

Sarah E. S. Sinwell  
Program in Media and Screen Studies  
Northeastern University  
204 Lake Hall  
Boston, MA 02115  
(812) 361-5283  
[s.sinwell@neu.edu](mailto:s.sinwell@neu.edu)

Flow Abstract 2012: Making Media Studies Perfectly Queer: A Tribute to Alex Doty

Queering Media Studies with Alexander Doty

My academic work simply would not have existed without Alexander Doty's books, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) and *Flaming Classics* (2000). *Making Things Perfectly Queer* was one of the first books I ever read that explored the complicated and complex nature of media and mass culture in the context of queer theory. In relation to my own work, it created a space for queerly imagining texts that were often only seen in relation to heteronormative culture. Challenging and questioning our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories, his argument was particularly unusual at the time insofar as it explored texts (such as Jack Benny, *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Designing Women*) that had not previously been read as queer. In his work, Doty created a "flexible space" for queerness and "queering" texts that seem to be non-queer and provided a place for queerly positioning both viewers and texts. For Doty, queer readings are not alternative, wishful or "reading too much into things," but rather he argues for "a range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (16).

Finding queerness in seemingly non-queer spaces like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Laverne and Shirley* became a way for me to negotiate a place for my own work within queer and feminist media studies. Doty's understanding of queerness as something other than

“lesbian,” “gay” or “bisexual” also enabled me to envision queerness in seemingly heteronormative spaces. His idea that “basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments” (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 3) also enabled me to think about the possibilities for resistance, openness and erotic variety within texts most people would not consider queer at all. At the same time, his re-reading of texts outside of the queer canon also created a space for me to explore the queer moments within non-canonically queer media texts such as *sex, lies and videotape*, *thirteen* and *The Virgin Suicides*.

While in the classroom, I have had the opportunity to teach his Flow article about the 2009-2010 Emmy Awards focused on *Glee* and *Modern Family* as well as the chapter from *Flaming Classics* on *The Wizard of Oz* as lesbian fantasy (a read of the film that I’m sure my students will find hard to forget). I have found that these texts are essential to students’ understandings of both television and film as media institutions, as well as their political and queer implications. In my experience, whereas students are often open to the queer representations of *Glee* and *Modern Family*, they are much less open to queer readings of seemingly straight texts. His reading of *The Wizard of Oz* in particular pushed my students to reconsider the ways in which heteronormativity often structures the ways in which we create meaning from media texts. In this way, I have used his work as a model for reading queerness in texts that include everything from *Superbad* to *Nip/Tuck*.

Most recently, at the Console-ing Passions Conference in July of 2012, I had the pleasure of seeing Alex present on twenty-first century television beefcake. Arguing that shows like *Spartacus*, *UFC* and *The Jersey Shore* create new spaces for queer masculinity within popular culture, his talk was especially notable because of the

insertion of his own spectatorial pleasures in watching these shows. Many critics writing about Alex's influence in media studies have called attention to the ways in which his own viewing pleasures have not only influenced his own readings of media texts, but also created a space for other academics to incorporate their own personal connections and media fandom within their scholarly work. His highly personal analyses of Shari Lewis, Captain Kangaroo, *Laverne and Shirley* and *Designing Women* certainly are a reminder of the queerness that is often present in seemingly heteronormative popular texts and the pleasure we get out of watching them. This investigation of the intersections between queer and non-queer culture has made his work instrumental for scholars continuing to make (even seemingly non-queer) things perfectly queer. His scholarly legacy continues in all those works that integrate the personal and political, the straight and the queer, the text and the audience, and I look forward to the critiques that will continue to be created with his perfectly queer theorization of media studies in mind.