JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Gooey connections: A little detour en route

by Special Section editor [Joëlle Rouleau](#)

There is a fuss (and a fuss yet to be made!) around queer media, and I embrace it as I edit this special section on Queer TV for *Jump Cut.*

To my mind, "queer" is an amorphous goo that you cannot hold or control, that seeps into everything —it is both a deeply bad and good word. I love "goo" because it is profoundly playful, and profoundly gross. Goo sums up the stickiness, the slipperiness of boundaries, the ambiguity and tension that make up queer culture, since "queer" now encompasses issues of identity, gender, theory, politics, and culture. As a cultural studies scholar, I find it antithetical to try to integrate queer culture within a predetermined methodological or theoretical conceptualization. Why try and pin down goo? Thus, I use the term "queer sensibilities" (Muñoz 2009, Nash 2010) or "queerity" (Nowlan, 2010) to describe what I mean when I talk about queerness. This not only allows for an extensive and shifting conception of that culture, but it also underscores a need to refrain from establishing what is or is not queer, what does or does not belong to the goo. In my writing and my teaching, I try to interrogate what viewers and researchers of various mediatic forms might perceive of or read as "queer". The notion of "sensibilities" allows me to consider the multiple dimensions of identity which inevitably accompany how we as media viewers (and researchers) position ourselves when thinking about representations of ourselves and our communities.

I am reluctant to ask whether a media representation is faithful to a specific identity category or not. I find that such identity categories collapse under a signifier such as LGBTQ+. Consequently, that signifier becomes a placeholder for neoliberal, value-hungry strategies to reify the inclusion of sexual diversity, in particular in media representations. Furthermore, an emergence of politically correct[1] discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ themes and representations indicates yet again the rigidity, orthodoxy, and superficiality of the current acceptance of LGBTQ+ realities (the anti-goo!). Of course, socially, I advocate for the development of open, sensible, and progressive measures to work toward a better, more inclusive world. But I question the ideological motivations underlying what has quickly become an abundance of queer representations, especially on television. There is a saying in my own Québécois French: "Trop, c'est comme pas assez," or, "too much is the same as not enough". This abundance of representation speaks to an innate bias against its own absence and lack: a hyper(in)visibility[2].

This special section seeks to question the representations, receptions, perverse readings (Staiger, 2000) and fan creations around the so-called LGBTQ+ spectrum in audiovisual media. I see this collection of essays as a probing of/for queer sensibilities. Collectively, we wish to explore the aesthetic and narrative forms of the various cultural objects selected here in a way that asks *Jump Cut* readers to interrogate what these objects produce, both in terms of visibilities and invisibilities. Moreover, taken together, these essays allow readers to think about methodologies in queer media studies, and they encourage readers to compare how the authors' queer sensibilities relate to their unique objects of study.

Queer sensibilities

As a good "lezzer," I absolutely despise stand-up comedy. When Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* came out on Netflix, numerous friends, colleagues and students enthusiastically encouraged me to watch. "But I hate stand-up comedy!", or so I thought. It was only one night, when I found myself lonely, tired, and dispirited, that I reluctantly decided to give Gadsby a try.

I laughed, I cried—so much that it hurt. My reaction as a viewer sent me spinning over my own life and choices. Something happened that I hadn't expected: I felt that Gadsby was queering stand-up comedy in a way I had never seen before. It's not about her feminist jokes or her queerness: it has to do with her approach to comedy itself. Gadsby exposes the power dynamics which enable comedy to function culturally. She takes the box consisting of stand-up comedy and folds it in on itself:

> "Let me explain to you what a joke is. And when you strip it back to its bare essential… components, like, its bare minimum, a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punch line. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is, is a question that I have artificially inseminated. Tension. I do that, that's my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you're like, '"Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense."' I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship. Do you know why I'm such a funny fucker? Do you? It's because, you know, I've been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a children [sic]. Back then it wasn't a job, wasn't even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I was the tension." (Gadsby, *Nanette*, 2018)

