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Patricia White

Teaching Queer Cinema with Independent Media

One of the most exciting dimensions of teaching film (and popular culture) is learning what students already know and then generating an informed and critical epistemology from the familiar. Teaching LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) representation in film and media presents rich opportunities to build on student familiarity—with such mainstream breakthroughs as Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–07)—and to formalize the knowledge and challenge the assumptions that students have about LGBT history, lives, and struggles for representation. With the commercial success of gay-themed work and the acceptance of such out celebrities as Ellen Degeneres, the recent past is a teachable moment of both social transformation and market logic, and students of diverse backgrounds have illuminating perspectives on and important stakes in making sense of it. By focusing on film and media by and about LGBT producers, teachers can connect questions of political and aesthetic representation and expose students to independent media sources.

In the post-network-television era of convergence between media platforms like cable and the Internet, the young citizens who are our students have many media alternatives, but their exposure to alternative

media—noncommercial, politically engaged, formally inventive film and video work by feminists, people of color, or LGBT, transnational, and other media producers—is not guaranteed by this apparent democratization. Such exposure is more likely to come in the classroom, facilitated by critical pedagogy. Similarly, a seeming liberalization of representations of gender and sexuality—*The L Word* gesture—obscures more challenging practices and histories unless teaching these is made a priority.

This contribution discusses how a vital curricular area—the mutually constitutive fields of gender and sexuality studies and film and media studies—has been defined and enriched by an emphasis on independent media and questions of self-representation, as well as how higher education can respond to changes in the mediascape, including in the distribution of independent film and video. I draw on my teaching experience and the assumption that a focus on questions of gender and sexuality is a productive entry point to film and media in a broader curriculum.

Teaching film today necessarily entails teaching media. Even if the object of study is a discrete cinematic text, access to it and information about it engage and are embedded in other media—principally students' computers, linked by a campus server to course management software, the library, and the Web. Changes in media delivery systems like Web streaming and video on demand, the proliferation of “niche” cable networks, and Web 2.0's culture of user-generated content correlate with changes in media content, but not always in predictable ways. The advent of *YouTube* has had a profound impact on teaching film, as anyone involved in higher education is likely to confirm, and, like any anarchic and libidinally driven realm of cultural practice, the site is rife with queer content. Given the voyeuristic structures that have always attended lesbian representation in particular, *YouTube* is not an unproblematic place to do research on the topic. In teaching the course Learning from *YouTube*, Alex Juhasz finds that getting a whole lot of something does not necessarily mean getting what you need in a form you can use.¹ Quickly, her class gained “a more keen awareness of how censorship and corporations function well on the site while community and art do not.”

Queer media is defined by a range of film forms; changing relations of production, address, and reception; historical, subcultural, national, and transnational contexts; and cultural and political rifts and alliances between gay men and lesbians, feminist and queer theorists, politicians and aesthetes. To learn about these things, students often have to unlearn what they think they know about queer media from networks like Bravo and

television shows like *Will and Grace* (1998–2006). Student openness to queer content in mainstream movies has undoubtedly increased since early in my career, when I encountered skepticism when teaching homoeroticism in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) or Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948). The number of *Brokeback* mash-ups on the Internet is adequate testimony to this fact.² Learning from *YouTube* could occur if instructors used the site in the context of the rich homoerotic tradition of the west-ern—from *Red River* to Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), which, though an obscure avant-garde film, is also a cult film and a parody, genres that thrive on the site and elsewhere on the Web. But like art and community, history is not a priority of the site. For me, there is a kind of pathos in how much ingenuity goes into queering popular culture sources—while I often find fan videos deeply compelling (and suspect that having been bewitched by the television show *That Girl* [1966–71] in my childhood would have led to similar efforts if I had had the tools), I feel that students' exposure to alternative traditions would channel some of this creativity toward less-well-worn grooves.

Media proliferation contributes to the rhetoric of democratization, while real inequities in access remain or deepen in the era of deregulation and globalization: just count the number of films by women released in the summer months, nonwhite actresses in leading roles, subtitled films on *Logo*, independent documentaries on public television. For anyone teaching the history and stakes of women's and LGBT media, mainstream (corporate-owned and -driven) outlets are woefully inadequate. Despite a congressional mandate for the funding and broadcast of risk-taking independent media addressing underserved audiences, the percentage of work by independent producers remains miniscule even as the television grid expands. Deregulation and privatization will not redress these inequities. One important classroom strategy is teaching media policy and political economy.

