

English 559: Topics in Literary and Cultural Theory

## **Queer Popular Culture Studies**

Professor Ramzi Fawaz

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Class Meetings: W 6-8:30 PM, 2637 Mosse Humanities Building

Office Hours: W 3-5 PM, and by appointment 7161 HCW

**Course Description:** This advanced seminar in literary and cultural theory will explore the intersection of Queer Theory and Popular Culture Studies. The dramatic visibility of queer people and other sexual outlaws in contemporary mass media has been heralded by many as a sign of the LGBT community's entry into mainstream culture; at the same time, queer people have historically been associated with the most innovative and provocative creative transformations in 20th century art, literature, and film. Yet as many scholars and cultural critics have shown, cultural representations alone rarely translate into tangible social and political gains for sexual minorities. Against a celebratory vision that equates LGBT representational visibility with social equality, queer popular culture studies has questioned the ideological structures of sexual and gender difference that have organized ways of seeing, modes of entertainment, and the popular narratives through which Americans have projected their social and political desires. In this course, we will explore how recent developments in queer popular culture studies have transformed approaches to histories of cultural production, audience reception, and the analysis of media texts.

Among the topics we will explore include the development of queer publics, the affective or emotional economies of popular culture, the intersections of racial, gender, and sexual identity in mass culture, the anti-social turn in queer theory, and queer temporalities. Throughout the course, we will pair key theoretical texts in these emergent fields of inquiry with case studies in a variety of media -- including film, television, popular fiction, music, and digital media -- to unpack the ways in which queer cultural theory has emerged as a political response to particular media texts and cultural transformations in the late 20th century.

### **Course requirements**

This is an **advanced readings course** in literary and cultural theory. The texts we're reading this semester will be conceptually dense, and they will challenge many of the assumptions you may have about sexuality, politics, and culture. My hope is that these materials will provoke you to engage in generative and dynamic discussions about your relationship to these categories, and help you develop a sophisticated language for talking about the politics of popular culture. With this in mind, it is crucial that you devote significant time and energy to all the readings; please plan to read all the texts thoroughly and thoughtfully, and please bring your questions and thoughts to every class meeting. You must have your readings with you in each class session either as physical copies or on a digital reading device.

Alongside our scholarly texts, most weeks will require you to view a film or engage with another form of popular culture. These should be treated with as much attention as any of our scholarly readings. Films and television shows will be made available through learn@UW.

All members of the class must participate in every discussion. Collaborative engagement and dialogue is a central component of academic life, and our class discussions will function as a model for how to enter debates in thoughtful and productive ways.

This course has **three writing assignments**: 1) five short response papers. These should be 2 double-spaced pages of thoughtful engagement with the central ideas of the readings for a given week. These should not be summaries. Instead, take-up, reframe, or debate with the key concepts and arguments of the materials at hand. Responses do not need to address all readings in a given week, but should still seek to develop links across at least two texts. Submit responses to me via e-mail Tuesday evenings by 8PM. These papers are ungraded but will receive a check, check +, or check -. You may choose which weeks you wish to write a response. 2) a 6-7 page analysis paper discussing 2 key readings and 2) a final 12-14 page seminar paper analyzing a literary or cultural text of your choosing using 3 theoretical texts, including one not assigned in class. You will have the option of making the 6-page analysis paper a preliminary version of the final essay.

Graduate students enrolled in this class will need to complete a response paper for every week of the semester (you may opt out of 2 weeks), complete all recommended readings alongside primary readings, and develop a 20-page seminar paper at the conclusion of the term. You may develop a paper based on a dissertation chapter, journal article, or portion of a Master's thesis.

### **Grade Distribution:**

Response Papers (15%), Analysis Paper (15%), Seminar Paper (30%), Participation (40%)

### **Course Materials**

The texts below are required. All other readings will be available on the course website:

Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*

**Disability Support Services:** At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/services/>.

## WEEK 1: The Culture of Queers

Wednesday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> Advance Reading:

Alex Doty, "What Makes Queerness Most?" From *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993)

David Halperin, "How to Be Gay," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 3, 2012)  
<http://chronicle.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/article/How-to-Be-Gay/134024/>

### View the following clips:

Selected episodes from "Gay of Thrones":

<http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/8fbd05a4b3/gay-of-thrones-game-of-thrones-episode-3-recap-with-alfie-allen?playlist=341958>

<http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/29221ac323/gay-of-thrones-s4-ep-10-future-legendary-children>

From *The Sopranos*, Season 4 Episode 12:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyRPmMi1Mio>

## WEEK 2: Gay Expectations: Popular Culture Hails a Queer Public

Wednesday, September 10<sup>th</sup> Screening: "The Puppy Episode Part 1-2" of **The Ellen Show** (1997)

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter, 1998)

Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," from *Heavenly Bodies: Screen Stars and Society* (1986)

Anna McCarthy, "Ellen: Making Queer Television History," *GLQ* 7.4 (2001)

