between gender, sex, sexual practice, and desire; they exist despite the fact that they challenge conventional associations between the different nodes of identity. Butler points out that drag also draws attention to the notion of performance itself, revealing the vast continuum of combinations available when gender is performative rather than a constant conception of one's identity. Though drag is not itself resistive, in the sense that it still relies upon coherent categories of gender even in its recombinations, it is a site of conflation and ambiguity from which resistance can be theorized.

This ambiguity is central to Queer theory (or, at least, as central as an amorphous, interdisciplinary, ill-defined theoretical tradition will allow); in fact, this ambiguity is *queerness*. Butler's notion of gender performativity introduces the quality of queerness to traditional understandings of gender. Coupled with Foucault's concurrent notion that individual sexuality is also discursive in nature, beholden to the political and social arrangements of given times and histories, the theory of gender performativity severs the classic links that tenuously hold the aspects of one's identity together. However, the severing of those links, far from defeating or ruining individuals, instead frees them from traditional formations of power and allows for new ways of understanding themselves and their social worlds.

A Queer Analysis of "Invisibility" in Media Texts

An important, concurrent project to the individual hermeneutics discussed above is the analysis of media texts for the ways they normalize concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. This differs from the analysis of representations of GLBTQQIA individuals because it seeks to unmask the unquestioned, implicit assumptions of a text in relation to sexuality. In other words, merging the frameworks of Foucault and Butler to "queerly" analyze media texts allows scholars to understand how these texts link "individual" discursive concepts like gender, sex, sexual practice, and desire with "cultural" discursive factors like politics, medicine, religion, and the family (we distinguish the individual from the cultural only as an interpretive heuristic; they are actually inexplicably linked as discourse). Queer criticism deconstructs texts for their implicit representations of and claims to truth regarding sexuality, troubling the assumptions of a text in such a way as to reveal how they affirm relations of power.

A particularly rich media text for this kind of analysis is pop artist John Mayer's song "Daughters," on his 2003 album *Heavier Things*. The song, like so many of Mayer's pieces, begins with a discussion over a woman with whom he is infatuated (a woman that puts "the color inside of [his] world"). He describes her as an inaccessible labyrinth, exhibiting a strange coldness that results from her family upbringing. "Boys," he claims, "you can break . . . you find out how much they can take." Girls like his coveted female, conversely, are more fragile and susceptible to their family's opinions, and therefore require extra care to avoid ending up romantically damaged or distant. Mayer offers his personal perspective in the chorus:

> So fathers be good to your daughters,
> Daughters will love like you do.
> Girls become lovers, who turn into mothers,
> So mothers be good to your daughters too.

With its emphasis on gender roles, heterosexuality, and family socialization practices, it would be difficult to find a media text more fruitful for Queer criticism than "Daughters." In blaming Mayer's difficult romantic relationship on the woman's childhood experiences, the song links the development of proper gender roles

to healthy heterosexuality (promoting a normalizing conflation of gender and sexuality reminiscent of Butler's critiques against gender identity). Improper socialization results in a woman who can't perform heterosexuality, and the inability to be heterosexual becomes the central "problem" in the text and, truthfully, the entire purpose of the song. Thus the song becomes implicitly heteronormative though the machinery of gender. At the same time, by emphasizing the role of the family in the woman's identity formation, the song naturalizes the very unnatural and discursive links between family and sexuality (akin to Foucault's deployment of alliance and sexuality, respectively). This melding masks the historically new conception of sexuality as an individual trait beneath the relatively long-standing discourses of family and relationship. The song, then, not only privileges and normalizes heterosexuality, but also normalizes the concept of individual, innate sexuality itself. Media texts like "Daughters" affirm the kinds of normalizing discourses that Foucault and Butler dissect, and Queer analysis becomes an important way of revealing the presence of power.

Queer analysis can also be productively applied to analyzing how even apparently progressive texts in fact maintain discourses of (hetero)sexuality and gender. The long-running NBC television show *Will and Grace* is an apt example. The show follows the lives to two roommates living in New York (Will, and openly gay lawyer, and Grace, a straight interior designer) and their various antics with friends (Jack, a perpetually unemployed gay actor, and Karen, a straight, alcoholic divorcee). Though the show is certainly one of the more visible instances of queer characters on recent television programming, it still tends to normalize the discourses of sexuality with which Foucault and Butler take issue.