For Gadsby, to queer stand-up is to no longer be the butt of the joke, but to queer the set up. I love to laugh, and I am a great audience, but my ability to endure teasing and making fun of someone's experiences (for whatever reason) is shortened by the years of homophobic bullying I experienced as a queer kid. Today, as a queer feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2016) my relationship to comedy is complicated, because my ability to access most stand-up is shaped by that experience. When Gadsby engages with this trope of the humorless lesbian feminist ("What sort of comedian can't even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever" [Gadsby, 2018]), she is also acknowledging that something is rotten at the core of stand-up comedy. Queer communities are resplendent with humor—queers love to laugh and to tease, just check out your local drag show, for example—but mainstream stand-up comedy often uses denigration and humiliation as a lever and a tactic of tension and diffusion.

Gadsby is well aware of this, and she uses our expectations of comedic tension to explore what it means to use self-deprecating humor as a queer, marginalized individual. Before watching *Nanette*, I was not aware that this is exactly what I do when I teach and when I write. When I crack a joke (which is admittedly not my forte), I humiliate myself as terrain for my queer pedagogy. Engaging with Gadsby's stand-up made me realize what I had been doing for years: making myself small to make the lessons clear, more accessible, and less dangerous. I soften the edges of my queerness so as not to offend their lack of queer sensibilities, and in doing so I undermine myself.

Since watching Gadsby's stand-up, my teaching practice has changed, almost without trying. I don't know if it's for the better, but I know that I feel more comfortable owning my queerness: how I look, what I say, how I feel, who I am is no longer something that I wish to degrade.

This is how I engage my own queer sensibilities with *Nanette*. I describe this experience to indicate what I think these queer sensibilities might mean, and why I am focusing on this framework in assembling this special section on queer TV. To me, queer sensibilities are the state of being both angry and hopeful, loving and enraged. A queer sensibility contains all of these complicated and overwhelming feelings simultaneously, all of the time. Politically and emotionally, a queer sensibility means not giving up because the world is doomed, but not trying to fix it by patching holes in a sinking boat, either.

Queer sensibilities give us historical flexibility. As Bob Nowlan put it, queer becomes a doing more than simply a way of being:

> "For queer theorists, 'queer' is, therefore, not so much an adjective or a noun that refers to the broad array of contemporary lesbigay identities, but rather a verb that marks out a shifting field of gender and sexual discourses and practices that work 'to queer' both the straight and the lesbigay. This queering, in other words, proceeds by taking up the position and the interest of those who occupy the sexual margins of mainstream lesbigay sub-cultures as well as the far fringes of dominant-straight-culture. In sum, it is not a question of being queer but rather of doing queer." (Nowlan, 2010: 9)

This special section aims to study the queering of media, the doing of queer, much more than it wishes to study media considered queer or featuring queer representations. I do not want to offer readers a more complex label of some aspect of gender identity; that would be paradoxical. Rather I would like this collection of essays to contribute to subverting and challenging established norms of media production and reception. Such innovations in media scholarship are made possible through our very own queer sensibilities, and I invite you to bring your own to this work.

Queering television as queering media

This collection began with a Queer Television Conference I co-organized with my colleague Marta Boni at the University of Montréal in May 2019. The conference and the experience of editing this special section revealed to me that queer television is intertwined with many other types of media. Of course, many papers here focus on television shows—from animation to documentary, independent to mainstream fiction productions, even talk shows and soaps. But the limits of genre are not clearly defined/definable: is Netflix television or Internet streaming? Do we define Internet streaming through its relation to television? If Netflix, Crave, Prime Video, Hulu, Open Television, or any other streaming platform could broaden our understanding of television, then is a movie produced by such a platform effectively a made-for-TV movie? Or is it something else entirely?

The array of work published here, the amalgam of different objects of study and different levels of focus, may seem too inclusive. However, the assortment of writings reflects my conviction that many older and newer manifestations of media production now fit best under the rubric of television, since television has always shown the potential to bend the frame of its own box (terrible pun intended, and now you know why I don't make jokes!). As evidenced in the categories listed in the Table of Contents, this vision of television as a "gooey" genre has shaped my mapping of the material at hand. Television is at the center of this special section, but film and video game studies come into our orbit as well.

