

VITO RUSSO (1946-1990)

LGBT Activist and Film Historian

Lesson Plan



"I DON'T KNOW WHAT WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE WAY I WAS RAISED OR THE WAY I REACTED, BUT I NEVER ONCE, NOT FOR A SECOND, BELIEVED THAT IT WAS WRONG TO BE GAY, THAT IT WAS A SIN, THAT HOMOSEXUALITY WAS EVIL." – Vito Russo



Pioneering journalist, lecturer, and author Vito Russo's activism began in the early years of gay liberation following the Stonewall riots. His 'Movie Nights' screenings of camp films were cultural touchstones for the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), a gay rights organization founded in late 1969. A charismatic speaker and film buff, from 1973 to 1990 Russo traveled throughout the United States and to several European cities delivering lectures about 'The Celluloid Closet' – with accompanying film clips – at college campuses and at assorted venues. Russo's presentations, as well as his 1981 book *The Celluloid Closet*, explored the history of gay and lesbian representation in film, explaining how such depictions in movies were surprisingly open before the advent of the Hays Hollywood Production Code in 1930 and viciously demonized thereafter. In 1983 Russo wrote, produced and co-hosted a WNYC-TV public television series focusing on the gay community called "Our Time". In 1985, the same year he was diagnosed with HIV, the defamatory and sensationalized coverage of the AIDS epidemic by 'The New York Post' prompted Russo to co-establish the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). The organization continues to monitor LGBT representation on television, in print, and in film and still presents an annual award in Russo's honor. In 1987 Russo and activist/author Larry Kramer co-founded the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) – which focused the nation's AIDS activism by forcing a brutally homophobic government to respond to the worst health crisis of modern times. In 1990 Russo appeared in the Oscar winning documentary "Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt." He died of AIDS-related complications on November 7, 1990 at the age of 44. His definitive biography – *Celluloid Activist* – was published in 2011; and the film documentary of his life – "VITO" – was released in 2012. Vito Russo's enduring legacy – the 1996 HBO documentary of "The Celluloid Closet" (a film project funded almost entirely by small donations) was co-executive produced and narrated by his close friend, Lily Tomlin, just as she promised it would be.

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Read the biographical information (Above).
2. Activate Prior Experience: What contributions did Vito Russo make to the Gay Activists Alliance and the film industry?
3. Group Discussion: What process did Russo use to chronicle the history of homophobia in the film industry? How did he share it with regular people?
4. Extend Knowledge: What do you think Russo achieved by challenging LGBTQ representations in Film and Television?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Website Investigation: How did Russo establish a knowledge base about LGBTQ issues in the media? What process did he follow?
2. Execute an advanced search of people in the **Film** industry at: <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Can you find anyone else who used film to illuminate an issue? Write an essay comparing and contrasting that person (or persons) with Russo. Weigh the long-term impact of their work on the film industry and on society as a whole.
3. Explain why (or why not) addressing LGBTQ representations in film matters in day-to-day life for both people in the film industry and for average people who like to go to the movies.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. How did Russo meet the personal challenges in his early life and his adult life?
2. Describe the importance making changes for LGBTQ rights in Russo's own words at <http://www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html> How does this apply to your own beliefs?
3. Russo examined the power of the media in changing the society's impressions of LGBTQ people. Read the following article at <http://www.glaad.org/blog/hbo-debut-documentary-about-glaad-co-founder-vito-russo>. Examine the methods that were used by Russo in creating *The Celluloid Closet*.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Explore this link at <http://www.glaad.org/sri/2014/vitorusso>. How would you apply the "Vito Russo Test" to films that you have seen?
2. After viewing *Vito: The Life of Gay Activist Vito Russo* (<http://vitorussomovie.com/>) how would you go about advocating for fair representation of any maligned community through the use of film, media, and documentaries?