

**MA Major Research Paper**

**'Positive' Images?: A Critical Examination of Queer Visibility in  
Contemporary Popular Culture**

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## Introduction

The past five decades have seen a marked increase in attention to, and representations of, queer people in mainstream popular culture. Within the last ten years, several films and television programs featuring gay men and lesbians have garnered critical acclaim and high ratings among diverse audiences and myriad companies have incorporated queer imagery into their advertising campaigns. Despite fervent protests from socially conservative organizations, this trend shows no signs of abating.

Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for civil rights protection and bestow a sense of empowerment upon those who have lived without any validation from the dominant culture (Hennessy), and as such it has long been a salient political issue for marginalized identity-based groups seeking inclusion and social change. While queer (or 'homophile', as they were then known) organizations existed in the 1940s and '50s, they were staunchly veiled in secrecy lest their members be persecuted as criminal, mentally ill, or politically subversive. The Stonewall riots of 1969 served as a catalyst for a new movement founded on visibility, in which 'coming out' as gay or lesbian came to be understood as both a public and individual act (quintessentially expressing the then-radical fusion of the personal and the political). The growth of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s were important turning points in the fight for mainstream media recognition.

Post-Stonewall, the discourse around queer representation has been dominated by the 'positive images' approach, which presumes a direct correlation between 'affirmative' depictions of queer people in popular culture and legal equality. Most contemporary queer media criticism and activism is based on this premise. This paper is broadly concerned with the political efficacy of the queer visibility project in contemporary popular culture. More specifically, I will explore the philosophical underpinnings and historical development of this strategy, the merits and limitations of the positive images approach, the queer movement's relationship to commodity capitalism, and some alternative, non-commercial routes to cultural visibility.

While the term 'queer' carries several meanings, it will be used here to denote the experiences of those on the margins of heteronormativity (the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem privileged and coherent [Berlant and Warner]). Those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited or questioning are included in this category. Although I recognize that most of the representations in contemporary popular culture deal only with gay and lesbian people and are hence only partially 'queer', the term nevertheless reflects the political concerns that inform my analysis.

## Chapter 1

### Queer Identity, Visibility and Representation in Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Popular Culture

The emergence of a political movement based on a distinct queer identity is firmly rooted in the liberal capitalist tradition, as is the strategic necessity for cultural visibility. While 'coming out' has come to constitute the first step towards visibility for individual queer people, the movement has placed a great deal of importance on representations of queer identities in popular culture (newspapers, film, television, and advertising). In order to understand the complexities of the current queer cultural visibility project, it is helpful to review the movement's involvement with various media since its inception in the 1950s.

The notion of a distinct 'gay identity', defined by Alexandra Chasin in Selling Out as "a kind of self-understanding, a description of an entire persona named for, or understood through, the practice of homosexuality" (11), is a product of modern economic and political conditions. As historian John D'Emilio argues in "Capitalism and Gay Identity", there have always been same-sex sexual practices, but it was not until the dawn of industrial capitalism that the idea of a coherent identity based on these practices gained currency (it should be noted that 'identity' is itself is a modern invention—as the private family ceased to be the primary site of economic production, the consequent separation of personal life from production gave rise to the view that human beings, and human relationships, are ends in themselves). As cities filled with independent

wage earners who placed importance on personal, affective experience, it became possible for homosexuals to locate other people who built their identities on the same basis and to meet with them in relative anonymity.

As George Chauncey suggests in Gay New York, the construction of this new identity was reinforced through public acts of consumption. Bars, theatres, restaurants, and other commercial establishments became locus points for nascent urban queer communities. This is not unique to the queer community, of course; commercial life has long been instrumental to the formation of modern social identities. As Don Slater notes in Consumer Culture and Modernity, consumerism represents the “pre-eminent social training ground” for the production of liberal individualist ethics (61). These ethics have shaped contemporary ideas about identity and civil rights, and thus deserve closer scrutiny.

The “indissolubility of citizenship and property” (Chasin 4) is a fundamental principle of liberalism. John Locke, one of the chief architects of the liberal tradition, argued that the individual constitutes the basic unit of social life, and that the individual’s chief right is that of the possession of the body and its labours (and, potentially, the right to the bodily labours of others). Not surprisingly, the development of the homophile movement around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a distinctively American emphasis on possessive individualism. Chasin writes:

Arising...in an age and place of liberalism, the movement held at a premium the right of individuals to possess a (homo)sexuality. Whether conceived as an identity feature or a behavior, (homo)sexuality is always conceptually located in the body. Because the body is private property, as

long as it properly contains its sexuality within a domestic sphere, what is at stake, according to liberal logic, is the right to privacy. Of course, the right to privacy (and to homosexuality) must be won in the public sphere—in the courts and the legislature, in the media, in “public” opinion (15).

Identity is thus conceived as a personal possession deserving of legal protection.

In Up from Invisibility, Larry Gross describes the homophile movement’s burgeoning emphasis on individual rights. As organizations like the Mattachine Society grew throughout the 1950s and 1960s, they “expanded and deepened self-awareness of lesbian and gay people as a distinct, self-conscious, and embattled minority” (23) in need of deliverance from medical, legal, and cultural oppression. Accordingly, “the drive for the full range of the benefits and privileges of citizenship has always been present, if not dominant...since the 1950s” (Chasin 17).

As noted, ‘identity’ is conceived as a possession that is rooted in the body, rendering it private and presumably unseen. In order to establish and protect this identity through public means, it must somehow be made apparent. The necessity for public recognition of this private ‘possession’ has resulted in the queer movement’s emphasis on cultural visibility. There is no other way for a largely invisible minority to obtain civil rights within a liberal democracy than by coalescing into a group and making themselves seen. The act of coming out (declaring one’s sexual identity to oneself, friends, family and the world at large) constitutes the first step on the road to visibility, and it has become a core narrative of queer life since the practice began in the late 1960s. Unlike other groups who base their identities on visible physical characteristics like ability or

skin colour, queer people generally do not signify their identity visually although it is still considered to be embodied (the popular rhetorical strategy of presenting sexual identity as a social category akin to race is flawed for many reasons, only one of which is this slippage between the visible and the invisible). Coming out makes a hitherto private identity public, and though this action may not carry much political weight on an individual level, it theoretically establishes the conditions for collective action and substantive change.

Most contemporary queer theorists and activists take the need for visibility to be self-evident without discussing the specific political conditions that have made it so important. Nevertheless, they agree that this project is crucial; In All the Rage, Suzanna Danuta Walters writes, “visibility is, of course, necessary for equality. It is part of the trajectory of any movement for inclusion and social change” (13). Gay U.S. Congressman Barney Frank has stressed that “visibility is, in and of itself, cleansing. Because the best antidote to the prejudice is the reality” (quoted in Walters, 51). Rosemary Hennessy states in “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” that visibility can both “prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection” and “empower those of us who have lived most our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture” (31). Larry Gross develops the common ‘visibility = equality’ equation further by presenting a detailed, three-pronged argument in “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media”. Here, Gross asserts that images of queer people in popular culture will proclaim their substantial presence within the population and in so doing disprove the myth that queer people constitute a tiny, insignificant

minority; that images of queer people whose lives are not scandalous will contradict stereotypes that define homosexuality as psychologically and socially deviant; and that visible queer people offer role models to young people who suffer emotional disorders because they are unable or unwilling to conform to heteronormative standards. The writers quoted here differ widely in their approaches to the problem of visibility, but they all agree that it is the best route to both queer self-acceptance and the emancipation from homophobic oppression.

Visibility is both the cause and effect of the growing queer presence in Western culture, and the battle for this visibility has been primarily waged in the realm of popular culture. Newspapers, film, television, and advertising constitute the bulk of our cultural field, and it is important to understand the role that they have influenced and been influenced by the queer movement. As Stuart Hall argues in "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'", "popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also a stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of contest and resistance" (Hall 239). This notion of struggle is important, for pop culture can be a volatile domain; just as visibility has the potential to disrupt accepted beliefs and propose new kinds of categories, it is never out of the reach of dominant forces, since the pop culture arena is "partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall 239).

In order to understand the complexities of the current visibility project, it is helpful to understand how it has been taken up in the past. To this end, I will

provide a brief overview of the queer movement's involvement with popular culture between 1950 and the late 1990s: the inception of the gay press, mainstream print coverage of queer issues from Stonewall to AIDS, and the slow rise of gay-themed film, television and advertising. This is by no means an exhaustive inventory, but rather a survey designed to illustrate the interconnectedness of queer identity, politics, visibility and popular culture in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The queer press was instrumental to the formation of the movement. In Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970, D'Emilio writes, "the pioneering effort to publish magazines about homosexuality brought the gay movement its only significant victory during the 1950s" (15). In Up From Invisibility, Gross describes the Cold War cultural climate in which gay and lesbian people were routinely derided as criminal, mentally ill, morally degenerate threats to national security; during these years, all organizational efforts were understandably veiled in secrecy. One of the first queer magazines, Vice Versa, was produced in 1947 by a 26 year old RKO Studios secretary working clandestinely in her office after hours (Gross 24). According to archivist Jim Kepner, Vice Versa "established the basic format for the general gay magazine—with editorials, with short stories, with poetry, with book and film reviews, and with a letters column"(quoted in Gross, 24). Though Vice Versa had only a very modest distribution and folded after only nine issues, subsequent publications ONE (1953), Mattachine Review (1955) and the Ladder (1956) managed to secure national distribution and had a combined circulation of

about 7,000. Each lasted over a dozen years, weathering attacks from government agencies and officials determined to shut them down (Gross 25).