Queer television

In the introduction to *The Queer Art Of Failure*, Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of high/low theory resists binary opposition to suggest that these theories depend upon each other as a "model of thinking" (2011: 15). Halberstam extracts this useful modus operandi from Stuart Hall's assertion that "theory is not an end unto itself but 'a detour en route to something else'" (Hall, 1991: 43) (2011: 15). In my own work, I have found that there is something about television studies that is more permeable than any other media scholarship, especially if we have a flexible concept of television as

integrating networks, web series, streaming platforms, cinema and video games. Television—"c'est tout et rien". That is to say, it is everything and nothing, at the same time. It is a medium, a technology, an apparatus; it's also a platform, a narrative art, a system, and an industry.

The essays in this special section also bear the burden of asking, "Can television be queer? What would that look like?" The range of issues raised within this collection emerge from observing new tendencies—especially the proliferation of LGBTQ+ characters on television—which increase the visibility and necessary debates surrounding the queerness of specific shows, series, personalities, characters, etc. This line of reasoning seems simultaneously progressive and regressive, as corporations regularly appropriate "subversive" representations for their profit-making potential (Himberg, 2018) by taming them and thus erasing their disruptive elements. From one standpoint, homonormative narratives shape what is understood as queer representation: we hope for inclusion, love, and diversity by portraying attractive narratives of successful queer love/life stories. By contrast, an alternative reading of non-LGBTQ+ narratives emerges as fan fiction is queering hetero/homo/normative representations. How can queer television's usefulness to corporate media allow for increased production of LGBTQ+ representations? Can television hold space for complexity? Does TV drive social change, especially in terms of gender? Or, as Quinn Miller argues, does queerness lie outside a show's dominant narrative (Miller, 2019)? Where might queerness be located in or beyond overtly LGBTQ+ content?

Queer film

The lines of genre between film and television are increasingly blurred, and with that, so too are the distinctions between different forms of media scholarship. However, film and film studies in particular have something to contribute to our discussion of queer television: in the '90s, New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992) offered an extensive and shifting, even malleable, way of thinking about queer events on screen. B. Ruby Rich identifies the birth of New Queer Cinema (NQC) at the intersection of four elements: the AIDS crisis, the Reagan era, camcorders, and cheap rent (Rich 2013, p. xvi). Almost 40 years later—that is, 40 years of globalization, neoliberalism and Trumpist political paranoia culminating in a global pandemic—we are galaxies away from queer cinema's original media environment or social context.

Today we find multitudes of explicit LGBTQ+ representation in the media since the inception of New Queer Cinema. B. Ruby Rich argues there is little relevance for such a term, since the genre itself has lost some of its edge. Rich writes: "[...] in truth, [NQC] had begun to shapeshift during the mid- to late 1990s into a launching pad for temporarily bankable movies to usher into the multiplexes (p. xxii)". As Rich observes, the attraction to gay-related themes in cinema shifted exhibition away from counter-hegemonic productions and visibility. Even so, queer cinema still exists, but its "constellation" needs to be rethought. At the moment, we have a "being" of queer cinema (television and media). I'm suggesting that we could have a "doing" of queer cinema (television and media). Instead of interrogating what a film portrays, research informed by this approach could focus on how film interacts with the social, cultural, and political power relations around it. If we think of cinema now in terms of queer sensibilities, queer cinema enables a disruption, a subversion. It aims to break from a conventional representation of sexuality. It breaks up the dichotomy of gay/straight themes and (re)makes them its own. Queer cinema moves away from the dichotomy of being either "good" or "bad" for the community. Queer cinema embraces the harshness of being an outcast because of one's sexuality, gender identity, or gender expression, or any combination of these.

Queering everything here

"Queer TV" features a vast scope of disciplines, objects of study, research interests, and analytical methodologies. In putting all of this material together, I decided to imagine the layout of articles and book reviews like a map. I think of that mapping not so much in terms of discursive or epistemological delimitations, but as territories sharing common boundaries, even overlapping in some places. As I will explain below, this map draws links between the 19 articles, six book reviews, and two interviews that comprise the special section. I have grouped the papers according to seven lines of inquiry:

- *ambiguities*
- *trans-iting*
- *camp*
- *pedagogy*
- *reality TV*
- *politics*
- *film & TV*

These categories demand the reader understands queerly. Categories create meaning and must be subverted in order to allow for these meanings to emerge fully.

