A Queer Eye for Capitalism

A Queer Eye for Capitalism: The Commodification of Sexuality in American Television

By

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This study uses critical discourse analysis to conduct an examination of the reality television program *Queer Eye*. *Queer Eye* is a makeover show and each of the five main characters --Ted Allen, Kyan Douglass, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley and Jai Rodriguez—has an area of specialty (fashion, home design, culture, food and grooming). The first two seasons of the show entitled *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* gave makeovers exclusively to straight men. However, after season three the Fab Five, as they are commonly called shortened the title and expanded their makeovers to couples, a gay man and a transgender man.

The purpose of this study is to help understand the manner in which the representations of queer culture in the show reinforce the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality. By investigating the evolution of *Queer Eye* (all four seasons), this study provides insights into popular culture's understanding and depiction of sexual difference and evidences the strong link between these representations and the commercial interests of the producers.

This study's theoretical framework brings together concepts from queer theory and political economy to the examination of the commodification and construction of sexuality and gender. In the show *Queer Eye*, the male guests sell access to their lives for a makeover and in the process they are indoctrinated into new patterns of consumption. The identity of both the five main characters and the guest character is represented as a reflection of their aesthetic choices, and audiences are exposed to numerous product placements and advertising messages. In encouraging materialism, the show transforms the term queer into a commodity sign and redefines masculinity as represented through wealth and accumulation.

Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of the show, I argue that the Fab Five serve as normative figures within the structure of the capitalist system because: their performance reflects the intrinsic values of a materialistic society and ignores social responsibility. Moreover, consistent with the stereotypical representation of gay males in American culture the queerness of the Fab is depicted as asexual and a form of aestheticism Ultimately, the program and the main characters support a narrative of heterosexual reproductive romance.

The combination of all this elements—the commercialization of sexual desire, the aggressive use of product placement, the reproduction of common stereotypes- is directly related to the success of the show and its historical significance.

CHAPTER ONE

QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY

> "I am just a business owner trying to improve mankind one mullet at a time"
> —David Collins, 2004 in an advertisement for American Express, Executive Producer of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*

Surfing through the channels on a late night, I found myself watching a promotional interview for the latest fashion makeover show. During that interview, five men explained the purpose of the show. Their mission was to change the world one man at a time and their catch phrase was "we are not here to change you, we are here to make you better." While the main premise of the show seemed promising, I was intrigued by the fact that for these men, changing the world involved wearing designer clothing. The show was *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a reality TV fashion makeover show that featured five gay men and used sexuality as a positioning statement. The program was part of the summer lineup of Bravo, an NBC Universal Inc. Cable Network (General Electric and Vivendi). It premiered on July 5, 2003, and it quickly became one of the most profitable shows of the station, winning two of four Emmy nominations and bringing great recognition and commercial success to the five main characters.

The Fab Five, as they are commonly called, have been marketed by Bravo TV as a sophisticated team of gay men. Most often a straight guy is selected and the five characters of *Queer Eye*[1]—Ted Allen, Kyan Douglass, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley and Jai Rodriguez—give him a makeover. Each character of this "reality TV" show has an area of specialty. Ted is the food and wine expert. On the show he illustrates the appropriate kitchen tools and how to use them; sometimes he teaches men special recipes and gives them lessons for buying and ordering wine. Thom is the decoration expert; his contributions consist of rearranging the

[1] *Queer Eye* is used to refer to all four seasons of the show. While some episodes featured non-men – couple and a transsexual female to men—the show primarily targets straight men.

space in which the straight guy lives. Carson is the fashion expert in charge of deciding the "appropriate" look for selected character. Jai covers the area of "culture." For *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, "culture" translates into: lessons on public speaking, dancing and body language, mostly etiquette. However, it can also cover areas such as pet grooming, and dating; in sum, the focus of the area will depend on the mission of the week. Finally, Kyan is the grooming specialist, as he covers issues related to skin and hair care.

The Fab Five have several items and merchandise associated with the production of the show including a DVD, numerous music CDs and a book with general tips. Moreover, some of the main characters have additional books. For example, Carson has a children's book (*You're Different and That's Super*), Ted released a cooking book (*The Food You Want to Eat: 100 Smart, Simple Recipes*) and Kyan published a grooming book for ladies (*Beautified*).

These five characters are the self proclaimed embodiment of good taste and class. They are depicted as five super heroes traveling through the streets rescuing males from bad taste. They arrive to the "challenged" straight man's house in a black SUV, a contemporary representation of the "Batmobile." In the SUV they describe the mission of the day, reminiscent of Charlie's call when assigning missions to his angels in the series, *Charlie's Angles*. The super hero theme is also made evident in all advertising and promotion efforts. The five men are portrayed in their advertisements, merchandize, and internet pages in James Bond poses, using hangers and hair dryers as their weapons of choice when combating the style horrors of the world. In fact, David Metzler and David Collins, the producers of the show, comments:

> "When the Fab Five was born, they were superheroes in our minds—bigger-than-life gay men, armed with great fashion, good looks and bottles of eye cream. If there was a straight guy in need, they'd rush to his rescue" (Allen, Douglas, Filicia, Kressley, and Rodriguez 8).