## WEEK 3: Working Like a Homosexual: Notes on Gay Hollywood

Wednesday, September 17<sup>th</sup> Film Screening: **Meet Me in St. Louis** (Minelli, 1944)

Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" (1964)

<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>

Matthew Tinkcom, "Working Like a Homosexual: Camp Visual Codes and the Labor of Gay Subjects in the MGM Freed Unit," *Cinema Journal* 35.6 (Winter, 1996)

"Hollywood Lesbians, Annamarie Jagose interviews Patricia White about Her Latest Book, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*," *Genders* 32 (2000): [http://www.genders.org/g32/g32\\_jagose.html](http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_jagose.html)

#### WEEK 4: The Making of Queer Counterpublics in the AIDS Epidemic

Wednesday, September 24<sup>th</sup> In-class screening: **Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo** (Carlomusto and Meggenti, 1988)

Gregg Bordowitz, "Picture a Coalition," *October* 43.1 (Winter, 1987)

Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43.1 (Winter, 1987)

Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," *boundary 2* 19.1 (Spring, 1992)

#### WEEK 5: Against the Future

Wednesday, October 1<sup>st</sup> Film Screening: **Heavenly Creatures** (Jackson, 1994)

Leo Bersani, "The Gay Absence," from *Homos* (1995)

Lee Edelman, "The Future is Kid Stuff" from *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004)

**Recommended Reading:** Jack Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies," Speech given at the Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (2007).

"Forum: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006)

## WEEK 6: Sex, Risk, and Self-Negation

Wednesday, October 8<sup>th</sup>

Film Screening: **The Living End** (Araki, 1992)

Tim Dean, introduction to *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subcultures of Barebacking* (2009)

Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole" (1991)

Damon Young, "The Living End, or Love Without a Future," in *Queer Love in Film and Television*, edited by Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen (2013)

**Recommended reading:** Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43.1 (Winter 1987)

## WEEK 7: Queer Crossings: Intersections of Race, Gender, and Disability

### 6-7 page papers due

Wednesday, October 15<sup>th</sup>

Screening: selected episodes from **Orange is the New Black** (2013) and **Glee** (2009)

Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," *GLQ* 3.4 (May, 1997)

Robert McRuer, "As Good as it Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability," *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003)

## WEEK 8: Dis/identification: On the Politics of Appropriation

Wednesday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>

Screening: **Paris is Burning** (Livingston, 1991)

Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion" from *Bodies that Matter* (1993)

José Muñoz, "'The White to be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag" *Social Text* 52/53 (Winter, 1997)

## WEEK 9: Queer Affects

Wednesday, October 29<sup>th</sup>

Film Screening: **Brokeback Mountain** (Lee, 2005)

Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *differences* 17.3 (2006)

Heather Love, "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence," *New Formations* 63 (2007)

**Recommended reading:** "Brokeback Mountain Dossier" from *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* (2007)

Christopher Nealon, "The Secret Public of Physique Culture," from *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (2001)

Sarah Chinn and Heather Love, "Queer Feelings/Feeling Queer: A Conversation with Heather Love about Politics, Teaching, and the 'Dark, Tender Thrills' of Affect," *Transformations* 22.2 (2011).

## WEEK 10: Feeling Backward

Wednesday, November 5<sup>th</sup> Film Screening: **Beginners** (Mills, 2011)

Selections from Kathryn Stockton, "Growing Sideways, or Why Children Appear to Get Queerer in the Twentieth Century," from *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009)

Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, "'Ah, Yes, I Remember It Well': Memory and Queer Culture in *Will and Grace*" (2004)

## Week 11: Queer Orientations

Wednesday, November 12<sup>th</sup> Film Screening: **Boys Don't Cry** (Pierce, 1999)

Jack Halberstam, "The Brandon Archive" and "The Transgender Look," from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005)

Scott Herring, "Out of the Closets, Into the Woods: RFD, Country Women, and the Post-Stonewall Emergence of Queer Anti-urbanism," *American Quarterly* 59.2 (2007)

**Recommended Reading:** Jack Halberstam, "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geography," from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005)

## WEEK 12: Transnational Desires

Wednesday, November 19<sup>th</sup> Film Screening: **Fire** (Mehta, 1996)

Gayatri Gopinath, introduction to *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005)

Jasbir Puar, “The Sexuality of Terrorism” from *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007)

*Optional Reading:* Gayatri Gopinath, “On Fire,” *GLQ* 4.4 (1998)

WEEK 13: Class canceled for Thanksgiving holiday. Individual meetings to be scheduled earlier in the week with all students.

## WEEK 14: Screening Sex

Wednesday, December 3<sup>rd</sup> Film Screening: **Shortbus** (Mitchell, 2006), Episode 4 of HBO’s **Looking** (2014)

Nguyen Tan Hoang, “The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star,” in *Porn Studies*, edited by Linda Williams (2004)

Matthew Tinkcom, ““You’ve got to get on to get off”: *Shortbus* and the Circuits of the Erotic,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.3 (2011)

## WEEK 15: Reclaiming the Radical Promise of Queer Culture

Wednesday, December 10<sup>th</sup> Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2013)