Ambiguities
Our first cluster of articles explore the challenges and complexities of queer television. Mainly articulated around mainstream US productions, this subsection addresses issues of identity, identity politics, closeted identities, visibility, queerbaiting, boundaries, and of course, ambiguity. The authors of this subsection find intricacy in the spaces between the margins and the norm, between visibility and identity, between coming out and coming in. Ambiguity here aims to rest in an inter-binary positionality that enables us to rethink these poles, no longer taken as references in terms of identity, but as possible fluctuations of binary tensions which point to new possibilities. What might emerge if we rest in the in-between? The section includes articles by Lynne Joyrich on *Batwoman*; Kinga Erzepki on *Billions*; Jordan Z. Adler on *Transparent*; Lauren Herold on the persona of Queen

Latifah; Sarah E. S. Sinwell on *BoJack Horseman*, and finally a book review written by Christina Hodel on queerbaiting (Brennan, 2019). Ambiguities share a territoriality with the following subsection, "trans-iting", and as such, I locate ambiguities as a compass for our queer sensibilities.

Trans-iting

I titled this section "trans-iting" because I want to underscore that transness (and studies around it) is constantly in motion. Trans isn't only an identity, a concept, or a point of activism; articles about trans characters, films, and television productions are found throughout the entire special section, as transness itself moves across landscapes, and permeates borders, shapeshifts. This subsection specifically refers to transition through the lenses of TV studies, literature studies, film studies, video games studies, fan studies, trans perspectives, trans utopias, trans-normativities, non-disclosure, trans children and so on. "Trans-iting" begins with an interview I conducted with Jack Halberstam on Queer Television, seriality, and queer and trans representation. The subsection also includes Deborah Shaw and Rob Stone's paper on *Sense8*; Toni Pape on stealth gameplay; Mary Zabroskis on *I Am Jazz*, and Beck Banks' book review on queer and trans struggle and the need for the "ordinary" (Cavalcante 2018).

Camp

Dear to queer and trans communities, camp plays a major role within queer sensibilities. Here, we analyze manifestations of camp in documentary and on mainstream TV. With a historical perspective on such representations, "Camp" discusses questions of archives, in/visibility, and the mise en scène of camp characters. Sid Cunningham's work on *Disclosure* offers a camp perspective on trans media. The author engages the ambiguity between distorted binary positions and offers a reconciliation between the pain and pleasure suggested by mainstream visual representations. Katharine Mussellam reviews Quinn Miller's groundbreaking book, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Television History* (2019), and Astrid Fellner takes a camp Latinx perspective on *Ugly Betty* and *One Day at a Time*.

Pedagogy

Many queer kids, myself included, learned about their queerness through television. Television teaches us through its display of underrepresented subjects and themes, but also through an exploration of various possible identities. Alexis Poirier-Saumure considers Ava Laure Parsemain's *The Pedagogy of Queer TV* (a theoretical text referenced throughout this collection) to reveal how television both succeeds and fails to be a nuanced queer teacher, changing our relation to ourselves in the process. In looking at *Sex Education* and *Schitt's Creek*, Tanya Horeck finds that both shows encourage a pedagogical responsibility within mainstream television. And finally, three filmmakers— Beck Banks, Miche Dreiling, and myself—discuss queer/trans filmmaking as a form of pedagogical engagement. Pedagogy gives us a real-life takeaway from mediatic forms of representation.

Reality TV

So far, most of the work referenced focuses on explicitly fictional queer representations. By contrast, reality TV occupies a unique historical position when it comes to queer television, as it challenges some of the boundaries traditionally separating media and spectators. Sean Donovan (*Ru Paul's Drag Race*) and Philippa Orme (*Are You the One*) both explore current reality TV productions in their papers which study the intricate and delicate relations between a show, its audience, and their strange mainstream/counter-mainstream, ambivalent *liaisons*. The authors ask, what utopic possibilities appear in the disruption of queer identities as staged through reality TV?

