

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE

OFF THE STRAIGHT & NARROW:
LESBIANS, GAYS, BISEXUALS & TELEVISION

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content—and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them—the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We've also set it up to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video's sections with a series of discussion questions.

Discussion Questions provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

OVERVIEW

How are we to make sense of the transformation in gay representation – from virtual invisibility before 1970 to the "gay chic" of today? *Off the Straight & Narrow* is the first in-depth documentary to cast a critical eye over the growth of gay images on TV. Leading media scholars provide the historical and cultural context for exploring the social implications of these new representations. This video challenges viewers to consider the value and limits of available gay images: who is represented, what they get to say, and how people respond to them. The video is an invaluable tool for all educators interested in introducing students to issues of representation and diversity in the media.

PRE-VIEWING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are stereotypes? What kinds of stereotypes do people associate with gays, lesbians and bisexuals? Should we do away with stereotypes, and if so, how might GLBs be represented?
2. What do we think of as "positive images?" What would "positive" lesbian, gay, and bisexual images look, sound and act like?
3. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of only showing "positive images" of gay people?

THE EARLY YEARS

- The 1960's were a time of political ferment. The movements for civil rights, women's liberation, and the end of the Vietnam War were profoundly disruptive to a society emerging from the seeming consensus of the late 1950's. As television scrambled to catch up with the pace of social change the growing visibility of gay rights activism could no longer be ignored.
- On June 9th in 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village. Sick of ongoing police harassment and facing another round of arrests, drag queens, butch dykes, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals responded with force. Rioting continued for three days and the next month the Gay Liberation Front was founded.
- The 1970's saw the America Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders and anti-gay statutes were revoked in many states. A vibrant gay culture, long thriving behind closed doors made its way into the view of mainstream America.
- Disco especially made television makers realize what gay culture could offer to the mainstream. Single gay characters began to appear more frequently to spice up the everyday lives of straight television casts. But such gains in visibility did not come without cost. A conservative backlash was ignited by the threat that new gay images posed to the traditional view of America.
- Between the late sixties and the early eighties, gay images moved from complete invisibility toward a contested presence on television. Little did people realize however that an epidemic was on the horizon, which would thrust homosexuality into the media spotlight, often with troubling consequences.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are today's images of gay people similar to those of the late 1960s and 1970s? In what ways are they different?
2. Do we see the changes as progress? Why or why not?

UNDER THE SKIN

- The AIDS crisis presented television with a number of challenges: How to accurately report the epidemic, how to talk about HIV transmission, and how to promote strategies to limit its spread? On all fronts television failed. Producers, always concerned about advertising revenues, worried that audiences would recoil from a discussion of gay men and sex.
- Six thousand people had died before something dramatic forced the media to recognize the impact of AIDS.
- More sympathetic portrayals of gay men with AIDS tended to be set almost exclusively in white upper-middle class families. This made it difficult to see the real diversity of people with AIDS.
- With a few exceptions television's reluctant tackling of the AIDS epidemic tended to reproduce conventional ways of talking about gays as isolated, as victims, or as villains. Yet, ironically AIDS forced producers to deal more consistently with gay people in both news and entertainment television.

Discussion Question

- In what ways might we imagine a more inclusive representation of HIV+ people and people with AIDS? What dominant television ideologies would need to shift in order for this to be possible?

SAINTS, SINGLES & CELIBATES

- As AIDS increased the visibility of gay people on television, advertisers began to target the homosexual community as a profitable market. Gay television characters moved to greater visibility in TV movies, dramas, and sitcoms. The question shifted from concerns about invisibility to who gay characters were allowed to be and what they were allowed to do.
- Television producers dealt with a potential threat posed by depicting gay life on TV by creating saintly gay characters who were almost too good to be true.
- The creation of gay saints involved maintaining the taboo on touching. While passion and sexuality are a taken for granted part of the heterosexual television world, gay characters are presented as devoid of desire and lacking physical intimacy.
- As a result of renewed gay activism, and marketers' recognition of gay consumers, the visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals has significantly increased. However, the need not to alienate mainstream audiences means that gay characters are portrayed in the least threatening ways – as feminine, non-sexual, and isolated. Yet because there are so few homosexual images, gay audiences often identify with shows that include them. But what about audiences who see themselves as neither straight nor gay? What images can they identify with?