Another is to seek out independent work; in what follows I discuss the robust counterpublic sphere of feminist and LGBT filmmaking (see Warner), its relationship with the academy, and some specific challenges facing education in this area now. I do not wish to imply that work by LGBT producers is the only way to approach these topics, much less that independent media favors a mimetic relation between maker and content. Self-representation, however, is a useful rubric for organizing a syllabus that also redresses the marginalization of many of these artists. In the film and media studies classroom students can encounter independent

media with an awareness of its formal as well as institutional and economic specificities, such as funding, format, and distribution. For me, film (and media) pedagogy includes a wider range of work than theatrical features and so foregrounds the social contexts of film and media production and reception.

Although syllabi across the humanities curriculum include Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the most widely anthologized essay in the field, few emphasize that Mulvey proposes an answer to the bind she astutely describes: the paradigm of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" defining commercial, narrative cinema will be overturned by independent (experimental) women's filmmaking (11). While it is challenging to teach viewers who have grown up within a culture of maximum visual stimulation to appreciate Mulvey's films or the anti-visual pleasure modernist aesthetic she advocates, it is rewarding to introduce them to works that foreground form. In a related tactic, instructors can unfold historically for students all the sites in which women and queers have taken up formal experimentation to challenge dominant modes: Berlin and Paris avant-gardes between the world wars, the post-World War II American underground, and video activism during the AIDS epidemic, to name a few. Students certainly identify with Mulvey's polemical prose, and her call for new relations of production strikes a chord with the prevalent do-it-yourself ethic. Foregrounding these questions also offers an opportunity to address economic and institutional questions about film production: Who funds movies? Who has the skills to make them? What audiences are addressed? How do audiences access the work and acquire the skills to respond to it?

As my invocation of Mulvey's framework indicates, for me teaching LGBT media is intimately tied with feminist film theory and women's access to the means of production. With the upsurge of queer visibility since the 1990s, both the issues of gaze and image that Mulvey raises (and attendant issues of heteronormativity in her framing of the topic) and questions of gender equity are paramount. I often begin classes on gender and sexuality in film by discussing with students the Guerrilla Girls' campaign with *Movies by Women*, "Unchain the Women Directors," a public art project that raised awareness of how male-dominated film production remains. Although the statistics used to paint the dire picture of women's underrepresentation as directors (7% in 2005) are compiled from the year's two hundred top-grossing films—a different stratosphere from independent, nontheatrical production—they are sobering ones. Working

from what students are likely to know something about, I frame a unit on new queer cinema—B. Ruby Rich’s moniker for the flourishing of independent LGBT features with bold aesthetic and political visions in the early 1990s—through the work of the producer Christine Vachon. It was through close collaboration with Vachon and her partners at Killer Films that Todd Haynes has emerged as a first-rank auteur (see Morrison). Killer has also put its stamp on new queer cinema through Tom Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992) and *Savage Grace* (2008); Nigel Finch’s historical drama *Stonewall* (1995); the documentarian Mary Herron’s feature debut, *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1995); John Cameron Mitchell’s adaptation of his play *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), among other independent features. Most notably, Vachon’s commitment to the novice women filmmakers Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner (*Go Fish* [1994]) and Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don’t Cry* [1999]) constitutes a key intervention in the gender inequities of queer public culture. These two benchmark features have been the subject of fine analyses by LGBT scholars that are productively taught in conjunction with Vachon’s no-nonsense books on independent film production.³ Here issues of representation—both political and aesthetic—intersect, and students’ investments, no matter what their identities, make for lively classroom exchanges.

Theatrical features that influenced students’ youthful identification through accessibility on DVD are a useful way in to teaching students about queer self-representation. The DVD as equalizing commodity form can do some significant cultural work, given the radical discrepancies in budget and scale among feature-length films. Cheryl Dunye’s 16mm independent production *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), for example, resembles her early free-form, low-fi videos that mix talking heads and fictionalized scenarios. But as the first feature by an African American lesbian to be theatrically released (however modestly), it broke historical barriers and the DVD distribution threshold—fittingly for a “meta” movie about self-representation and alternative histories (see Reid-Pharr; Zimmer).

Access to work on DVD inevitably drives the selection of texts for teaching as well, but we need not be confined to American studio releases. Queer theory, like feminism, has become increasingly committed to transnational inquiry, and audiovisual works are central to these developments. Instructors may choose to highlight the prominent queer voices among art cinema auteurs—from Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Luciano Visconti, and Chantal Akerman to Lino Brocka, François Ozon, Tsai Ming-liang, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Or they may wish to

engage questions of globalization by focusing on queer representation in East Asian cinema through Tony Rayns's writing or on Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) in relation to films made by South Asian queers through Gayatri Gopinath's work. Teaching this work is facilitated by the global marketing of Asian cinema on DVD and LGBT-owned DVD labels like Wolfe Video.