Politics

Debates rage as to whether queerness is always political, and two papers in particular embrace this question head-on. Grace Jung discusses homophobia, policies, and discrimination in South Korea through the lens of the show *Ask Us Anything*. In the Canadian context, Ryan Conrad explores the importance of archives when it comes to queer histories, AIDS, and media productions by revisiting the *Toronto Living with AIDS* cable access project through detailed archival work.

Film & TV

As demonstrated earlier, film and television are queerly related. Film and television feed off one another; rather than being opposed, they represent a continuity of ideas and sensibilities. This subsection features two papers, one by Yaghma Kaby and the other by Patrick Woodstock, which look at continuities vis-à-vis *Hannibal* and its adaptation from book to film to television. *Hannibal* is a key text for discussion because it moves across numerous media platforms, and in this iteration, transforms from a homophobic and transphobic text in the hands of a queer fan (in this case, its showrunner, Bryan Fuller).

In the same subsection, Nicole Morse and Lauren Herold discuss Mulvey's "male gaze" in relation to a possible "female" or "trans" gaze by summoning Jack Halberstam, Joey Soloway, Todd Haynes, Barry Jenkins, and the popular sci-fi series *Black Mirror*. Also deeply rooted in a film theory tradition, Yaghma Kaby offers a book review on horror and television from the 1950s to the present in relation to psychoanalytic film theory, as well as gender- and class-based film theory. Teresa Caprioglio gives a detailed analysis of *Veronica Mars* and the series' regendering of film noir in its television adaptation. And finally, Jenée Wilde explores the paradox of science fiction, film, queer representation, the transgender "look", and intersex individuals by concentrating on the film *Predestination* (Spierig and Spierig 2014).

"Yeah, but we also want them to fuck!"

You might notice that there is barely any mention of sex in this collection. Absent from these multiple, varied, and highly nuanced texts is an extended discussion of sexuality. I find this to be an egregious act when working with queer theory.

Given that the authors of all of the submissions I received are so hyperaware of the explosion of LGBTQ+ representation in the media, I was initially surprised and dismayed that not one of the pieces tackled the flourishing evidence of traces of queer sexuality on television. But then I began to realize that this silence is rife with possibilities for analysis. I would like to offer some of my own thoughts on this subject.

As Jane Arthurs states, tradition centers television at the heart of the household, and television, in turn, centers tradition:

> "Explicit representations of heterosexual activity, or even the mention of other more 'deviant' sexual behaviors, were unthinkable for a medium that transmitted the core values of the society from the public domain into the private sphere of the family home." (Arthurs, 2004: 2)

At the same time, representation and visibility of sexuality transform the televisual apparatus in multiple ways, from sex scandals to pornography. They also transform queer publics.

Alongside the rise of LGBTQ+ visibility, there has been a concurrent rise of homophobic, transphobic and misogynistic hatred. Visibility is not value-neutral, nor free from the structures that govern our current realities, and television is no exception. Of course, this is not to imply that increased representation is not important, nor is it the cause of this increased violence. As many queers would probably attest, representation on television can be a lifeline, but the sad reality is that it can also result in death threats (some of these ideas are discussed in this collection, see Banks, Dreiling and Rouleau).

Our political climate contributes to this tension. On the one hand, fierce conservatives rail against what they call "liberal suppression", claiming that queer and gender studies are not real studies, but a leftwing ideology that censors the expression of real (read: white) men and women. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, a stratagem for neoliberalism better known as "pinkwashing" begets the token incorporation of LGBTQ+ signifiers, but also represses any meaningful discussion of queer sexuality—even as it allows for better inclusion of queer people in the workplace, schools, and possibly family life (at least in North American social life). These two seemingly disparate political stances ultimately make the same argument: queer sex shouldn't be televised.