Will and Grace do not act as a heterosexual couple in the traditional sense, but they live "heterosexually" for all intents and purposes in their mutual exchange of affection and support. Though the characters actually met and dated in college within the diegesis of the show, gender norms become key to their later formation as "heterosexual" roommates. As an interior designer, Grace signifies for viewers the traditionally feminine traits of creativity, artistry, and "right-brain thinking." Will, on the other hand, signifies masculine traits of logic, reason, and argument through his profession at a law firm. This masculine/feminine dichotomy so apparent in their jobs continues in the ways in which the two interact at home. Will tends to support and help Grace through her problems more often than the other way around, conjuring images of the protective male and the vulnerable female. The conflation of conventional gender norms with heterosexuality central to Butler's work applies here, as it provides viewers with familiar codes to interpret the show. This reliance on classic gender norms also introduces a heteronormative veneer onto a supposedly "queer" show.

Moreover, the various sexual relationships that the two engage in over the eight-season span are markedly different. Whereas many of Grace's heterosexual encounters represent drawn-out plotlines, her suitors often portrayed by famous actors (such as Harry Connick Jr, Ed Burns, and Woody Harrelson), Will only has one significant long-term relationship in the entire run of the show (portrayed by relatively unknown actor Bobby Cannavale). In the series finale that jumps years ahead into

the lives of the main characters, viewers are confronted with increasing degrees of heteronormativity. Both Will and Grace are happily nestled into their own separate families, the result of a falling out from years before that dissolved their status as roommates. Will and his long-time partner Vince (Cannavale) have a son named Ben, and Grace and her husband Leo (Connick Jr) have a daughter named Lyla. On top of the reinforcement of heterosexual family structures present in these couplings, the actual episode concludes with the marriage of the two children. Thus, although the show features queer characters, heterosexuality is certainly the lens through which we understand the characters' personal sexualities. In normalizing the overlapping deployments of alliance and sexuality identified by Foucault, as well as reinforcing the links between gender and heterosexuality, the show makes natural the aspects of sexuality that Queer scholars seek to challenge.

By looking at "Daughters" and *Will and Grace*, we can see how media texts that reinforce and normalize the discursive connections between gender, sexuality, and desire also function to perpetuate social systems of heteronormative power and domination. Queer criticism of these assumptions is the first step in revealing their discursive nature and troubling the binaries on which they rest. The work of Foucault and Butler reveals a complicated nexus of discourse and power that underpins categories we often take to be "natural," and their scholarship points to potential ways of better understanding and resisting these formations of power. However, until more people are equipped with this rather esoteric theory, the political project of Queer media studies will likely continue to focus on more visible representations of queerness and their social consequences. This consideration is the focus of our final section.

Consequences of Heternormative Media Representations

In Chapter 8 we outlined some of the consequences of sexist media representations on actual women and men in their everyday lives. In this section we continue that project by considering the potential effects of heteronormative media representations on queer and non-queer individuals. At this point, the last chapter in the media texts section of this textbook, you should have a fairly clear idea that media representations have both positive and negative effects on individuals in the real world. People often turn to the media, consciously or unconsciously, in order to form values about the world we live in today, and those values influence the impressions we have of ourselves and society. When we form values and impressions on the basis of heteronormative media representations, we run the risk of continuing current and unequal power relations.

Symbolically, the relative absence of positive queer individuals in the media results in limited models of identification for actual queer populations in the real world. In his account of contemporary gay life, *The Culture of Desire*, journalist Frank Browning recalls the importance of identification in exploring his own sexuality while attending high school:

What all of us were doing was sorting through the rush of sensual responses our bodies were offering up, calling on all the available plots of family, church, television, and paperback novels to enable us to savor some and discard others. . . . By what we said, and by what we contrived to be overheard saying, we learned (or didn't) whether we were exploring the same mysteries, whether we were inhabiting common plots.[30]

Early on Browning discovered that his "story's plot showed no sign of connection to any of the other plots other young men were following."[31] People draw upon the stories in the media to learn more about themselves, and heteronormative systems of power limit the amount of positive images with which members of disempowered groups can identify. Whereas young heterosexuals have a variety of (presumably) heterosexual characters and personalities in the media to emulate, queers have fewer unproblematic images to consider. This requires young queer individuals to be more media literate and vigilant in order to separate useful, positive images from stereotypical, negative ones.