Richard Dyer, the most significant scholar in defining LGBT film studies, opens "Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual," his contribution to Diana Fuss's groundbreaking anthology *Inside/Out*, by recounting a student's "gotcha" comment: "Richard doesn't believe in authors—unless they are women!" and adds blacks and queers to the list. Dyer's typically succinct and elegant diagnosis of the contradictory investments of the queer pedagogue remains accurate. Although his research and much of the field is profitably invested in the study of queer representations in and reception of mainstream culture, the history and concept of self-representation is the guiding principle of Dyer's *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*. His chapters foreground nonmainstream contexts from silent avant-garde cinema to Weimar to the 1960s underground and 1970s lesbian feminist and gay liberation movements and provide a useful breakdown for a syllabus on the subject. As a curricular organization in teaching LGBT film, authorship certainly departs from the media watchdog group GLAAD's (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation's) interest in mainstream representations and visibility—and, again, the field should not exclude scrutiny of dominant culture or focus on film to the exclusion of work on television and the Internet (see Gross; Becker; the online journal *Flow*). But whether or not it is a quaint fixation, a holdover from the days of identity politics, the commitment to authorial criteria—films by queers and women—is a fruitful approach to alternative media and its social contexts, if it avoids prescriptive aesthetics.

Independent filmmaking in the United States comprises documentary, experimental, short, and feature film and video made by producers working outside corporate structures to fund, produce, and often distribute their work, as well as the many organizations that support them. Beyond the teaching of specific works, pedagogy can engage with these groups' online resources, such as *IndieWire*, *Filmmaker*, and *The Independent*.⁴ Other institutions such as the Independent Television Service, media arts centers, community-based video organizations, and film and video festivals are important barometers of aesthetic, political, and cultural currents that teachers and students can explore. Yet even in the age of convergence,

not-for-profit educational distributors are the strongest bridge between alternative media and higher education.

Students learn to take a wider view of independent film than the theatrical feature through exposure to documentary, experimental film and video, and short work from the collections of distributors like Women Make Movies and Frameline. Documentaries like *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2006), by Victor Silverman and Susan Stryker, and *Boy I Am* (2006), on female-to-male transgender identity, by Sam Feder and Julie Hollar, are in productive dialogue with the scholarship students read for feminist and LGBT studies classes. The recognition of formal traditions beyond talking heads and narrative commonplaces is as eye-opening as the subject matter and perspective. Teaching Barbara Hammer's 1970s lesbian videos provides a direct dose of lesbian feminist culture, enriched when historicized and taught with the work of the younger experimental filmmaker Su Friedrich and the even younger video artist Sadie Benning. The compelling voices of black gay men echo in two key works from the late 1980s: Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989) is an hour-long video on "black men loving black men"—a phrase that is repeatedly invoked in the film—identity, and HIV, structured around performance and poetry. Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1988) highlights some of the same black gay poets to illuminate the intersections of race and desire in queer subcultures and histories and the protection of legacies.

Riggs is only one of many artists of this period of efflorescence in queer cultural production to have been lost to AIDS. Video had a key role in AIDS activism. In *An Archive of Feelings*, the queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues that cultural production is one important response to queer trauma and looks at lesbian video artists' work. Many aspects of the AIDS video movement tested out assumptions about collectivity and community, democratization of media, and government indifference long before the advent of the Internet; the online ACT UP Oral History Project, by the filmmaker Jim Hubbard and the writer and activist Sarah Schulman, includes numerous interviews with filmmakers and video artists that can be taught in conjunction with their work.

Julien remains a key figure in LGBT independent film, and it is fitting that his experimental biopic *Derek* (2008) celebrates another avant-garde British queer auteur, Derek Jarman, who died of HIV in 1994 and who connected queer aesthetics and politics in a radical and public way. The preservation of his contribution is crucial. *Derek* is narrated by Jarman's friend and featured actor Tilda Swinton and was produced by the film

theorist Colin MacCabe. The presentation of *Derek* in lesbian and gay film festivals recalled Jarman's participation in these events as the new queer cinema was emerging. It is a reminder of the political and experimental promise they still hold.

The space of the classroom where these works are taught is distinct from the sector of LGBT independent production and the organizations that sustain it, but the vital worldwide network of hundreds of film and video festivals can be studied through the informative roundtable discussions published on festivals in the journal *GLQ*.⁵ Participants speak of the festivals' function as a queer counterpublic sphere, raising questions about the local and transnational, consumerism and oppositionality, globalization and corporatization, community and virtuality. The accessibility of online festival programs can also enrich class discussions and facilitate curatorial assignments.⁶