The show starts with a shot of the five characters in their areas of expertise being paged with a "QE" (*Queer Eye*) emergency. They discuss the day's mission in their SUV while driving to the straight guy's house. During that time they provide the audience with a demographic profile (age, profession, marital status, location) of that week's character and describe the mission or objective.

Once at the home of the straight guy, the Fab Five go through the space commenting on the style, decoration, clothing and belongings. Each of the five characters discusses his plan for the day and the areas each will

be working on. Then each Fab has some alone time with the straight guy while selecting and buying all the elements needed for the make over. When the straight guy returns home, he admires and reviews all the days' accomplishments (new clothing, decoration, food, etc). Then, he has a final meeting with each of the Queer Guys, and he is left alone with cameras filming what he has learned. Then, the Fab Five meet at their New York apartment and watch a video of the straight guy. The episode comes to an end when both the Fab and the audience witness the "life changing" event (e.g date, standup comedy, proposal, wedding, etc.). They discuss the video over some glasses of wine or another alcoholic beverage and debate on the success or failure of the mission. The program ends with some concluding thoughts of the *Queer Eye* guys. Also, at the beginning of each segment, right after commercial breaks, the producers insert excerpts of prerecorded interviews with family members and friends of the straight guy, where they make remarks about their friend's "problem areas." Finally, the Fab Five give daily tips in their areas of expertise.

The transitions between the scenes are very sharp and usually accompanied by background music. The producers use interviews of friends and family members in order to establish the need of the makeover. Music is also used during certain shots to sustain the hip and trendy image of the show. Also, the characters are often running through the streets while upbeat music is playing in the background to give a sense of urgency and dynamism.

Understanding the structure and phases of the show is instrumental for the analysis of the program. During the first stage, both audiences and characters come to appreciate the challenge, then the Fab Five work on the changes and finally everyone gets to see the glorious results. Each stage of the show reveals the topics or ideas privileged by the characters and highlights the process of negotiating and constructing values and identity. Importantly, in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the editing choices, music and general format of the show provide insight for the analysis of this cultural text and help construct the general narrative of the characters and the mission of the show.

Queer Eye aired for the first time on July 15, 2003 and quickly became very popular among audiences and marketers. The show was produced by David Collins, Michael Williams, and David Metzler by Scout Productions and Francis Berwick, Amy Introcaso-Davis and Christian Barcellos for Bravo. The original cast of the show consisted of Ted Allen, Kyan Douglass, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley and Blair Boone. However, the culture expert, Blair Boone, was replaced after two episodes by Jai Rodriguez.

During the first season, the audience share of the show reached unforeseeable numbers, making *Queer Eye* the best rated show of the summer of 2003. Wayne Friedam and Richard Linnett reported that the show captured 2.8 million total viewers, out of which 2.1 million were adults age 18 to 49. In their article, Friedman and Linnett explain that the primary target for the show was women 18 to 49, with a secondary target of gay men. By July 29, 2003, *Queer Eye's* audience numbers had reached an all time high, making the series Bravo's highest rating show ever.

By the end of the first season, executive producers for Scout Productions, David Collins, Michael Williams, and David Metzler, had deals for a spin-off of *Queer Eye* and franchises through the world. Between 2003 and 2005 the original version of the show—featuring Ted Allen, Kyan Douglass, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley and Jai Rodriguez—was transmitted in over 100 countries including Spain, England Turkey, Portugal and South Korea, among many others counties. Also, the franchise was sold internationally, thus licensing13 countries (among them France, Italy, Spain, Finland, Australia and England) to produce their own versions of the show featuring a local cast (NBC Universal Media Village, "Broadcast").

The success of the series enticed Bravo's parent network NBC Universal to air a half hour version of the show (the regular hour format was compressed to a 30 minute format) on NBC that attracted 6.9 million viewers. Claire Atkinson in her article, "Comeback Trail" explains that *Queer Eye's* success with audiences impacted the way marketers used their advertising dollars. The show made media buyers look at cable as an alternative to the networks to place their ads. Moreover, Richard Linnett reported that the success of shows like NBC's *Will & Grace*, and Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, both part of the General Electric Corp.'s, was taken as evidence that gay themes were mainstream and profitable.

The show was also significant for the Five main characters. Claire Atkinson and T.L. Standley's article "*Queer Eye* For Rich Guys" describes how the Fab, who were each getting $3,000 per episode during the first season, moved to $10,000 a show each for the subsequent seasons. The Five also received individual offers for sponsorships and commercial deals. However, the salaries of the five characters were not the only thing that changed through the seasons.