Although the underground queer press reflected (and helped to create) a self-conscious queer community during the 1950s, queer people and issues tended to be ignored by the mainstream press. When they discussed homosexuality at all, it was always as a legal, medical or social problem and always relied on the testimony of 'experts' in those fields. In 1962, a public radio station in New York City, WBAI-FM, broadcast a program entitled "The Homosexual in America", which featured a panel of heterosexual psychiatrists discussing homosexuality and mental illness. Gross describes the events that followed:

This familiar pattern of talking about gay people rather than allowing them to speak for themselves was one time too many for a young gay activist named Randy Wicker. Wicker marched into the station the next day and demanded equal time. The station program manager agreed to the demand and scheduled a second program, this time featuring Wicker and seven other gay men. The announcement drew ridicule from some in the press...[but] was greeted more favorably by others, such as Jack Gould in the New York Times, who believed it encouraged a "wider understanding of the homosexual's attitudes and problems" (29).

Wicker was eventually interviewed by a reporter for the Times, and although the resulting article was characteristically biased ("Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern"), it nevertheless marked an end to the pervasive silence of queer people in the mainstream press. As the 1960s progressed, many more articles appeared in newspapers and magazines, "many of them echoing the Times' concerns over the growing visibility of gay people" (Gross 31).

Against the backdrop of the civil rights, antiwar and women's movements, the lesbian and gay movement took on an increased fervor during the 1960s. In 1967, a Los Angeles activist took over a movement newsletter, renamed it the Los Angeles Advocate, and the U.S.'s first commercial gay newspaper was born. By the end of its second year, the Advocate had reached a circulation of 23,000 and was distributed in cities across America. The Advocate differed from its conservative, assimilationist predecessors in that it encouraged the movement's newly militant tactics-- in August 1968, patrons of an LA gay bar called the Patch mocked police as they raided the establishment, and the Advocate hailed it as a historic event that signaled "a new era of determined resistance"(Gross 35). And so it was, as the riots at New York City's Stonewall inn were to prove the following year.

On the evening of June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, and the fairly routine incident of police harassment resulted in several nights of rioting by the bar's patrons and their local allies. Not surprisingly, the event was largely ignored by the mainstream press:

Even though the editor on night duty at the New York Times realized that "these guys are fighting the cops for the first time" and dispatched a reporter to the scene, he also knew that the topic of homosexuality was not popular with the top brass. The Times' brief account of the historic event was buried on page 33 and told from the police's perspective. As the riots continued the Times ran a second story the next day, also on page 33, that again focused on the official point of view: "Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths" (Gross 41).

Other New York media were less subtle than the Times, though no more sympathetic to the rioters (a story entitled “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad” the following week in The New York Daily News [Gross 41]).

A rally held in the wake of the riots led to the formation of a new, radical movement modeled after such groups as the Black Panther Party. Activists from newly formed groups like the Gay Liberation Front began to focus on the images presented in the media, and protested magazines and television stations that ran homophobic stories through sit-ins and other disruptions. These initiatives marked the beginning of a new phase of activism that combined consciousness-raising with politicizing tactics. Visibility became a radical imperative in the months following Stonewall, reflected in part by hitherto unheard-of phenomenon of the Gay Pride rally (the first American Gay Pride rally occurred in New York City on the one-year anniversary of the riots, and the first Canadian demonstration took place on Parliament Hill in August, 1971). This new emphasis on visibility did not take place in a vacuum; D’Emilio writes that the necessity to publicly declare one’s queer identity “quintessentially expressed the fusion of the personal and the political that the radicalism of the 1960s exalted” (quoted in Gross, 69). The roots of what came to be called ‘identity politics’ were simultaneously shaping other social movements; in their influential Black Feminist Statement (1977), the Combahee River Collective asserts that “the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody’s else’s oppression” (quoted in

Gross, 69). Maligned as identity politics have become in recent years, this strategy can be viewed as the logical result of American liberal ideology.

Concomitant with the movement's celebration of contemporary queer people's lives was a rediscovery of the stories of the past. Grassroots historical research projects yielded reams of information that was published in the newspapers and journals created by the queer liberation movement. Among these was Toronto's The Body Politic, which Gross lauds as "easily the most sophisticated and ambitious in its intellectual and political scope"(Gross 36). Before The Body Politic, Canada had at least two other short-lived publications (Gay International and Two), neither of which matched The Body Politic's peak circulation of 3,000. The Body Politic published 135 issues between 1971 and 1987, and boasted 80 correspondents from 21 Canadian cities (CBC Archives). Radical journals like The Body Politic and Boston's Gay Community News played a "central role in the emergence of a newly self-confident and visible community"(Gross 37). The movement's political successes (and defeats) were reported in the pages of these journals, while the mainstream press continued to ignore or mock their efforts.

The advent of AIDS in the early 1980s effectively ended the mainstream press's avoidance of queer issues while galvanizing media activists who had grown complacent during the 'golden age' of the 1970s. The queer press played a crucial role in both of these developments. In 1981, gay physician and writer Lawrence Mass had begun a series of articles for the New York Native, a gay newspaper in which he covered health concerns for gay men. Spurred by

rumours of a rare cancer afflicting gay men (Kaposi's sarcoma), Mass consulted the Center for Disease Control and was informed that fears of a 'gay cancer' were unfounded. His article, published in May 18, 1981 in the Native, was to be the first written about the disease now known as AIDS (Gross 95). The following month, the Associated Press picked up an article about the mysterious disease that had been published in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report , and brief pieces appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times. The New York Times ran an article on page 20 in early July 1981, entitled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" (at this point the disease was being called GID—Gay Related Immune Deficiency), and the response from the rest of the mainstream media was "deafening silence" (Gross 95). The article in the Times caught the attention of playwright Larry Kramer, who knew people suffering from Kaposi's sarcoma and who became alarmed by the dimensions of the implied crisis. Kramer assembled a group of friends, and together they established the Gay Men's Health Crisis, the first grassroots AIDS organization, in order to warn gay men about the risks they were facing and to call for medical efforts to investigate and fight the disease. The fact that AIDS appeared to target marginalized groups (gay men, Haitians, and injection drug users), coupled with the homophobia of reporters reluctant to be perceived as 'too' interested in a story deemed to be of queer interest, ensured that the mainstream press did not devote much attention to the epidemic for quite some time. It was not until Rock Hudson's announcement that he was dying of AIDS in the summer of 1985 that the disease finally gained widespread public recognition; the week after he made

his statement, Hudson appeared on the covers of Newsweek, People and Maclean's. Four years after it had emerged, AIDS was finally recognized as a national crisis, though mainstream print media seemed incapable of providing sustained, careful coverage for those actually suffering from HIV. This limitation prompted Kramer to write a series of articles in the Native and, later, the Village Voice in an effort to draw attention to the seriousness of the problem. AIDS was not merely a health crisis, but a political one as well; hostility towards queer people was evident in countless reactionary articles, many of which referred to the disease as 'the gay plague' (Gross 104). Spurred by the New York Post's notorious homophobia, 700 lesbians and gay men convened in 1985 to "express their outrage at the media in general and the New York Post in particular" (Gross 105). In the wake of this meeting, a new organization was formed to confront and educate the media about the concerns of the queer community. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)'s first target was the Post, and their protest campaign eventually resulted in editor Jerry Nachman's 1991 declaration that "we've finally decided to take you guys seriously" (Gross 106). This era also spawned direct-action groups such as the Lavender Hill Mob and the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (widely known by its acronym, ACT-UP). While these groups did receive coverage from mainstream print media, they were usually portrayed as irrational extremists. Despite the myriad limitations of the media coverage (chiefly the vilification of gay men and the occlusion of other queer-identified people), "by the late 1980s the AIDS epidemic had

accomplished something that the lesbian and gay movement had not been able to achieve—the end of gay invisibility in the mass media” (Gross 103).

Despite the widespread assumption that film is a more progressive medium than television, mainstream Hollywood film has traditionally been reluctant to openly and non-stereotypically engage with queer subjects and characters (Walters 131). As the late film historian Vito Russo suggests in his meticulous exploration of queerness in Hollywood film (The Celluloid Closet), queer people have generally been depicted in coded terms, or as self-hating, tortured denizens of a dangerous subculture. Walters aptly notes that “life was indeed often nasty, brutish, and short for the celluloid homosexual...gay characters that were clearly marked as gay usually had to die, often to enable the ‘real’ heterosexuals to get on with business (often the business of marriage)” (Walters 132). Confronted with pernicious stereotypes or total invisibility, queer viewers found ways to “read between the lines, and—if need be—to ‘rewrite’ scripts, characters, cinematic moments to create a space for themselves” (Walters 132). In Hollywood, the post-Stonewall era was ushered in by The Boys in the Band (1970), likely the first fully gay-themed film (filled with “self-deprecating wit and truckloads of self-hatred” [Walters 134], it was adapted from the off-Broadway musical of the same name). Hollywood was ambivalent in its treatment of queer themes throughout the 1970s, ranging from John Schlesinger’s “unusually mature and sensitive” (Gross 63) portrayal of a gay relationship in Sunday, Bloody Sunday (1971), to William Friedkin’s Cruising (1980), a violent detective story that seemed to herald a return to the old

template of the psychotic/murderous homosexual. By the early 1980s, two mainstream Hollywood films had deigned to sympathetically place gay relationships on center stage; Making Love (1982) and Desert Hearts (1985), were box office failures, though they drew a great deal of attention from the queer community. Various other films entered the queer fray (Personal Best, (1982), Lianna (1983), though they too failed to make a mark on the broader cultural imagination. The 1990s marked the dawn of the commercially successful queer-themed Hollywood film; Philadelphia (1993), Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994), To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar (1995) and The Birdcage (1996) (a remake of 1978's La Cage Aux Folles) were far more financially successful than their predecessors, and these films (and others) seem to have constituted a sort of 'critical mass' whereby,

...gay- themed films no longer exist as rare and financially risky outposts in the barren desert of heterosexual romance, but rather begin to refer to each other, to construct a 'genre' or a group of films that engage actively in a dialogue with other mainstream entertainment. In an era of newly acquired visibility, the depiction of gays is not simply hidden or circuitous or restricted to a few choice stereotypes, although to say that there is an 'outpouring' would be an overstatement (Walters 135).