Discussion Question

- What are some of the limitations placed upon lesbians, gays and bisexuals when they appear in contemporary dramas and sitcoms? What do these limitations protect the television world from?

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

- Bisexuality presents a particular challenge to television producers, used to dealing with clear distinctions between straight and gay. Gay people of color also blur the boundaries of television's conventional ways of talking about sexuality.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are bisexual characters most often portrayed as youthful, indecisive, or in crisis?
2. Why are bisexuals so rarely represented on US television?

DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY

- The increase in gay images on television has meant the increase of white lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. So who is left out of these images? What might they have to say?
- Recent years have seen the development of more racially diverse gay roles. Which frequently offer more complex portrayals of many depictions of white gay characters.
- Spin City offers us the most developed recurring gay character on television. Not only is Carter Haywood African-American and gay, he is also portrayed as political, and as having, if intermittently, a romantic life.
- While these portrayals of gay people of color offer us some of the most three-dimensional characters, they are still a small part of an already underrepresented group.
- As a commercial medium, television privileges whiteness and wealth. It is not surprising then, that the most high-profile coming out of the late 1990s was by Ellen Degeneres.

Discussion Question

- How is the concept of "diversity" usually handled by television shows? In what ways do the Latino and African American characters discussed in the video (Pedro Zamora in *The Real World*, Ricky Vasquez in *My So-Called Life* and Carter Heywood in *Spin City*) challenge television's usual ways of talking about diversity?

ASSIMILATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

- Ellen was one of the few gay television characters allowed to have a romantic life. Network anxiety about this has been one reason suggested for the show's cancellation.
- A double standard was imposed on the Ellen show by nervous ABC executives. What was considered "adult content" on Ellen was mild compared with the sexual activities frequently represented on other prime time sitcoms.
- Amidst the Ellen controversy, another news story broke that showed how superficial progress in gay representations has been. Coverage of the murder of fashion designer Gianni Versace by Andrew Cunanan resurrected the stereotype of the gay psycho killer.
- Prime time images of gays have been at the center of most controversy. Yet lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences have found in sometimes the most unexpected places, images of their lives, which offer a vital form of validation and pleasure.

Discussion Questions

1. Does *Ellen* represent progress in gay television representations? Discussions of *Ellen* often go quickly to the assertion by straight audiences that the show was cancelled because it was "not funny any more."
2. Compare representations on *Ellen* to the media coverage of Andrew Cunanan's murder of Gianni Versace, both occurring in 1997. Did it matter that Cunanan was a "gay serial killer"?

VITAL SIGNS

- Young gay people grow up in enemy territory, indeed their immediate families may be the most hostile to their sexuality. Gay youth are three times as likely to commit suicide than their straight peers, and often suffer isolation and harassment. Television images offer a crucial lifeline for people craving to know that there are others in the world like themselves.
- Fiction and news programs are not the only places where gay images exist. Other genres, such as music videos, cartoons, and sports, can offer more open spaces for different kinds of sexual identification.
- Occasional images of gay consumers can also be found in commercials.
- Some ads are carefully coded to suggest a gay theme to gay audiences, while remaining innocuous to heterosexual viewers.
- Lesbians, gays and bisexuals can make television relevant then, even in the absence of explicit images. Gay audiences have long been casting an ironic eye over the sexual stereotypes of mainstream television, and have been re-reading same-sex friendships as romantic involvements. Such strategies can continue to offer a place for identification in a medium, which still minimizes gay experience and culture.
- By the late 1990s, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are no longer invisible on television. But gay characters are still expected to exist in a straight world, as a foil for others' anxiety, sympathy or humor. Few shows are willing to consider the real challenge gay perspectives pose to the mainstream, to questions of identity, gender, and sexuality as well as to conventional family life. To include the broad range of lesbian, gay, and bisexual experience, would demand that television expand its range of who it validates as fully human.

Discussion Questions

1. Does it matter if gays are on TV? In what ways might it matter, and for whom? Would more gay images automatically be an improvement?
2. What do we mean by queer readings? Why might these be important to lesbian, bisexual and gay audiences? If there were a plethora of lesbian, gay and bisexual images, would queer readings become obsolete?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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[See also Riggs, M. (1991) *Color Adjustment*. San Francisco: California Newsreel. Video: 88 mins. While Riggs does not deal here with gay images at all, his analysis of positive African American images provides a useful framework to consider positive images of gay people.]

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