The concept of the show also changed significantly during the third season. With the beginning of the third season, Bravo's president announced in June 2005 that the title of the show had been abbreviated to *Queer Eye* because they wanted to venture into new kinds of makeovers and add more compelling narratives to the story lines. According NBC

Universal Media Village the changes responded to: a decline in the popularity of the show and increasing competition from the makeover show *Extreme Makeover Home Edition ('Queer Eye').* However, in an interview included on the bonus video section of the *Queer Eye* website, Ted Allen mentions, "We just call the show *Queer Eye* because we want to be able to work with women, gay women, straight men and gay men. As Carson always says, 'bad taste does not discriminate'." The changes in the third season included a makeover for a gay man and a transgender, thereby refining the positioning of the program. Finally, on January of 2007, Bravo announced the final season of *Queer Eye* (Serpe). The last ten episodes of the show aired in October of 2007.

Importance and Purpose of the Study

The concept of the show generated great controversy in popular and academic circles. For scholars, the program created a hype around issues of representation, identity politics, the use of term queer and the commodification of sexuality, sex and gender through aggressive marketing strategies. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* also had an enormous impact on popular culture. A year after the showed premiered, *Television Week* reported that as a direct consequence of the success of the show NBC started discussing development of a series of spin-offs of the program. Indeed, in the fall of 2005, Bravo aired a spin-off of the show called *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*, a program where gay men conducted a makeover on a "fashion-challenged" straight woman. Moreover, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* generated conversations at Viacom that pointed to the development of a cable network aimed at gays (Joe 2004). A first step in this direction was seen on the summer of 2006 when Bravo launched OUTZone TV, a broadband channel that caters to gay and lesbian audiences.

Further evidence of the success of the show is *Comedy Central's* three episode spoof of the program called, *Straight Plan for the Gay Man*. As noted by Devin Gordon, the "Flab Four" (unlike *Queer Eye, Straight Plan* does not include a culture makeover) are the satiric impersonators of the Fab Five and their mission is to help a gay man pass for a day as a hetero.

The popular culture animated show *South Park* also aired a satirical episode about the show called, "South Park is gay!" where the town joined in the *Queer Eye* craze. In this episode many of the male characters become metrosexuals. Although the change is received positively at first, the episode comes to an end when the women in town kill the Fab Five and explain that masculinity is what makes men attractive. Importantly,

Hillary Atkin comments that part of the unintended consequences of this pop culture phenomenon is that it has created some misconceptions about the amount of gay programming on television (8).

The goal of this study is to intervene as a critical actor and conduct a multidimensional reading of the show that incorporates the socioeconomic context and the constructed meaning. My study explores the ways that the representations of queer culture in the show reinforce the binaries of sex and gender. By investigating the evolution of *Queer Eye* (all four seasons), this study provides insights into popular culture's understanding and depiction of sexual difference and the strong link between these representations and the commercial interests of the producers.

The title of the show and the use of the term queer suggested the possibility of the development of a new discursive space for contested sexualities. In fact, the promotion of the show generated great appeal among LGBTQ audiences. But this excitement was short lived. Thus, four research questions guide this work: 1) In what way is the program sustaining structures of power and the corporate capitalist media system to promote consumerism? 2) What is the role of advertising in the negotiation of identity and the representation of sexual desire? 3) Does the representation of queer in *Queer Eye* helps undermine or reinforce the goals of the queer project? and 4) How is the program constructing narratives of masculinity, femininity and heterosexual romance?

While many critical texts have been devoted to analyzing some of these issues, this study attempts to extend the discussion by looking at *Queer Eye* from different theoretical frameworks—queer theory and political economy—and conducting a close analysis of a selection of episodes. To examine the research questions, a discourse analysis will be conducted on a random sample of episodes from the four seasons of *Queer Eye*. The episodes were recorded and transcribed in an effort to closely study the verbal and nonverbal remarks of the characters.

I frame the cultural study within Judith Butler's discussion of performativity and queer theory. Supplementing this perspective with insights from political economy, I look at the ritualized production of gender and sexuality in the popular culture program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Using discourse analysis, I discuss issues of representation of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity, readings of the body. Moreover, I provide insight as to the influence of commercial advertisements on the content of the show and its effects on audiences by also analyzing the texts within their system of production and distribution.

Outline of the Study

In the initial chapters of this dissertation, I review the published research on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and reality television, and articulate the relevant insights from queer theory and political economy that ultimately inform my analysis of the show. Thus, the first two chapters of this dissertation identify the gaps in the present research and argue for my study's theoretical positioning.

The goals of the second chapter are to situate *Queer Eye* in its historical context, identify the factors that influenced its development, and to describe this study's contribution to the current scholarship on the reality television genre and *Queer Eye* in particular. I first provide an historical context and an overview of the representation of gay sexuality on TV and reality television. Then I briefly discuss the current scholarship on *Queer Eye* as well as the research that focuses on the reality television genre.

In chapter three I review the primary contributions of each area and examine the advantages of using them for the study of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Political economy supports my critical examination of advertising and the marketplace in relation to sexual identity, while queer theory will be instrumental for the evaluation of the discursive constitution of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity in *Queer Eye.*

The first four chapters position my study theoretically and methodologically. The remaining chapters of the dissertation focus on my analysis. Chapter five, turns a critical eye toward the use of sexuality as a commodity. Here, I review the structural elements of producing *Queer Eye*, the strategies of cross promotion used to maximize the revenues of the show and the depiction of materialism. Furthermore, I explore the relationship between advertising, product placement and the representation of sexuality in the show.