Though much has been made of the recent wave of gay-themed films, it is actually television that has become "the most conspicuous and visible marker" of queer visibility (Walters 59). The location of the medium (in the home, amidst the mundane fixtures of everyday life) renders television markedly different from film, and for queer people to have "sprung up in this at once most generic and most personal space is indeed amazing, and disconcerting to many who are used to the television illusion of heterosexual bliss" (Walters 60). As in mainstream

newspapers and magazines, early television either ignored queer people altogether, or presented them on news and interview programs as legal/medical quandary to be solved. Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon is the 1967 CBS Reports special in which a somber Mike Wallace presents “the dilemma of the homosexual...Told by the medical profession he is sick, by the law that he’s a criminal. Shunned by employers, rejected by heterosexual society. Incapable of a fulfilling relationship with a woman or, for that matter, with a man. At the center of his life, he remains anonymous...” (quoted in Walters, 60). Despite the waves of protest that greeted this and similar programs from the newly radicalized queer movement, it was not until the 1970s that any substantive representation of queer people appeared in entertainment television; in 1971, All in the Family aired an episode featuring a gay football player; in 1972, ABC showed a movie of the week (That Certain Summer) that dealt with a father coming out to his son; and a 1973 episode of Marcus Welby, MD featured Dr. Welby’s attempts to ‘cure’ a homosexual patient. Throughout the latter part of the decade, queer characters made sporadic appearances on sitcoms such as Three’s Company, WKRP in Cincinnati, and Taxi. These portrayals were markedly different from those in mainstream film:

While film tended to be more graphic in its portrayal of vicious stereotypes, sitcoms typically trotted out the swishy, effeminate queen/hairdresser/interior decorator while TV movies featured the tragic, closeted victim...Gays were generally played for giggles or pathos; occasionally (as in All in the Family and Family) to make a point about anti-gay bigotry” (Walters, 61).

As was the case in the mainstream press, it took the AIDS epidemic to produce any “quantifiably meaningful representations of gays and lesbians in television” (Walters 61). However, the early AIDS dramas portrayed either promiscuous gays who were threats to society, or (in the case of the 1985 TV movie, An Early Frost), gays whose acceptability rested on their status as objects of intense pity. As Gross has noted, queer people have generally been depicted on television as either victims or villains, and this is nowhere more true than in the representation of gay men with AIDS. These representations are also notable for their refusal to engage the community context of the gay male characters—gone is the network of friends, lovers, bars, support groups, community centres, bookstores and neighborhoods that the queer movement has fought to establish, not to mention the very existence of lesbians, bisexual, or transgendered people.

The fervor that surrounded the ‘coming out’ episode Ellen Degeneres’ eponymous sitcom in 1996 deserves mention. Despite the “odes to assimilation and anxious cries of ‘can’t we all just get along’ that accompanied the dramatic coming-out episode and its media effluvia” (Walters 84), Ellen gradually became what its star had promised it would not be: a gay sitcom. Walters writes:

In a world so adamantly structured around heterosexuality, sexual identity does matter and Ellen’s refusal to allow her gayness to slink into the background is a step in the right direction. Don’t get me wrong, her constant reiteration of the “but I’m just me” litany of liberal sameness was still tiresome but was now at least partially challenged by a sitcom that actually had lesbian stories and lesbian lives represented, not just lesbian photo ops and chic accouterments as token asides to diversity...these episodes also reinforce the ongoing nature of coming out and the ongoing realities of anti-gay practices, even in this new world of ‘fashionable’ lesbians (85).

When the show was cancelled later that year, the formerly apolitical Degeneres publicly criticized the homophobia of her former network, ABC. Walters describes the specific homophobia that resulted in the cancellation of Ellen: “Ellen was not canceled simply because she depicted homosexuality, but because she refused to be then re-closeted, to relegate her gayness to the ‘been there, done that’ realm” (86). While the coming-out episode destroyed barriers that may never be rebuilt, it is also true that “double standards and heterosexual unease are still firmly in place” (Walters 94); Ellen did become too gay, revealing that “a gayness not in the background, not fully assimilated, not willing to slink off, is always too gay” (Walters 94). The Ellen debacle is a particularly salient example of Stuart Hall’s characterization of popular culture as a complex, contested terrain.

Gay-themed advertising has followed a trajectory similar to that of film and television. In, “LesBiGay Identity as Commodity”, David Skover and Kelly Testy chart the progression of the queer-targeted advertising phenomenon: Absolut Vodka, the first national marketer to advertise in the queer press in 1979, found itself in better and better company in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Seagram, Hiram Walker, Miller, Calvin Klein, Benetton, Philip Morris, Columbia Records, Saab, Saturn and Subaru coming on board (231). They note that over the six years from 1993 to 1999, the national marketers’ budget for queer-oriented advertising tripled; between 1998 and 1999, it rose 29% (from \$120.4 million to \$155.3 million) (232).

The push for cultural visibility based on the 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal capitalist conception of ‘identity’ has characterized the queer movement since its inception.

As illustrated by my brief survey of mainstream press, film, television and advertising, the Western queer visibility project is firmly tethered to popular culture. Despite the steady increase of queer issues and characters in the aforementioned media, it is necessary to be mindful of the fact that popular culture is always a contested ideological terrain. Walters aptly summarizes the queer visibility zeitgeist:

We come to know ourselves through the images and stories of popular culture. There is nothing worse than to live in a society in which the traces of your own existence have been erased or squeezed into a narrow and humiliating set of stereotypes. The power of culture visibility and memory is potent, and the absence of that public face can crush even the hardest of souls...But visibility does not erase stereotypes nor guarantee liberation (13).

To be seen is an important transformation for queer people, but vision is never neutral; who is being seen, and why? Who is consigned to the shadows? In the following chapter, I will explore the complexities of contemporary visibility project and its relationship to commodity capitalism.

## Chapter 2 'Positive' Queer Visibility and Commodity Culture

The discourse around queer visibility in popular culture has traditionally been dominated by the 'positive images' approach. As Alexander Doty and Ben Gove explain in "Queer Representation in Mass Media", this "considers how stereotyped (or not) representations of lesbian and gay lives are in the media, as well as the range of gay and lesbian representation the media offers" (86). The 'positive images' school of thought is based on the supposition that 'affirmative' depictions of queer people in popular culture will eventually result in mainstream acceptance and legal equality. This notion seems to stem from the 'direct effects' paradigm that characterized early-20<sup>th</sup> century media research, and it is aptly summarized by film scholar Richard Dyer in The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations: "...how we are seen determines how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation"(xx). Larry Gross and Vito Russo helped to establish the 'positive images' philosophy within the nascent field of queer studies, and it continues to shape the efforts of such activist organizations as GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). As noted in Chapter 1, this organization was founded in the 1980s in order to combat homophobic media coverage of the AIDS crisis, though in recent years their focus has grown to include all media coverage of queer people. The results of their monitoring efforts are communicated through newsletters, in the gay press, and via the Internet (see

fig. 1), “stimulating both positive and negative feedback to reporters, editors, writers and producers” (Gross 107).