For example, the #MeToo movement was (and still is) a major development in the television, film, and video game industries, despite being co-opted from its roots in Black women's communities. It clearly demonstrates the sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia are deeply rooted in our media industries and representations. As Robin James notes in a discussion of Laura Mulvey's emblematic "Visual Pleasure",

> "both in art and IRL [in real life], things like sexism, racism, ableism, all that–they hide behind habits and techniques of seeing / 'seeing'-as-metaphor-for-knowing that build a fourth wall. These habits and techniques make humanly constructed phenomena (like misogyny, sexist treatments of women characters, the tendency to kill off lesbian characters in TV shows, etc. etc.) appear as natural and true, as accurate reflections of how things really are. (James, 2016)"

In other words, how the industry functions is directly connected to the representations that are produced by/within it. By celebrating the expanded queer representations in mainstream media, we, as scholars, have fallen into a self-serving pattern of discourse. That is, by avoiding an extensive discussion of non-normative sexuality whilst celebrating a more "diverse" realm of representation, we give in to harmful conservative discourses about queer sexualities. If we are not talking about queer sex, not showing it on screen, not renewing shows that depict it, and not addressing it in its complexity, we are contributing to a cultural stalemate regarding sexual oppression. Our silence around the lack of representation of queer sexual expression becomes critical avoidance, the consequences of which include sexualized violence against queer and trans people.

What else is at stake with this absence of sex? What does this sanitization imply?

In their book *#NSFW, Sex, Humor, And Risk in Social Media*, Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light explore the regulation of sexuality within social media as hidden behind the hashtag *Not Safe for Work* (#NSFW). They argue that,

> "This practice of conflating safety with the filtering of sexual content both builds on and bolsters an understanding of sex and sexuality as inherently risky, potentially harmful, and best hidden away and left unmentioned." (2019, p.10)

In absenting sexuality within this special section, we too neutralize the "dangerousness" of queer sexuality. Let's not forget how the AIDS pandemic also reinforced a safety discourse surrounding queer sex[3]. For years, society at large did not discuss sex and/as pleasure, that is sex as creative and imaginative, but instead portrayed it as dangerous, life-threatening, and contagious. We are witnessing a contemporary version of this view of sex as what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis" and its "perverse implantation" (1994). That is to say, we suppress sexuality within the discourse while concurrently creating a way to talk about it without actually talking about it.

Put bluntly, "queer" stripped of sex is a new form of puritanism. Too often we make an overly simplistic analogy wherein any non-heteronormative representation is read as queer. What we fail to acknowledge as queer theorists of television is that this increased representation reproduces homonormativity when TV strives to present "queer" as safe and devoid of sex. This is also true of scholarship when we strip subversively queer sexual representation down to homonormative tropes

in order to make queer sex seem safe, nice, and acceptable, even desirable to a voyeuristic straight eye. Regrettably, this special section is no exception.

> To conclude, I've taken the liberty to open up this discussion in my introduction because the essays collected in this special section contribute to interrogating queer and television scholarships in so many ways. It is in this kind of theoretical space that we can challenge how we engage with queer sexuality on screen. As James mentions,

> "Mulvey's idea of the fourth wall and its role in film illustrates something that also happens in mainstream notions of politics, society, and government: when we focus just on individuals as they are in the present, we build a fourth wall that obscures histories and ongoing material practices/habits that shape reality in unequal, biased ways."

By understanding and dismantling the fourth wall through a broader contextualization of where we come from, we will have a better idea of where we are now—and perhaps even a say in mapping out where we are going.

Notes

1. I use this term willfully to put into question its pejorative use by conservatives to discredit leftist critiques of the lack of representation of diversity. I think it is undeniable that a form of "PC culture" exists. I don't believe it's rooted in activism. To me, it is a mean**s** for capitalist profits; an instrumentalization that glosses over issues of marginalization in order to pique public interest. I will expand on this further in my introduction.

2. I am referring here to this hypervisibility of LGBTQ+ storylines and characters creating a sort of saturation: not of queer images flooding visual culture but of what they could be of instead. I argue that this hypervisibility creates a sort of invisibility regarding the complexity of queer identities.

3. The SILENCE = DEATH Project comes to mind (Finkelstein, Howard, Johnston, Kreloff, Lione, and Socarrás, 1987), and its visual is still a symbol of queerness today.

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