Chapter six, looks at the representation of queer in *Queer Eye*. The program identifies the main characters as queer however the label is stripped of any sexual desire. Instead the characterization of sexual differences, represented by the use of the term queer, is consistent with current stereotypes of gay males. The chapter reviews the representation of gay males in popular culture and the many ways in which the program uses stereotypical representations of male homosexuality (comical, asexual gay men) to negotiate the boundaries of interaction between gay and straight men. The chapter attempts to argue that contrary to the goals of the queer project *Queer Eye* reinforces sexuality as a differentiating category of identity.

Chapter seven focuses on the ways the show constructs gender. Using examples from the show, I explore the role of the program in the negotiation of gender roles. This chapter reviews the representation and construction of masculinity, femininity and heterosexual romance.

Finally, chapter eight provides a summary of main arguments and the implications for the consumer market, popular culture and media studies critics. This chapter revisits the theoretical and conceptual ideas presented in the literature review and addresses the way this study contributes to the literature on the representation of queer identity.

In sum, this study argues that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is much more than a key player in the study of the representation of sexual difference in American television. The show also marks a key step in the evolution of the partnership between corporate sponsors and media content, by expanding the way product can be incorporated into a show. Additionally, the program provides a lens for the examination of consumerism in popular culture.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM QUEER IMAGES TO REALITY TELEVISION

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is one of the many reality fashion makeover programs currently showing on the television. However, it is different than its competitors in that the show uses stereotypical representations of gay men as their unique selling point, thereby highlighting the role of sexuality. Sexuality then, becomes a product, a point of differentiation that defines and constructs both homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Several authors have conducted studies about the show since its debut in 2003 (see, Allatson, Bateman, Gallager, Kavka, Pearson and Reich, Heller, Miller) but an examination of the data reflects a serious gap in the literature. This chapter reviews the literature in three key areas. First, it analyzes the literature on gay representation in television. Second, I give a brief overview of reality television. Third, I examine current scholarship specifically focused on the show. Finally, the chapter comes to an end with a review of the general areas that remain unexamined in the study of the television program *Queer Eye*.

Queer Representation on Television

In an effort to account for the significance of *Queer Eye*, I turn to the literature on the representation of gays in American media. Most of the literature addresses the limited characterization of queer in terms of the type of characters that are represented, the frequency of gays represented and the gay characters' importance in regard to the plot.

Much current scholarship has been devoted to analyzing the representation of homosexuality in film and television. This section sought to establish homologies between the two areas, to address the types of characters and representations of sexual desire on the big screen, and to examine how those characters have moved to small screens.

In his groundbreaking work, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo explains how the representation of homosexuality in film is directly related to a history of censorship. He explains that in the 1930s, the Motion Picture Production Code was established. The Code represented part of the industry's effort to avoid formal regulation. This self regulating policy restricted, among many other topics, the representation of sexual images of any kind in film. Most illuminating is his discussion of the three main types of depictions of queer characters that survived the regulations in American film: "the sissy," "the villain," and "the tragic hero."

For Russo, the "sissy" is the effeminate, flamboyant, asexual gay men. For him the sissies became symbols of failed masculinities, weakness and the things men secretly dread (homosexuality). In representing the dangers of being homosexual, films used the images of "the villain" and the "the tragic hero" to show the boding consequences of their "perversion." These two representations represented homosexuals as killers or as victims of tragic deaths.

Russo further explains that filmmakers used cues to suggest a character's sexuality without breaking the Code. In their book, *Queer Images*, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that unlike other identity markers, sexuality is not easily identifiable and therefore filmmakers rely on connotative means to suggest that a character is queer. Benshoff and Griffin categorized the cinematic resources used to convey the queerness of a character: dialogue (e.g., a male character who likes flowers); delivery (e.g., a male character who flips his wrist); name (e.g., a women named George); and costume makeup and hair (e.g., women wearing plain shoes, women with short or pulled back hair) (15).

Benshoff and Griffin summarize the salient criticism regarding the representation of queer identity in film (251-6):

- Most films are made from a heterosexual perspective, and when there is an attempt to tell a story from a queer perspective, efforts are made to change the plot in a way that will not "offend" straight sensibilities.
- There is a conscious effort in Hollywood to minimize queer plotlines and characters from films and scripts (e.g. film *Fried Green Tomatoes*).
- Gay intimacy, romance and community are often marginalized. Producers often resort to flamboyant images as a way of avoiding addressing issues of sex.

- When gays are presented, producers use straight characters as points of audience identification; thereby making queer characters secondary.
- Most representations rely heavily on stereotypes.
- Films that address queer topics minimize gay struggles or the contributions of queer activists (e.g. film *Philadelphia*);

Interestingly most of the criticisms of queer representation in film are also evident in the portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in television. Like film, the characters represented in television rely on stereotypes, usually play secondary roles in the plotlines and are stripped from any sexual desire.