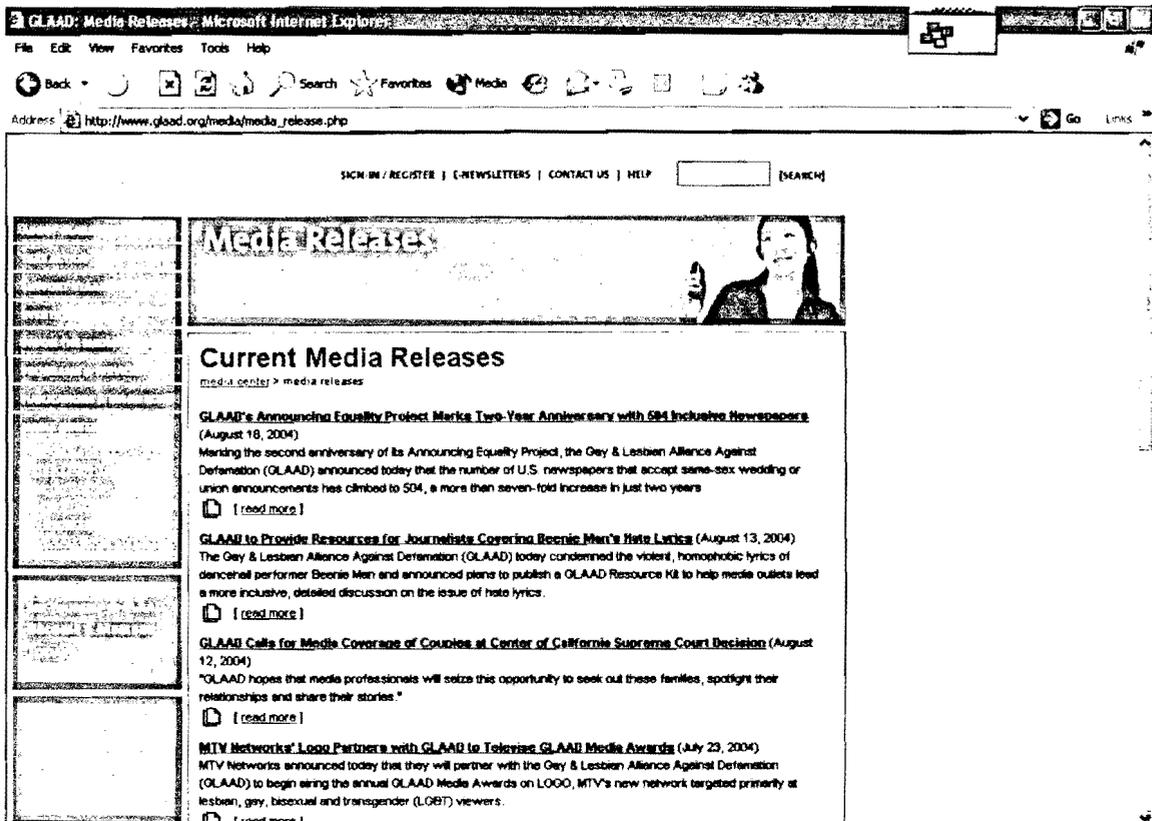


Figure 1. Current GLAAD Media Releases.

Joan Garry, executive director, clearly outlines GLAAD's standpoint on the organization's website:

At GLAAD, we are in the business of changing people's hearts and minds through what they see in the media. We know that what people watch on TV or read in their newspaper shapes how they view and treat the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people around them. And we have a responsibility to make sure those images foster awareness, understanding and respect. When media images of our lives are fair, accurate and inclusive, we find ourselves increasingly welcomed into a society that respects difference. When they're not – when stereotypes and misinformation pollute the well of cultural acceptance – we become vulnerable to anti-gay forces working to create a world in which we do not exist.

GLAAD has irrevocably altered “the representative frame” (Walters 137) by both lauding ‘good’ representations of queer people, and aggressively challenging those deemed to be defamatory.

Due to the efforts of scholars like Vito and Gross, and organizations like GLAAD, the explicit, virulent homophobia that was taken for granted in popular culture a few short decades ago no longer passes without comment. While this is most certainly an improvement, it is crucial to explore the reasons for, and consequences of, this rather abrupt shift. By examining the ‘positive images’ approach and its relationship with commodity capitalism, we may come to a deeper understanding of the increasingly visible movement’s political potential.

The incredible success of the queer visibility project must prompt us to ask some basic questions. What constitutes a ‘positive’ image in the realm of queer representation? Ironically, though perhaps not surprisingly, this invariably consists of someone that conforms to hegemonic ideals of appearance and class. Despite their oft-stated longing for ‘nonstereotypic’ imagery, proponents of the positive images approach tend to celebrate a very limited range of subjects. As Steven Kates notes in “Making the Ad Perfectly Queer”, the most culturally-visible queer people are white, healthy, affluent, young, and male, while all other identities that do not mesh with this ideal tend to be “marginalized and precluded” (11). As outlined in the previous chapter, the past three decades have seen a proliferation of gay and lesbian characters in popular culture. I have discussed the role of film, television and advertising, though this chapter will be devoted to

the latter two media because their familiar, ubiquitous nature is particularly well-suited to the positive images campaign (film attendance usually involves some planning and expense, whereas television and advertising are inexpensive and accessible from home). The following three examples of contemporary queer-centric pop culture (one cable television program, one network television program, and an advertisement) reveal the inherent bias of the 'positive images' school: almost every character reflects the hegemonic ideals of North American society (professionally successful, affluent, young, attractive, etc.).

The Showtime drama *Queer as Folk* (aired on Showcase in Canada) is a good example of this tendency (see fig.2). Adapted from the British series of the same name, the program is now in its 4<sup>th</sup> season in North America. *Queer as Folk* follows the lives of five gay men and two lesbians in contemporary Pittsburgh (actually a poorly-disguised Toronto). The show's producers effusively proclaim its diversity ("*Queer as Folk* is an unapologetic celebration of life in all its varied forms. Within the differences, we discover the similarities that make us all human...(it is) a compelling, realistic, and graphic depiction of society"), though this is hardly reflected by the program. Perhaps these claims would ring true if "society" did not also include disabled people, poor people, lesbians who are not obsessed with marriage, women who are not mothers, people of colour, and those who identify as heterosexual. The episodes screened in the first season included a disclaimer that the show was not meant to depict the gay 'lifestyle' but merely the experiences of a group of friends, though that hardly makes the *Queer as Folk* vision of reality any less bizarre. The writers and

producers do indicate some awareness of other subject positions, though this awareness usually takes the form of racist and/or sexist jokes; perhaps this is done in the hopes that the shock of a queer character can be assuaged by a reaffirmation of hegemonic ideas about race and gender. In this and many other cases, the 'positive' depiction of a gender/sexually variant person rests on the marginalization of a differently located person, whether through subtle or explicit exclusionary methods. As 'progressive' as it is touted to be, *Queer as Folk* employs both techniques on a regular basis.

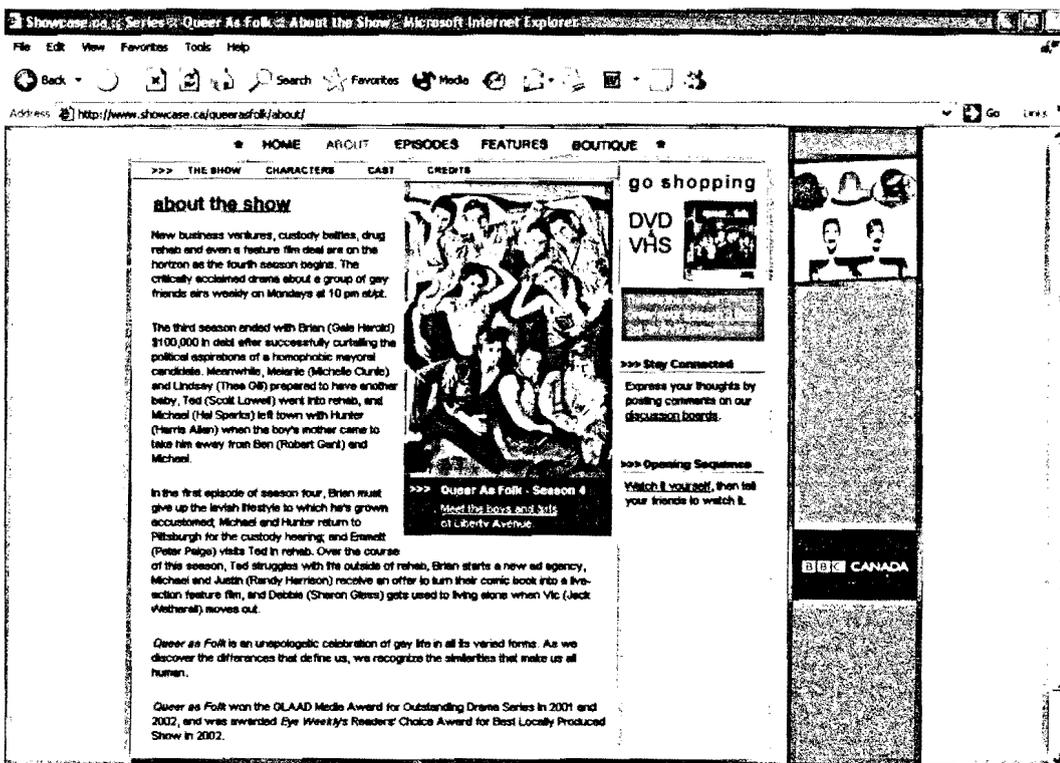


Figure 2. About *Queer as Folk* (Showcase).

*Will and Grace* (see fig. 3) is equally guilty of this tactic (though it has not publicly pledged to “celebrate life in all its varied forms”). The NBC sitcom, now in its seventh season, features the relationship between a gay lawyer and his

best friend. Set in New York it also features Will and Grace's best friends, Jack (a flamboyant actor) and Karen (a flighty socialite with a penchant for prescription medication). The show has been consistently popular since its debut, likely because it reinforces certain standard conceptions about race and class. White, affluent, fit, able-bodied people abound, and the only regular cast member that does not fit this mould (Karen's maid Rosario) is routinely used as a comic foil. Lesbians make periodic appearances, though always as objects of derision (Will and Jack seem to lack any kind of queer community outside of themselves). Upper middle-class, white, apolitical and apparently asexual, Will and Jack do not present any threats to the status quo.