The lack of symbolic resources is an important effect to consider, especially in an increasingly media-saturated, image-based world like our own, but heteronormative representations also reinforce public prejudices and help shape social policies that affect queer individuals in the real world. The fact that the overwhelming majority of characters and personalities in the American media are heterosexual contributes to a social system that often marginalizes the interests and needs of queer people. The Human Rights Campaign website lists a number of legal statutes that solidify heteronormative practices into law. For example, the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 compels certain employers to give unpaid leave to employees for the care of parents, children, or spouses. A "spouse" according to the law is "a husband or wife as defined or recognized under state law for purposes of marriage in the state where the employee resides."[32] Although certain companies have taken the initiative to offer similar domestic partner benefits to homosexual couples, there is no federal mandate that guarantees this protection. The law, guided and reinforced by the kinds of social prejudices embodied in the media, is clearly in support of heteronormative systems of power. Other policies, including the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and the "don't ask, don't tell" doctrine of secrecy in the US military, are even clearer examples of this trend.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered how media representations of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as the unproblematic consideration of sexuality itself as a natural or inherent thing to humanity, contribute to a system of unequal power relations between individuals in society. Queer theorists seek to critique both this sexual visibility and invisibility as a way of deconstructing heteronormativity. Part of this project is the analysis of how mass media portray heterosexuals and homosexuals differently in popular texts. Part is discerning the difference between

visibility and representation, understanding that the mere presence of queer char-
acters is not enough to make a text resistive. And part is looking at the deep,
unquestioned, underlying logics of a text to understand how the aspects of sexual-
ity that we take for granted, such as its individual or personal nature, in fact sup-
port very shared, cultural relations of power. Though Foucault and Butler's work
in this final area probably best embody the disruptive, shifting, ambiguous sensib-
ility meant by the term "queer," we can see from this chapter that Queer analysis
is a diverse project with many different goals. In a sense, this applicability across
many fronts is fitting for a perspective that refuses to be clearly pinned down.

Again, like in Chapter 8 on Feminist analysis, we stress here that Queer analysis
as a theoretical perspective on the media is not only appropriate for scholars who
may also identify as queer. Stereotypes and unquestioned understandings of sexual-
ity work to place limits on all people in relation to issues of personal identity,
practice and desire, regardless of how we conceive of ourselves. While heteronorm-
ative social systems place greater limits on individuals who identify as homosex-
ual, resulting in both symbolic and material disadvantages, those who identify as
heterosexual are also inscribed into relations of power. Only the vigilant and care-
ful consideration of media representations of sexuality can begin to overcome these
systems of unequal relation. From this perspective, only by "queering" everyone can
we begin to make the world a more equitable place to live.

MEDIA LAB 8: DOING QUEER ANALYSIS

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this lab is to utilize concepts of Queer theory to analyze media texts. Specifically, students
will investigate popular and supposedly "queer" movies for the ways in which they challenge and rein-
force understandings of visible and invisible sexuality.

ACTIVITY

- Divide the class into small groups of 4–5 students each.
- Play a short clip (5–6 minutes) of a popular movie widely recognized for its inclusion of queer char-
  acters. Potential films include *The Rocky Horror Picture Show, The Crying Game,* or *To Wong Foo, Thanks
  for Everything—Julie Newmar.*
- Have students record their answers to the following questions.
  1   How, if at all, does the representation in the clip reinforce systems of heteronormativity? How do
      you know?
  2   What stereotypes of heterosexuality and homosexuality are present in the clip?
  3   How does the clip link sexuality and gender? In your opinion, do these associations reinforce or
      challenge heteronormativity?
  4   How, if at all, does the clip portray sexuality as a permanent, personal, or special quality of iden-
      tity? After reading this chapter, do you find that portrayal troubling or affirming? Why/why not?

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