Stephen Tropiano undertakes a critical study of the history of gays and lesbians on television. He explains that some of the first representations of homosexuality in television can be traced back to 1950s talk shows where the topic was introduced as a taboo. During that time, the medical discourse in regard to sexuality (mental illness, cures, and psychoanalysis) dominated the discussions of homosexuality. The author asserts that during the mid 50s the topic of homosexuality was discussed in one of two ways: as a social problem or as a target of sensationalism. Tropiano cites "Homosexuals who Stalk and Molest Children" and "Introduction to the Problem of Homosexuality" as examples of the overall mood and topics that dominated the discussions (3-4). He also asserts that lesbians were often excluded from these discussions.

During the 1960s, networks started to address issues of homosexuality in selected episodes on dramas such as a 1967, N.Y.P.D episode titled "Shakedown" where New York detectives, helped by a closeted homosexual, try to solve a case of blackmail. Homosexuality was also addressed in news programs such as the CBS report "The homosexual, the first major network news special about homosexuality" in 1967. After the 1969 Stonewall Riots the representation of homosexuality gained popularity in television (Tropiano 12). Shows like *All in the Family* (1971) and the television movie *That Certain Summer* (1972) addressed the subject of homosexuality while the ABC show *The Corner Bar* (1972) incorporated a regular gay character into the plotline (Tropiano).

Tropiano explains in the comedy genre that the character of the sissy was the leading recurrent portrayal of homosexuality up to the 1970s. Furthermore, he explains that during that time, comedy sitcoms addressed the issue of homosexuality in the plotlines through: coming out episodes; shows of mistaken identity; programs where the characters pretend to be gay to escape a situation; or special episodes that addressed some specific

social problems like AIDS (191-236). These plotlines were solidified in the 1980s in the narratives of shows like *21 Jump Street*, *Designing Women*, *Mr. Belvedere* among others (Hart). Moreover, the link between homosexuality and AIDS is still prevalent in more recent years. A commonly cited example is the *Seinfeld* episode of mistaken identity, "The Outing" that aired in February 11, 1993. During that episode, the main characters, Jerry and George, were identified as gay and they continuously denied it by adding "Not that there is anything wrong with that" (Tropiano).

According to Ron Becker, TV was dominated by three main networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) during the 1970s. He explains that over 97% of American households had televisions (81). Additionally, about 90% of audiences where watching one of the three networks, and therefore networks had little interest in reaching a smaller demographic or investing in risky programming that could potentially split their audience (Becker 82). Yet, two important events changed the way that television content was designed: a move towards niche advertising and cable.

Becker argues that at that in the 1970s the industry gained interest in targeting special demographics. The media environment was also changing, as signaled by the growth of cable and independent broadcast stations. These two changes combined with political pressures for inclusiveness in the media made gay material more appealing to the networks.

In the 1980s, shows started presenting gay and lesbian characters as part of the ensemble of the programs (Tropiano). However, ABC reported losing more than one million dollars in advertising revenues when an episode of *Thirtysomething* showed two men in bed having a post-coital conversation (Tropianao x). Suzanna Danuta Walters explains that the increased exposure of gay characters in the media during the 80s also elicited great opposition from conservative groups, and often resulted in lack of support from advertisers.

It was not until the 1990s that television saw an increased number of gay characters on primetime programs such as *Friends, Roseanne, Spin City, and Mad About You* as well as the daytime soap opera *All My Children.* However, in most cases these characters were only supporting characters (Tropiano; Becker; Kessler; Walters). Danuta Walters, however, points that while the popularity of gay characters increased in the nineties, the representation of intimacy (kissing, caressing, stroking) was still not accepted between characters.

In the late nineties, the gay and lesbians gained more cultural visibility. The infusion of gay characters was described by Tropiano as "GAYCOM."

For him, "GAYCOM" refers to situational comedies featuring one or more queer characters involved in their plotline: "A situation comedy that tries not to reduce gays and lesbians to second class citizens" (245). *Will and Grace* is one of the examples provided by the author to explain this phenomenon.

In April 30 1997, Ellen DeGeneres made history when her character came out during her TV show (Benshoff and Griffin 251). The episode was named, "The Puppy Episode," because ABC, concerned about Ellen's lack of a love interest on the show, had suggested for DeGeneres to get a puppy (Tropiano 248). The coming-out episode was heavily promoted by ABC which charged premium rates for 30-second spots. ABC was a sellout, the advertising slots sold for 20% over the show's usual $ 170,000 and was the network's highest-rated episode program in three years (Grover). However, a year after the airing of the episode the show was cancelled. The last episode of *Ellen* aired in May 13, 1998, a year after the cited episode (Hontz).