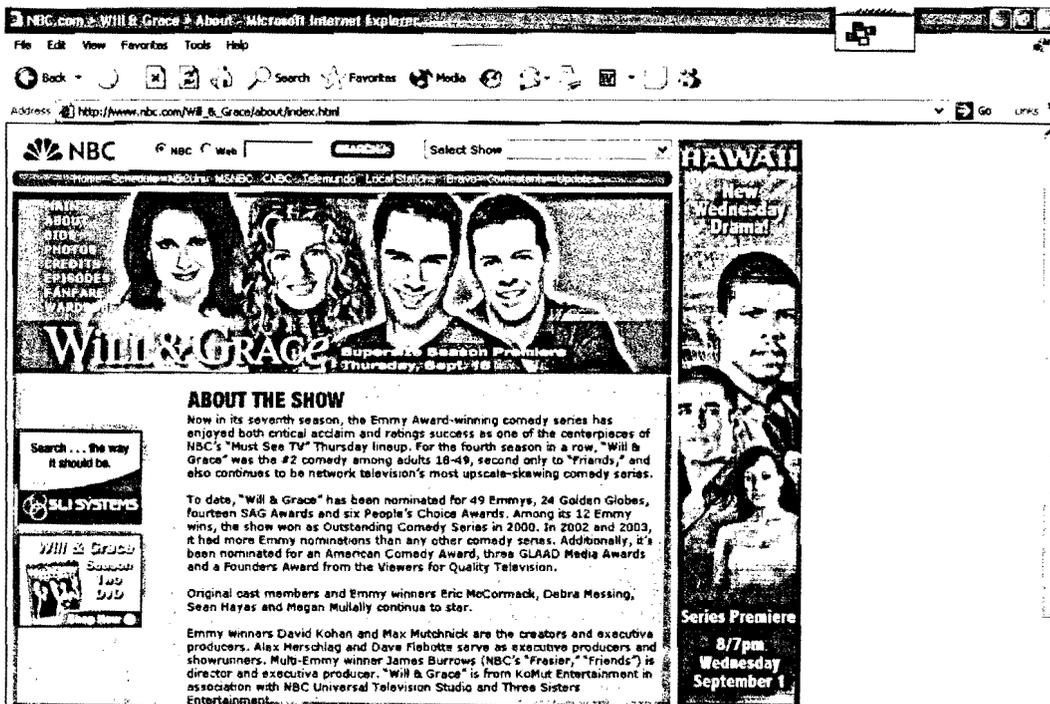


Figure 2. About *Will and Grace* (NBC).

The Bridgestone advertisement (see fig. 4), which appeared in several queer publications in 2002, features two women sitting on a pile of tires. One of

them (a brunette wearing high-heeled boots) is holding a laptop and the other (a blonde wearing running shoes) perches behind her, smiling. The headline reads:

“Your ideas about liberation...” and the copy follows:

...are part of your identity. You live for technology. Cell phones. Laptops, And of course, the road-gripping, rain-loving Bridgestone Turanza LS-T. Stops on command. Corners like a dream. Responsive in wet or dry conditions. All the elements of style, comfort and performance you demand. Today. And thousands of miles from now. Welcome to the future.

The ad does make an attempt, albeit a lame one, to acknowledge/encode difference (the high-heeled shoes and running shoes are placed in the foreground as if to signify femme and butch identities). However, both models are white, able-bodied and professional, and the ad takes great pains to establish just which segment of the lesbian market it is addressing: those educated and affluent enough to “make technology part of...[their] identity”. The conflation of liberation, technological savvy and consumption is a particularly salient maneuver.



Figure 4. Bridgestone/Firestone (2002).

These three examples illustrate the extremely narrow range of 'positive' representations available in this new era of visibility. I will address the reasons for this limited scope after a brief examination of queer issues in contemporary politics.

Has the marked increase in 'positive' cultural representations produced any substantive political change? While it is obviously difficult to establish a clear link between pop culture presence and the social/legal status of the group being represented, many critics contend that the political gains of the queer movement do not reflect its newfound visibility (I should state that although I am wary of assuming the existence of a coherent "queer community" with universal political goals, I think it is fair to assert that freedom from homophobic discrimination/violence and equality under the law can be considered fundamental objectives in a liberal democratic society). According to Skover and Testy,

...in the chambers of the judiciary, on the floors of the legislatures, at the ballot boxes of the electorate, or through the ranks of the military, the state demands that LesBiGays fulfill their civic responsibilities, but it denies their civil rights (225).

Skover and Testy are rooted in the American context, but many of their comments are applicable to Canada. The controversy over queer civil rights continues to simmer in both countries, and constitutes a major election issue in 2004. While some gains have been made here over the past year (namely the recent passing of Bill C250, which criminalizes 'hate propaganda' based on sexual orientation, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Ontario, B.C.,

and Quebec since 2003), they are often precarious and subject to the vicissitudes of public opinion. The Supreme Court of Canada has not yet delivered its final ruling with regards to same-sex marriage here, even though more than a year has passed since it first began its review. In the U.S., only eight states and the District of Columbia include sexual orientation in their hate crimes legislation. It may now be legal to marry in Massachusetts, but 40 other states have laws or constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage (Human Rights Campaign). As Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed caution in Homo Economics, "Citing recent civil-rights 'advances' is rather like viewing the glass as one-fifth full, when it's really four-fifths empty" (xiii).

How can there be so much visibility and so little substantive legal change? The notion of reification provides a helpful tool to understand this disconnect. According to Karl Marx, reification occurs when workers are alienated from their labour and the goods that they produce. Georg Lukacs further extends this concept, asserting that *everything* is reified in late capitalist culture, and that commodities have themselves become ideological symbols.

Lukacs describes this phenomenon in History and Class Consciousness:

The relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: that of the relation between people (83).

Reification is an essentially dehumanizing force, and the recent visibility project seems to have facilitated the reification of queerness by performatively inscribing it as a consumable 'lifestyle' in popular culture. This situation has developed in

two closely related ways: queer people are increasingly courted by mainstream media because of their ostensibly greater buying power, and the idea of (not so queer) queerness is used to woo straight consumers.

The perception that queer people constitute a desirable, affluent market has profoundly influenced the course of queer visibility over the past two decades. According to Walters, the “influx of marketing to gays has been predicated on a number of shifts” (236), among them the rise of ‘niche marketing’. No longer able to mass market in the hopes of reaching everyone, marketers have shifted to a more targeted approach:

The attempt to “reach everyone” through a sort of bland sameness (assuming a white and heterosexual viewing public) has given way to aggressive targeting of populations deemed either golden in terms of their spending patterns (youth) or untapped in terms of their spending potential and brand loyalty (blacks and gays) (237).

Such niche marketing is a natural extension of the liberal identity politics discussed in Chapter 1. Chasin observes that it is often at the moment in which social movements make significant progress that they become target markets, and that is certainly the case here. Having organized into a self-conscious, visible group in the late 1960s, the queer movement began to “negotiate for identity and power with capital” (181) around the end of the ‘golden age’ of the 1970s. It is important to realize that mainstream marketers did not approach the queer community unbidden; the process was actually facilitated by queer people working within the advertising industry, and was often conceived (or at least justified) as a political act. Gross describes the birth of this new niche market:

As [gay] marketing professionals regularly explained to their potential clients, gays (and to a lesser extent, lesbians) were the ultimate yuppie consumers. In the slang of the advertising business, 'guppies' as they were sometimes termed were perfect DINKS—double income, no kids—and therefore, presumably, had lots of disposal income...Despite the rise in anti-lesbian/gay organizing by the religious right in the 1980s, the attractiveness of the lesbian and gay market became increasingly seductive (235).

This seduction was accomplished in part through the efforts of queer market research firms, such as the Chicago-based Overlooked Opinions and the New York agency Mulryan/Nash, which “amassed mailing lists comprising thousands of gay and lesbian individuals and made these available to publishers, ad companies, and direct mail marketers” (Gross 236). This technique was quite effective during the 1980s, and though many of the original marketing companies no longer exist, the promise of an untapped reservoir of queer wealth continues to drive myriad advertising campaigns. In 1991, the conservative Wall Street Journal referred to the queer community as “a dream market” (cited in [commercialcloset.com](http://commercialcloset.com)), and the term has come to dominate the market discourse, despite constant challenges to its veracity. Estimates vary as to how lucrative this market actually is—an Overlooked Opinions survey published in 1992 reported that the gay and lesbian American market was worth \$514 billion annually (Chasin 36), and although the study’s statistics were later discredited, they still remain in use by a number of gay marketers and publications. A Witeck-Combs and MarketResearch.com survey published in September 2003 estimated that the gay, lesbian and bisexual American population had a buying power of \$485 billion, though this study was also questioned

(commercialcloset.com). Most findings are challenged as soon as they are published, largely due to the researchers' lack of random sampling and the fact that most surveys target those who already display disposable income (according to economist M.V. Lee Badgett, marketers have confused survey data referring to the readers of gay publications with the demographics of the community as a whole. Badgett's findings actually indicate that gay men earn 4% to 27% less than their straight counterparts, while lesbians are roughly even with heterosexual women in earning power [commercialcloset.com]). Nevertheless, these questionable statistics appear unchallenged in most mainstream news stories about the queer community's ostensibly staggering wealth.

While advertising efforts directed towards the 'queer niche market' are largely responsible for the current brand of queer visibility, the recent rise of 'gay vague' advertising also deserves mention. This term refers to advertisements that use "tantalizing, hip, and trendy same-sex innuendo...to deliver an ambiguous lure to straights" (Skover and Testy 232) while also targeting queer consumers. Business writer Michael Wilke, who is thought to have coined the term, explains further:

This can include ambiguous relationships, blurred gender distinctions, wayward same-sex glances or touching, camp/kitsch, or coded references to gay culture. Some ads convey different meanings in mainstream media versus gay media because of who is intended to look at it (commercialcloset.com).