Yet nontheatrical work by independent artists featured in festivals is usually not accessible to individual viewers on DVD. Any work in distribution is most often available from educational distributors with institutional pricing structures, and faculty members need to advocate for these works' acquisition by university libraries. Learning why artists' work and independent documentaries cannot be purchased or downloaded for home video prices is an education in economies of scale, the politics of visibility, and media justice—for teachers and professors as well as students. Independent media is not funded by corporations or government grants or foundations, sold to television or major cultural organizations, or advertised to anything like the extent that would be necessary to subsidize mass-market distribution. Colleges and universities, through institutional purchases from independent distributors, are the key sites through which students have access to alternative work and artists are compensated for their work. Work is usually sold with public performance rights, so that free campus screenings are permitted (unlike other library holdings). The institutional price returns a much larger percentage to the filmmaker than a low-cost sale. Educators can connect with the media arts community not only to bring new works into the curriculum and scholarly debate but also to engage in media advocacy efforts.

My affiliation as a board member with Women Make Movies, the leading feminist distributor of films by and about women, exposes me to a continuous flow—or gush—of new work by and about women from around the world that drives my teaching in feminist and LGBT media, from the reissued work of Mulvey and Peter Wollen to documentaries

about women and the Middle East to a range of works by lesbians of color. New releases, especially documentaries, motivate my curricular revisions, but their sheer number can be difficult to absorb into existing course structures. Hence I encourage other kinds of campus programming and design assignments that engage students in documenting our library's holdings to teach others about these resources—whether they are professors designing courses using media across the curriculum or students looking for alternatives to the mainstream media. Teaching specific works is always facilitated by scholarship on a particular title, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's experimental documentaries or Kim Longinotto's observational ones. The University of Minnesota Press's Visible Evidence series has been an important catalyst for scholarship on independent documentary, and blogs and online reviews help redress the inattention of major outlets.

Educational distribution in the United States is endangered, as is independent media, by lack of public funds. Organizations such as Women Make Movies, California Newsreel, Third World Newsreel, Icarus Films, and New Day Films have their roots in the politicized alternative media culture of the 1960s and 1970s or, in the case of the San Francisco-based Frameline's LGBT distribution service, in the phenomenal success of LGBT film festivals. While these not-for-profit organizations generate revenue to sustain themselves and remunerate their artists, changes in the market—first the wide availability of consumer-priced video and now Internet distribution—pose challenges to their marketing models. Committed to the widest possible exposure for the filmmakers they represent, such organizations may be undermined by new initiatives that do not generate enough revenue to sustain independent production. It is a precarious balance for which university faculty members and libraries are primary institutional supports. By making the case for independent media within our institutional settings and encouraging wide use of holdings and acquisitions, professors have a concrete role in supporting this sector.

Film studies emerged as a discipline in the era of a political counter-cinema and feminist theory in the 1970s, was challenged and catalyzed by multiculturalism in the 1980s, and offered rich terrain for queer theory in the 1990s. Commitment on the part of those teaching film and media could greatly influence pedagogical contexts in the early-twenty-first-century culture of convergence, but only if we are self-conscious about our institutional setting as one among many frameworks that govern access to alternative media and to self-representation. The counterpublic sphere of independent media that has been shaped over this same period, consisting

of documentarians, community video activists, media artists, and networks of media art centers, is both threatened and enhanced by developments in new media. Independent producers need to maintain the rights to and earn revenues from their work as new models for streaming and on-demand distribution are tried out and video-sharing sites proliferate. The independent media community and university information technology and library personnel are entering into dialogue on these issues and practices. Teachers and scholars should understand something of these debates and developments and the effects on their work. In this latest round of left pessimism versus techno optimism, we need a little of both.

Queer media is everywhere. To prevent the second half of the saying, “now you see it . . . now you don’t” from coming true, we as educators have to work to preserve histories and sustain alternative practices by addressing them in the classroom. A commitment to studying gender and sexuality means making marginalized perspectives central, and film and media studies offers a way to look at some of our culture’s most powerfully invested representations and visions. Its pedagogy should be attuned to the stakes of media production, distribution, and reception, as well as form and content.

Notes

1. Visit the course at www.youtube.com/MediaPraxisme.
2. *Star Wars: The Empire Brokeback* had 759,724 views as of 22 August 2008.
3. See Aaron, esp. Pick, “New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films” 103–18; “The *Boys Don’t Cry* Debate” in Stacey and Street (257–95); Vachon with Edelstein; and Vachon with Bunn.
4. A sign of just how tough the times have been is the cessation in publication of *The Independent* (which started in 1978), when the Association of Independent Film and Videomakers went under in 2006.
5. See “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One”; “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Two”; White, Rich, Clarke, and Fung.
6. A few of the longest-running North American events are Frameline in San Francisco, Out Fest in Los Angeles, MIX and The New Festival in New York, In-side/Out in Toronto, and Image + Nation in Montreal.

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