In her book Danuta Walters explains that when Ellen came out both in the show and in her personal life she became the target of institutionalized homophobia and the spokeperson for the Human Rights Campaign (82). The author maintains that although Ellen DeGeneres rejected the idea that the show was a gay sitcom, the development of the story line moved into that direction. For Danuta Walters, the coming out episode desexualized the character's desire for a woman and framed the relationship as "the meeting of like souls" (84). However, the storyline reflected Ellen's gayness. The author explains this best when she writes:

We witnessed not just the climatic moment of 'coming out,' but the more mundane and prosaic process of reckoning with the homophobia (and love) of friends and employers, confronting parents with truth they so desperately don't want to hear, and negotiating the changing and turbulent terrain of gay identity in a postmodern world. (Danuta Walters 85) Yet the author is also careful to overestimate the impact of the show for American television. As Danuta Walters also explain that the cancellation of the show was indicative of "true double standards and heterosexual unease" (94). As she argues that the show became too gay for heterosexual sensibilities.

The show *Ellen*, was seen by many as a milestone for queer representation in television, however it also generated much controversy as many grew critical of the new found "gay chic" aesthetic. For many, the popularity of gay and lesbian characters responded to a trend in the medium rather than a rupture with previous stereotypes. The type of representation did not change, mostly the character of the sissy is

represented (e.g. Carson from the Fab Five, Will and Jack from *Will and Grace*) thereby perpetuating the status quo. Yet, more programs seem to successfully incorporate the sissy into their story lines.

Also, Kelly Kessler explains that in the case of television programs such as *Friends*, and *Mad About You*, the characters behave in a manner that minimizes their lesbianism while highlighting their roles as mothers from their previous heterosexual relationships. Robert B. Bateman also cautions not to confuse visibility for acceptance. He explains that while more representation might mean acceptance, the type of representations and characters are also important. For him more representation could respond to an increased interest to see homosexual identity as an object of amusement.

Backlash of Queer Representation

The coming out episode of the television show *Ellen* generated strong reactions from audiences. Several religious groups organized bans against ABC, its parent company Disney, and the marketers with media properties on the show. On the other hand gay activists also organized to prevent companies from canceling their placements on the program.

The Walt Disney Company acquired American Broadcasting Companies (ABC) in 1996, and renamed the broadcasting group ABC, Inc. Both Walt Disney and ABC were subjects of criticism because of the airing of "The Puppy" episode in *Ellen*. Walt Disney Co. was the subject of a boycott from Southern Baptists over its gay-friendly policies that included: extending same-sex benefits to employees and having Ellen DeGeneres come out of the closet on her TV show (Grover, *Duck*).

In terms of the marketers, Michael Wilke in 1997 reported that Bristol-Myers Squibb Co.'s Clairol, Domino's Pizza, Burger King Corp. and Johnson & Johnson avoided placing ads during the episode while advertisers like Chrysler Corp. and General Motors Corp. canceled their placements. In the case of Chrysler, the company had to set up a touch-tone service to let viewers on both sides of the issue register their opinion and listen to a recorded explanation of the company's decision not to advertise their products during that episode of *Ellen* (*Adweek, An Ellen*). Clearly, the corporate decision to shy away from divisive gay content was the result of pressures from conservatives groups and other activist organizations.

Jack Neff writes that the National Federation for Decency, led by Donald Wildmon, was renamed in 1988 as the American Family Association (AFA). The AFA is an activist organization that supports

conservative values, and their mission is to clean up media content. Among many other issues, the association boycotts companies that advertise or support programming with gay or lesbian characters.

In 2005, *Advertising Age* reported on AFA's pressure on companies such as Ford Motor and Procter & Gamble to terminate sponsorship of any kind of programs with gay characters such as *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye.* Although the companies addressed AFA's concerns and suspended their placements of ads on gay-targeted titles for some time, the brands returned to advertise on gay-targeted media (Neff).

Additional cases of consumer pressures to censure homosexual imagery on television came after the 2007 Super Bowl in CBS. Ken Wheaton explains that at the time the Federal Communications Commission received more than 150 complaints regarding alleged homosexual imagery. The complaints made reference to the halftime show, which featured Prince as well as a Snickers (chocolate bar) commercial.

Viewers complained of the homoerotic imagery of Prince's halftime show "where at one point he went behind a curtain to play his guitar, and the silhouette created reminded some of a phallic symbol" (Wheaton). Complaints about the advertisement where two men unintentionally kissed while eating a Snickers were recorded too. According to Wheaton, one man was quoted stating,

> "It was obscene to show Prince, a HOMOSEXUAL person through a sheet, as to show his silhouette while his guitar showed a very phallic symbol coming from his below-midriff section. I am very offended and I would prefer not to have showed it to my four children who love football. One of them has hoped to be a quarterback and now he will turn out gay. I am actually considering checking him for HIV. Thanks CBS for turning my son GAY" (44).

Another person wrote:

> "The snickers bar commercial promoting homosexual behavior was disgraceful, also the giant shadow 'phallus' from prince's guitar was equally disgraceful, this behavior has no place in a prime time major family event. It was easier explaining to the kids about Jackson's boob being exposed, than explaining the pro homosexual theme of this year's event. We will never watch live again, only in TIVO, with the half time filth show cut out. It's pathetic when you can't keep porn out of the Super Bowl, just because 6% of the population is gay" (44).