IKEA began this trend in 1994 with a television ad featuring an ambiguously-gay couple shopping for a dining room table, and many other companies have followed suit (see fig.5).



Figure 5. Abercrombie & Fitch (1998).

The 'gay vague' trend is notable for the way that it produces "an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences" (Hennessy 32); once again, queerness is reified through popular culture, though in this case it is marketed to straight consumers as "Exotic Other" rather than to queer people as "Self".

Ultimately, though, the statistical underpinnings of queer-centric and gay-vague marketing are irrelevant. The salient point is that the queer movement has created and sold the perception of the 'dream market' in the hopes of gaining 'positive' visibility and a greater degree of political power. As noted above, the connection between visibility and enfranchisement is questionable, but the 'positive images' advocates have not lost faith. This faith is illustrated through organizations like Commercial Closet, which is a non-profit "education and journalism organization that charts the evolving worldwide portrayals of the gay community in mainstream advertising". Commercial Closet has partnerships with GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign, as well as the school-oriented Gay

Lesbian Straight Education Network. Like those organizations, Commercial Closet is a staunch advocate of the 'positive images' approach. According to their website,

The project believes that by reaching the image makers themselves, future advertising will be more inclusive and positive through this education. While gay-positive movies and TV programs can be avoided, the impact of advertising is more difficult to dodge, and its effect on public opinion about gay issues is tremendous.

The 'positive images' philosophy is always predicated on the assumption that audiences will be directly affected by what they see, and Commercial Closet's approach to advertising is no different. Homophobic people may be able to evade *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, but they cannot escape the onslaught of queer-themed advertising, and it is presumed that given enough exposure to 'positive' representations they will eventually reform their ways. The problems with this assumption are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is safe to say that some skepticism is warranted.

Unlike GLAAD, which actively boycotts homophobic imagery, Commercial Closet (which actually provides a rating system for advertisements—see fig.6) “proactively works from within the industry as a ‘colleague’ to teach that diversity and representation are not contrary to achieving business goals”. However, despite these different approaches, GLAAD and Commercial Closet are driven by the assumption that power can be negotiated with capital-- thus, GLAAD's angry boycott campaigns and Commercial Closet's gentle corporate education programs are two sides of the same liberal capitalist coin.

Commercial Closet: Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Search Favorites Media

Address http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/view/print\_ratings.html

**RATING SYSTEM:** ratings are NOT intended to assess the likeability or entertainment value of ads, just *what the imagery/narrative conveys about gayness and transgender* -- both perceived by audiences and intended by the advertiser. Ratings are more art than science, as there are many ways to read ad messages, and not everyone will agree with the project's editorial conclusions. We don't mean to imply there is only one "correct" interpretation, but we want to encourage debate and greater reflection overall. Please take a deeper look at the way ads are intended and how they are received -- in their time and place of airing, and through our constantly changing views. (For our Ratings Editorial Policy, see FAQ section in [About](#).)

 POSITIVE	 NEGATIVE	 NEUTRAL	 GAY VAGUE	 STEREOTYPE
<p>After generations of invisibility, in these commercials guys actually get their guys and gels get their gals. Kisses and affectionate displays are enjoyed by same-sex couples in the imagery, transgendered persons are a non-issue, Gay Pride is celebrated and some commercials even seem to sell the idea of being "gay" more than the product.</p> <p><a href="#">See The List</a></p>	<p>Ads in this section may be funny to some, but they often use fear of same-sex attraction (homophobia) or "inappropriate" gender behavior (transphobia) -- accompanied by a horrific reaction by someone straight -- as their source of humor. Many ads that would already be funny purposely choose a "gay punchline" to heighten the joke. Gay or transgendered people are also shown here as queens, predators, pornographers, murderers, pedophiles and greeted with fear, shock, repulsion and occasional violence. Bisexuals are shown as cheaters, and transgender persons are often shown with the time-worn cliché of "Surprise -- she's a he!"</p> <p><a href="#">See The List</a></p>	<p>Gayness, bisexuality or being transgendered is treated as a non-issue in these commercials. Like people of color are now often shown, gays are included in vignettes and sometimes in the mix of a larger campaign. This may be what the future of gays in commercials will look like: part of a larger whole.</p> <p><a href="#">See The List</a></p>	<p>"Gay Vague" is a term coined by Michael Wilke at <i>Advertising Age</i> in 1997 for ads that covertly speak to gays or seem to imply gayness with a wink -- an intention advertisers often deny or sometimes don't intend. This can include ambiguous relationships, blurred gender distinctions, wayward same-sex glances or touching, camp/kitsch, or coded references to gay culture. Some ads convey different meanings in mainstream media versus gay media because of who is intended to look at it.</p> <p><a href="#">See The List</a></p>	<p>Gay people are shown in this collection as classic gay stereotypes, including leathermen, sissies and queens, but are otherwise accepted by characters in the ad. While some in the gay community now accept these depictions as "diversity" and "reality" -- others remain sensitive to them and do not.</p> <p><a href="#">See The List</a></p>

Figure 6. Commercial Closet's Rating System.

I do not mean to suggest, as many critics have done, that the queer movement has been unwittingly victimized or manipulated by commercial interests, or that no good has come of the 'positive' images visibility project. Recall that the 'dream market' (and the consequent commodification of all things 'positive') was crafted by those with some stake in the movement. The marriage between the queer movement and corporate America has actually been quite beneficial in some respects: GLAAD's boycotts of products like Coors beer have resulted in less homophobic advertising and improved benefits for queer employees, and many of the corporations that court the queer community also sponsor events hosted by queer organizations (for example Jaguar, which recently launched a gay-specific ad campaign, also sponsored the 2001 GLAAD

Media Awards ["Designated", 32]). The queer movement benefits financially and symbolically from corporate sponsorship, and the corporations benefit by earning the notoriously fierce loyalty of queer consumers (Nancy Coltun Webster relates a telling anecdote from a Hiram Walker manager: "I have a file of letters an inch or two thick from gay consumers thanking us and vowing their loyalty.... a straight consumer wouldn't take the time to say thank you for validating us" [6]).

Nevertheless, the reification of queerness through popular culture will always present more drawbacks than benefits. These include (but are not limited to) the erosion of the queer press, the exclusion of many sectors of the queer community, and the potential for right-wing backlash.

The relationship between queer-themed advertising and other queer-themed popular culture products is quite unambiguous. Gluckman and Reed describe the assumption by marketers that, in order to take optimum effect, "advertising has to be placed in a complementary environment" (5)—behold the IKEA commercials that air during *Queer as Folk*, 'the gay-vague' Volkswagen commercial aired during the coming-out episode of *Ellen*, or the queer-themed Absolut ads that appeared in the December 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine (headline: "TV's Gay Heatwave"). Interestingly, the "mercenary collusion between advertising and editorial forces" (Gluckman and Reed 5) that seems to have fuelled much of the recent queer media visibility is not restricted to mainstream popular culture; the trend has also irrevocably altered the queer press. Writer and activist Donna Minkowitz describes the effects on what was once a vibrant, relatively public sphere:

To lure major advertisers, glossy magazines like *Out*, *The Advocate*, and *Genre* have increasingly focused on so-called lifestyle features—articles about homosexuals who take expensive vacations, cook elaborate meals, go shopping for fun, and never worry about how to pay the rent. Other articles unequivocally celebrate gays and lesbians who've acquired money and power. Gay publications that took more of an interest in working-class gays, like *Gay Community News* and much of the older lesbian press, have largely gone by the wayside (23).

Recall that the queer movement that grew in the decades before Stonewall was “nurtured and disseminated through the newsletters, magazines, ‘bar rags’, and newspapers that helped to forge a sense of community both within and beyond the borders of the gay ghetto” (Gross 244). By reflecting the lives of those that appeared in mainstream popular culture only as security risks or perverts, the queer media established the grounds for a struggle that brought about a radical shift in public consciousness. The fate of the publications like the *Gay Community News* is a telling example of the influence exerted by corporate interests in the formation of contemporary North American queer identity.

The reification of queerness in popular culture also presents a more pernicious problem: those that are not part of the ‘dream market’ are beginning to feel excluded from the movement altogether. Gluckman and Reed note that “gay politics now reflects this divide, and a growing chorus of conservative gay writers is calling for gay activism to separate itself from any broader progressive vision that might address the needs and interests of the less visible, less privileged members of the gay community” (7). Those who are left behind are stuck in a terrible double-bind, in that they are queer enough to be denied certain civil rights but not queer enough (in the ‘positive’ sense) to have the compensatory (and

ostensibly liberating) consumer agency/media visibility bestowed upon them.

Single lesbian mothers, homeless transgender people and/or queer people living with AIDS probably do not qualify as the untapped goldmine mythologized by organizations like Overlooked Opinions, and yet they are still on the margins of heteronormativity and will stay there as long as the perception of the 'dream market' persists. Furthermore, progressive advocacy organizations that would have addressed the particularities of race, class and gender within the queer movement have become increasingly rare in the age of gala fundraisers and corporate donations. Chasin writes:

Money comes to advocacy organizations through a variety of channels and sources. Those channels and sources have regular and systematic effects on the movement: the funding of gay and lesbian advocacy organizations tends to encourage liberal rather than progressive agendas within those organizations; funding favors larger organizations and organizations that are national in scope, while smaller and local organizations find it much more difficult to attract funding; the most common modes of funding for gay nonprofits tend to promote white people and men to leadership positions. Taken together, these effects create a situation in which large organizations dominate 'the movement' ...while these trends have been developing for decades, they became more pronounced in the 1990s because the numbers of people and the size of the budgets involved reached a critical mass, because of the sophistication of information systems, and because of the growing gap between rich and poor" (184-185).