Ultimately, the bans to Disney did not result in any losses for the company. The criticism did not prevent *Ellen* the show to have a sold out episode and register record audiences. However, even when marketers have seen great economic rewards for advertising on publications or programs that feature gay and lesbians, the reactions from some viewers, and the boycotts demonstrate cultural resistance to such inclusion in popular culture.

Yet the resistance to the relationship between advertising and queer identity has also come from LGTBQ supporters. Activist groups like "Gay Shame" and "LAGAI—Queer Insurrection" among others, have criticized the commercialization of the social movement, by contending that the celebration of a queer identity has been underwritten by corporate interest and the creation of a LGTBQ market. These groups are resisting the commodification of Gay Pride and the notion that the route to social recognition is to be empowered as consumers.

Reality Television

Reality television has become one of the most influential genres in TV programming. Annette Hill states that the increased popularity of the genre is reflected in the ratings of these shows and has resulted in great advertising revenues for the networks. The author uses the popularity of shows such as *Survivor, American Idol* and *Joe Millionaire* to show the great attractiveness of this genre to viewers. Hill notes that in 2000, *Survivor* reported over 27 million viewers and earned about 50 million in ad revenue; *American Idol* in 2003 had 25 million viewers; and in 2003, *Joe Millionaire's* 40 million viewers made the show almost as popular as the Academy Awards (3).

There are several Web sites dedicated exclusively to cover news, events and general stories about shows in the reality television genre. Among them, *Reality TV World*, that in 2006, listed over 300 reality TV shows in America alone. Gerd Hallenberger explains that one of the appeals of many non-fiction programs is that they can be easily transformed into different markets and give the appearance of being a domestic production. For example, versions of *Big Brother* have been incredibly successful throughout the world. Reality TV shows have also become the highest rated shows in the Netherlands, Spain, Northway, France, Australia, among many others (Hill 4).

However, the success of reality television cannot be limited to its popularity among audiences. Of great importance is the fact that the genre provides a cheap production alternative to dramas. Hill notes that while the

approximate cost of producing a one-hour drama is close to $1.5 million, the cost of production of a reality television show is $200,000 per hour (6). Chad Raphael further argues that the production strategies used for reality programming also facilitate the cheap production and maximization of revenues. Raphael details the most common production practices for these programs: hidden cameras, use of footage of the subjects in actual scenarios, an avoidance of studios, the incorporation of footage by unpaid amateur videographers, on-location interviews and synchronized sounds.

Anna McCarthy argues that reality television in this sense should not be seen as a genre, but as a mode of production. For McCarthy, the genre should be seen as the network's strategy to maximize revenues by bypassing major labor costs such as directors, actors and writers. Such criticism is consistent with the assessment that establishes correlation between the lack of originality from writers and producers with the popularity of this type of programming.

Matthew J. Smith and Andrew F. Wood, for example, argue against a formula that can become overly simplistic. For them, the genre involves deriving entertainment from the belief that the genre is unscripted and therefore one is watching ordinary people in their day to day activities. Thus, the perceived strength of the format is deceptive. A.J. Frutkin also criticizes the genre by stating that the popularity of reality television has to do with the changing tastes of a younger generation and the shortage of original ideas for scripted series.

The criticism from media scholars and many others has not stopped the rapid growth of the genre; in fact, the popularity of the genre has resulted in the formation of several subcategories within the format and a network. Some of the categories that make the genre are: gameshows, life, docu-soaps, dating, dramas, talk shows, hidden cameras and law enforcement (See Hill; Smith and Wood). **Gameshows** includes shows such as *Survivor* (CBS 2000) or the *Amazing Race* (CBS 2001), where participants compete for cash and other prizes; **life programming** (also referred as self improvement) involving house, garden, or personal makeovers such as *The Swan (FOX 2004)* or *What Not to Wear (TLC 2003*); **celebrity docu-soaps** (also referred as dramas) such as the *Osbourns* (MTV 2001), *Newlyweds* (MTV 2003*), Real World* (MTV 1992) and *An American Family* (PBS 1973); and reality **dating shows** such as *The Bachelor* (ABC 2002) and *Joe Millionaire* (FOX 2003) describe shows where participants choose suitors. Some experts include, documentaries as a genre, law enforcement shows like *COPS* and the entire television network CSPAN.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy falls into what Hill classifies as lifestyle programming involving house, garden or makeovers because it

combines makeovers with self improvement (24). For Hill, this subdivision of the genre is characterized by the "learning opportunities" provided to the viewers. This idea that reality television provides learning opportunities is part of a larger contention that television provides information and serves as an aid in the learning process. For Hill, television provides multiple learning opportunities, and in the case of lifestyle programs, audiences can learn from advice given in the program (79). Hill's argument makes an interesting case for the analysis of *Queer Eye* from a political economy perspective. A political economic reading of television would agree with her contention that television serves as an education source. However, such analysis would focus on the process of learning the exchange value of commodities as opposed to being centered on the "practical tips" she describes. Hill goes even further to argue that *Queer Eye* belongs to a subdivision of the subcategory that she calls gay lifestyle programming (20).

For June Deery, the dynamics of reality television are particularly interesting because it recruits people who are willing to work for nothing or very little in the hopes for the chance to win a prize. Central to the format, she claims, is the idea that "everyone has its price" (Deery, *Advertainment* 2). Participants in this genre will do and submit themselves to almost anything, including exposing their lives and sacrificing their privacy for cash.

Most illuminating in Deery's discussion of reality television is her take on makeover shows. The author states that the goal of makeover shows is also to sell commodities. These programs encourage the desire to attain an ideal of physical beauty through the consumption of goods (*Trading* 211). The main premise behind makeover shows is that consumption is the route to self improvement. These shows engage in superficial physical changes and fail to explore the reasons why many feel they need to alter their appearance. Moreover, for Deery, the participants are presented through individual stories which inspire empathy and become case examples for services the target of the makeover could not afford.

Another important theme for the study of reality television has to do with the conceptions of reality. Many scholars have attempted to address the question, how factual is reality television? Certainly a discussion of reality could get very complicated as one attempts to understand the philosophical implications of the term. Thus, it is important to clarify that this specific discussion of reality refers to the degree of involvement of the production staff during the production, or the degree of "ordinariness."

Misha Kavka, in the article "Love'n the Real" explains that the medium (television) complicates further the discussion of how factual is

reality TV. Television, she explains, is a medium that both opens a space for exposure to images and ideas, but simultaneously has a goal of entertaining (the spectacle). The medium has a dual role, one as forum for entertainment and one as a window into the world. This duality gives the impression that reality television is unmediated. However, the programs in actuality are sites of 'constructed unmediation' that have been shaped by technological sources (e.g. *Big Brother*, *Survivor*) (Kavka, *Love'n* 95).

Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood argue that despite the availability of programming based on non-fictional happenings (e.g. CSPAN or biographies), the ratings for reality TV increase under the premise of the "real." However, Rose and Wood state that the difference between the two focus on the how audiences interpret the content of the show. The authors explain that the viewers of the genre get their pleasure from the assumption that the characters are real people just like them. Thus, for many researchers the intersections between the real and the scripted are directly related to the ability of the viewers to live vicariously through the characters. For them, the premise of reality works under the assumption that the audience will be able to identify, empathize and live the experience as its own because, unlike actors, the main characters give the impression that they are average everyday people just like them.

Terry Toles Patkin suggests that reality television is more than inexpensive production, lack of creativity and big ratings, but a way of constructing both our individual and societal identities. The author argues that the identities of both the participant and the viewers are constructed, as reality TV gives us a false sense of intimacy. In the case of the audience, the construct is a result of a false sense of social interaction. For the participants, it occurs as part of the production, camera, editing and other production resources.

According to Mark Andrejevic, reality television is rooted on three main promises. First, the genre promotes the idea that audiences can go beyond the role of the spectator to become participants and in some occasions the main character. In this, Andrejevic coincides with Rose and Wood by asserting that the accessibility of the genre is highly related to the viewer's ability to identify with the narrative elements of the show.

Second, for Andrejevic, the genre becomes very profitable because the structure of that type of program allows for submission to comprehensive surveillance, meaning that the participants of reality television are being paid to be watched, making being the subject of surveillance a form of work. The author describes this form of employment as the work of being watched. However, for the author, the work of being watched has different dimensions as it makes reference to the characters in the programs that sell

access to their lives (a form of surveillance) and to the audiences that consume those messages through mass communication. It refers to both the participants and the audience as consumers of advertising. Andrejevic proposes that both being watched and watching television are forms of labor. For example, in *Queer Eye* the straight guy and the audiences are working for the network. The straight guy is working for them as he sells access to his lifestyle and is indoctrinated into new patterns of consumption; on the other hand, the audience labor is to process all the product placements and advertising messages and consequently generate advertising revenues for the station.

A third promise of reality TV is the high return on investment. Andrejevic indicates that this type of program typically generates a lot of media buzz and opens the space for spin-offs and sequels. In the case of *Queer Eye*, the program incorporates product placements in five categories, and countless possibilities for endorsements. David Collins creator of the show was quoted for *Adweek* as he explains "The show is a balance between creative and organically integrated product placement" (36). Also, cross promotion opportunities have materialized in the form of books, DVDs, franchises, and a spin-off show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl.*

Literature on Queer Eye

The literature on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* discusses major themes from the first three seasons of the show. The themes of discussion can be divided into four areas: 1) the role of the show in supporting the heterosexual romance; 2) the characters as facilitators of the capitalist economy; 3) the discussion over issues of representation of gay men and queer; and 4) the relationship between an alleged failed masculinity and the constitution of a new one, the metrosexual.

Many scholars agree that the role of the five main characters is to reinforce heteronormativity (Allatson, Bateman, Gallager). For Paul Allatson the program *Queer Eye* is a reflection of the economic and political environment in the United States. Allatson recognizes that the show uses sexuality to service the heterosexual and reproductive logics of capitalism. His argument is premised on his assertion that the show privileges the heterosexual couple and states that the producers use the homosexual male characters to turn the working class into middle class consumerists, to reaffirm compulsory heterosexuality, and to exclude lesbians by equating queer with white, upper class men.