The mainstreaming of the queer movement is not the only political risk inherent in the current positive image-style visibility: social conservatives and the religious right have begun to use the myth of queer affluence in their antigay campaigns.

Gluckman and Reed explain further:

The religious right has appropriated gay marketing statistics to portray gay men and lesbians as a rich special interest undeserving of civil rights protection. Overlooked Opinions received a request for evidence of the

gay community's financial power from the Colorado Attorney General's office, charged with defending antigay ballot initiative Amendment 2. And the antigay group Colorado for Family Values has argued that 'homosexuals are anything but disadvantaged,'...this campaign, directed at lower-income communities, has succeeded in fanning anti-gay hate as a response to real economic despair (6).

Interestingly, the decline of the radical queer press, exclusionary practices and potential for right-wing backlash has not weakened the enthusiasm for 'positive', commodified visibility. For many, the opportunity to participate in what Chasin calls "identity-based consumption" seems to indicate a long-overdue invitation into mainstream culture and all its attendant rights. As beneficial as a move away from the rhetoric of rights and identity (rhetoric that assumes a white, male subject whose only salient mark of difference is his homosexuality) might be, it does not seem likely to happen anytime soon. That said, the queer movement must begin to take notice of the multiple identities of its members if it is to benefit more than a few upper-middle class white men. This need not necessarily involve abandoning the discourse of identity and rights, but rather expanding it to include more than just sexuality. Gluckman and Reed write:

Seizing the gay moment even as it reinforces racial and class hierarchies will allow for only limited gains. As the best feminism is sensitive to more than questions of gender, the fight against homophobia will take on its most liberating forms only if it is conceived as part of a broader vision of social and economic justice (8).

Though there are few notable coalition-based movements in existence today, there is still some cause to be hopeful. The term 'queer' is itself a tenuous step forward, as it is an attempt to be more inclusive and to downplay the rigid, inherently exclusionary boundaries of identity categories like 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Of

course, 'queer' has arguably become another potentially static designator of identity, but at least it is a step in a more inclusive direction.

In addition to the sort of anti-racist, feminist, democratic politics that Gluckman and Reed describe, the queer movement must distance itself from the notion that "private consumption can serve as political participation" (Chasin 182). As noted in Chapter 1, citizenship and identity have always been at least partially constructed through the market, but they should not be limited to the commercial sphere. Though it has been very successful on a symbolic level, the 'positive images' visibility project has not resulted in much political change, and it is unreasonable to expect that such a thing could happen; consumption cannot do the work of progressive political action. Visibility is important, and although the only visibility that queer people have 'earned' in commodity culture has resulted in a situation in which they are "welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects" (Hennessy 32), that does not mean the project should be entirely abandoned. In the next chapter, I will investigate some ways that a broader form of visibility is being pursued outside of the usual commodified channels.

### Chapter 3 Alternative Routes to Queer Visibility

Despite its mandate to provide 'healthy, nonstereotypic' portrayals of queer people, the 'positive images' campaign has contributed to the narrowing of the representational field and the cynical conflation of commerce and activism. Nevertheless, in a society predicated on possessive individualism and attendant conceptions of 'identity', the queer visibility project retains some utility. As noted in the previous chapter, we should be wary of assuming a direct relationship between cultural visibility and political change, for there often exists a disconnect between the two. The most useful sort of visibility is that which avoids "displays of contained gay culture...[which] function as an outlet, albeit limited, for gay expression as well as a safe place for the dominant culture to experience pleasure and freedoms (Bronski, quoted in Walters 15); clearly, it is time to explore some alternatives to *Will and Grace*. While it is difficult to find any pop culture media that exist completely outside the reach of commodity capitalism, public access television, non-profit film festivals, and zines provide three relatively non-commercial routes to queer visibility.

As noted in the last chapter, a truly progressive queer movement would expand its scope to include questions of racial and economic justice. In, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", Nancy Fraser offers a vision of several small, interacting publics composed of people who have not traditionally been included in the bourgeois public sphere (feminists, workers, people of colour, etc.). This notion of 'subaltern counterpublics' has some valence for the queer movement,

particularly when it comes to issues of visibility; rather than participating in the reification of queerness via the market, those who identify primarily as queer would be well-served to form coalitions with other subaltern groups in order to effect broader social change. Unlike the advertising industry or commercial television, which hail a very specific demographic through specific portrayals of queerness, the three alternative routes to visibility discussed in this chapter are open to many subaltern groups, and in some cases they constitute temporary counterpublics in and of themselves (e.g. film festivals, zine fairs).

Public television provides a forum for self-representation by a variety of counterpublics, though it should be noted that American public television demonstrated a degree of ambivalence towards queer issues and themes during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During those years, programs such as Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (documenting the experience of black gay men in America) and Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* (a dramatization of his novel concerning a group of friends in 1970s San Francisco) drew fierce criticism from the religious right, who incorrectly assumed that the programs had been directly financed by either PBS or the National Endowment for the Arts. The furor over public funds being used for what the American Family Association called "pro-homosexual propaganda" (quoted in Gross 192) resulted in several PBS stations refusing to air the programs in question. According to Gross, the Georgia State Senate even "passed a resolution directing the local public TV station to cease airing *Tales of the City* and never air it again" (192-193), and within weeks PBS announced that it was abandoning plans to co-produce a sequel for which the

scripts had already been completed. Nevertheless, in the mid-1990s, ITVS (the Independent Television Service) presented a four-part series, *The Question of Equality*, in keeping with its congressional mandate to “develop, produce, and package independent work that addresses the needs of underserved communities” (quoted in Gross, 1993). The series was well received, and it demonstrated the potential of public television to serve as a venue hospitable to perspectives outside of the mainstream. Gross writes:

The public square represented by public television, however eroded by cable-carried competition and however challenged by right-wing campaigns, remains an important sector of the cultural landscape. Lesbian and gay people continue to make claims on this public resource, and the struggle for access to the public airwaves remains an important site of struggle for equality (194).

The potential for accessibility is perhaps the most compelling characteristic of public television, at least where queer visibility is concerned. In, “Beyond Wayne’s World: Queer TV on the Public Airwaves”, Phylis Johnson and Michael Keith discuss the production of self-representational programs for public television with a variety of people engaged in the process. All of the interviewees share a background in social activism, and all of them have found a home for their programs on public access television. Recollections from producers in Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Boston and New York are all included. Santa Cruz’s programs (*Qtv* and *Queer Youth TV*) deal mainly with local issues, while PBS’ *In the Life* is more national in scope (despite the fact that at the time of the article’s publication it was not aired in a number of states in the south and mountain west). According to Charles Ignacio, one of *In the Life*’s producers,

I don't really think the kind of show that we do would work commercially because we cover so many different aspects of the gay community that aren't necessarily things that would get high ratings. We're very conscious of the diversity within the gay and lesbian community and we go out of our way to find those stories. What has been wonderful about working on public television is that we have not had to worry about the commercial potential or how much advertising revenue we were raising or what the rating is (quoted in Johnson and Keith 118).

The disconnect between commercial interests and the presentation of more 'diverse' (e.g. less marketable) aspects of the queer community seems to be taken for granted by those working in public television. John Catania, another producer, states that public television is "where gay and lesbian communities should really be looking first for programming about their lives—rather than to characters on sitcoms and dramas and prime-time network programming" (quoted in Johnson and Keith 119).

Canada's public broadcasters have managed to avoid the sort of right wing censure directed towards PBS, and most major Canadian cities boast some queer-oriented content. According to gbtlq.com,

*Cable 10%* (1995-2000, renamed *10%-Qtv* in 1997) premiered on Rogers Community Television in Toronto and aired for six seasons in southern and eastern Ontario. Produced entirely by volunteers, *Cable 10%* lacked the production values of network television, but did chronicle queer love, families, and communities, exploring issues of diversity, religion, politics, arts, and culture.

In Vancouver, Shaw cable's Outlook TV now runs a similar volunteer-run current affairs program for queer people. In addition to these programs, many of the 17 queer-themed films produced by the National Film Board since 1992 have aired on Canada's public channels.

North American public television is mandated to serve voices that are not normally heard on commercial networks, and although it will likely never rival the popularity of commercial or cable television, it is a viable arena for queer people whose work falls outside of mainstream notions of marketability.

Queer film festivals provide another excellent forum for queer counterpublics to achieve self-representation with relatively little risk of reification. The number of festivals has grown exponentially over the past couple of decades, and there are currently over a hundred in such diverse places as Hong Kong, London, Berlin, Iceland, and Toronto. Patricia White outlines the merits of the contemporary festival:

Besides giving public exposure to thousands of works (and, as exhibition venues, causing work to be produced, as mushrooming annual submissions bear out) and—one hopes—garnering publicity for gay and lesbian media, film and video makers, and organizations, the festivals constitute a counter public sphere, providing a collective experience and a literal site of critical reception. What they exhibit and make visible, alongside their programming, is an audience (74).

In addition to her assertion that these festivals encourage and exhibit work that would not otherwise be shown, White identifies one particularly salient characteristic of the queer film festival: its importance as an event. Martha Gever echoes this in “The Names We Give Ourselves”, noting that, “our identities are constituted as much in the event as in the images we watch” (201). For those whose identities are wholly or partially based on their sexual orientation, a queer film festival can become a counterpublic in itself, and attendance becomes a constitutive act.

The Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival in Toronto epitomizes many of the qualities that White discusses. Now in its fifteenth year, the festival is run by a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion and exhibition of film and video by and/or about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. With over 20,000 attendees in 2003, Inside Out provides what Richard Fung calls “a double representation on and in front of the screen” (90). While Inside Out has garnered a fair amount of mainstream attention, they remain

...dedicated to nurturing and supporting new and established artists through a variety of initiatives such as the Queer Youth Digital Video Project, John Bailey Film and Video Completion Fund and Mark S. Bonham Scholarship for Queer Studies in Film ([insideout.on.ca](http://insideout.on.ca)).

In addition to their emphasis on development, Inside Out has thus far maintained an excellent record of community involvement. Films are selected by a Screening Committee and a Programming Committee, both comprised of a diverse group of volunteers who make an effort to include a wide spectrum of topics and formats. The question of how to present this diversity of programming is always at the forefront; Inside Out does not generally tend towards gender or race-specific programming, although this does occur in some cases (such as the 2004 festival’s “Queer India” program, which spanned several days). In an event that is already predicated on a specific notion identity, it is always interesting to see how questions of race, gender and class are addressed. The tokenization or elision of other identities are omnipresent dangers, depending on one’s perspective.

Despite the myriad successes, festivals like *Inside Out* are in a difficult position, as money is always in short supply and corporations are increasingly eager to advertise in the program guide or on the website. In addition, festivals must now cater to a wide audience accustomed to the hegemonic images available in mainstream pop culture. As Eric O. Clarke writes in, "Queer Publicity at the Limits of Inclusion", "traditionally, queer counterpublics, such as film festivals, have been formed largely as alternatives to the exclusion and stereotyping of queers perpetuated by mainstream commercial media and other dominant representational forms"(85). However, the current boon of queer-related film and television has presented some commercial competition, and "while this competition seems to signal gains in the fight for the inclusion of queers in the public sphere, it also threatens to homogenize queer representation" (85). In Clarke's somewhat dystopic vision, increased mainstream acceptance may very well result in formal and ideological standardization. Subject matter deemed inappropriate or irrelevant (i.e. that which does not accord with heteronormative standards) could very well be phased out altogether (*Gay Community News*, the movie?). This has not been the case with *Inside Out*, which continues to exhibit a wide variety of experimental work, but the potential for aesthetic self-policing in the hopes of attracting more funding or greater audiences may become a problem in the future.

Finally, queer zine culture constitutes another viable, visible, non-commercial counterpublic. In *Notes From the Underground*, Stephen Duncombe

defines the medium thus: "zines are non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves" (6). Fanzines (from which the term zine was derived), are usually devoted to a band or celebrity, while zines usually fall into one of two formats. According to Mike Gunderloy, these are the Genzine (a small-press equivalent to professional magazines, containing an editorial, a letter column, and articles on various subjects), and Perzines (more stylistically relaxed, and often consisting of a personal record of the life of the writer). Genzines tend to be a collaborative effort while Perzines tend to be produced by a single individual, though this is not always the case. Zine culture is self-consciously built outside of the commercial sphere; as Robert Wright writes in Hip and Trivial,

...Although this scene is, predictably, comprised of a highly diverse, amorphous and sometimes fractious collection of writers and publishers, their pursuits are characterized by a number of common elements. The most notable of these is their rather fierce determination to remain 'independent', that is, to publish works in which they have a great personal commitment, and to do so largely without reference to the 'commercial' criteria of mainstream publishing. Like other manifestations of 'alternative' culture...this scene has roots in a shared progressive, often radical, conception of the political and also, perhaps most importantly in a shared enthusiasm for the subversive (or 'counterhegemonic') possibilities of contemporary youth culture (182).

Zines are distributed through a variety of channels (independent distribution organizations, or 'distros', word of mouth, mailing lists, conventions, concerts) and are frequently sold on consignment at local book, video and music stores. In Canada, Broken Pencil magazine provides zine reviews, excerpts, contact information, and general information about independent culture.

Though it is impossible to provide a coherent history of queer zine culture, a survey of some of the more notable developments is useful. The first known queer zine (Faggots and Faggotry) was produced in the early 1970s by Ralph Hall, a member of the New York Gay Activists Alliance. Rob Teixeira describes the publication in "Punk-lad Love, Dyke-core and the Evolution of Queer Zine Culture in Canada":

The zine was filled with homoerotic line drawings, poetry and political commentary. The content was largely personal reflections on love, sexuality and politics. Billed as the offering of "limp-wristed revolutionaries" and produced by FIRM, "Faggots International Revolutionary Movement", it's an impressive zine of its time, a precursor to 80s zines that would fuse lifestyle and politics into a synergistic queer anarchist sensibility (1).

Subsequent publications were similar in content and were often influenced by the punk movement. The first queer zine convention was held in Chicago in 1991, bringing together "a wide array of alternative artists, punks, and otherwise creative queers" (Teixeira 2). The third convention, which was held at the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto in 1993, tried to create a space that avoided the "mere buying and selling of zines by holding informal discussions as an opportunity to meet and talk with others" (Teixeira 2). This event reflected the Toronto queer zine/punk (also called 'homocore') community's concern with issues of class and race, which effectively segregated it from the more mainstream political movement. G.B. Jones, founder of the punk zine J.D., describes the rift between these two groups:

It was obvious we weren't consumers of the 'right' clothes, shoes, hairstyles, music, and politics that the rigid gay and lesbian 'community' insisted on: we didn't subscribe to the racism and misogyny and their

ridiculous segregation of the sexes, either. Plus, we were poor (quoted in Teixeira 3).

By 1999, when Teixeira's article appeared in Broken Pencil magazine, the Canadian queer zine scene had grown from its punk roots to encompass a variety of queer identities ranging from transgender politics to pagan spirituality.

Currently, one of the most influential queer zines in Canada is the Toronto-based TRADE, which was founded in 2000. In an interview, editor Jon Pressick described his motivation for creating the zine:

Queer zines are the medium of choice for non-Xtra, non-Fab [two local community papers] queers. They aren't seeing themselves represented, so they represent themselves...I'm a queer guy, with a female partner and two kids. Is it likely I'll read about me anywhere? And so, the goal of TRADE was/is pretty much to give other people, who don't normally get it, exposure. And I think things have gone well so far.

In 2002, Pressick began organizing the annual Fruit Market festival in an effort to showcase queer independent publishing. Says Pressick, "as far as I know, there aren't any other queer zine fairs happening these days—in Canada, at least. But from the last two years, I do think there is a need for the event. I'm a bit surprised no one did it sooner". Like the Inside Out Film Festival, the Fruit Market permits several queer counterpublics to coalesce into a larger, temporary counterpublic that performatively constitutes the identities of those present. While it is unfortunate that it is based primarily in large urban centres, queer zine culture nevertheless provides an inexpensive, inclusive means to visibility.

Writes Teixeira,

As long as a bland and commercialized mainstream gay culture pervades, there are going to be zines to rupture through some of that commodified narcissism. As long as there are still radical sexual ideas, as long as there

are segregated gender bars in the gay scene, as long as there are HIV positive people who are treated badly by those who should know better, queer zines will continue to act as an important (sub) subcultural force. From sex workers to transsexuals, the seamier, grittier and more honest underside of queer culture can be found represented in queer zines and their homocore inspired up-front attitude (11).

The alternatives to the "gay monoculture" (Teixeira 12) constructed and presented in mainstream film, television and advertising will never match the influence of the more modest alternatives discussed in this chapter, but they remain an important part of the queer visibility project. Public television, queer film festivals and queer zine culture present a rare opportunity for self-representation, as well as the chance to simultaneously build and participate in a relatively non-commercial public sphere.

## Conclusion

The idea that cultural visibility is a necessary precondition for marginalized groups seeking political equality is firmly entrenched in our modern liberal capitalist society. On an individual level, the process of coming out makes a hitherto unseen identity visible, while on a collective level the queer movement seeks mainstream media representation in the hope of attaining social recognition and civil rights. As evidenced by my survey of late-20<sup>th</sup> century press, film, and television, the Western queer visibility project is fundamentally tethered to popular culture. Despite the victories won by media activists over the past few decades, it is important to recognize that popular culture is always a contested ideological terrain. Vision is never neutral.

The dominance of the 'positive images' approach to visibility is cause for concern. Whether intentional or not, this strategy (which has not been as politically successful as hoped) has drastically narrowed the representational field and has effectively alienated a great many queer-identified people (namely those that do not fit hegemonic ideals of appearance, race, and class). The queer movement's eagerness to present itself as a desirable niche market has undermined its progressive potential and created the conditions for conservative backlash. Though citizenship and identity have always been partially constituted through the market, they should not be limited to the commercial sphere; private consumption and political activity are two very different things.

In a society still predicated on possessive individualism and attendant conceptions of 'identity', the queer visibility project remains vital. It is unlikely that mainstream popular culture will alter its limiting portrayals of queer people and themes, but there are other, more accessible options available. The three alternative routes to visibility discussed here (public television, queer film festivals and zine culture) are open to many subaltern counterpublics and in some cases they constitute temporary counterpublics in and of themselves. These alternatives, though modest, present valuable opportunities for cultural visibility with little risk of reification and plenty of opportunity to engage with broader issues of social justice.

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