

## Queer Theory and Gay Representation in Film

### INTRODUCTION

In the past two years, the production of multiple films has drawn attention to how gay people are represented in film. *Moonlight*, *Call Me By Your Name*, and especially *Love, Simon* are just a few films that have been recently lauded for the way they portray gay people. However, films historically do not have the best track record when it comes to how they portray characters that do not fit the normative mold of heterosexuality. Using queer theory as a lens through which to address this topic, this paper seeks to answer the question of how gay people are represented in American film and what that says about gender and sexuality in American society.

### QUEER THEORY

Queer theory was chosen for this topic of gay representation because of its ability to look critically at representations and deconstruct cultural assumptions. Because of its tendency to focus on the analysis of cultural texts, it can sometimes fall under the paradigm of hermeneutic theory. However, its rightful place is under the critical theory paradigm, as it functions as a critique of hegemonic sexual ideologies and seeks to identify instances where these ideologies are challenged.

Queer theory developed out of cultural studies theories, which examine issues such as hegemony and power dynamics in culture (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). It emerged most directly from gay and lesbian studies. But while gay and lesbian studies focus primarily on the general representation of gay and lesbian people, queer theory looks at representations in the context of current normative systems and seeks to dismantle those systems (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). One example of this is how heterosexual marriage is considered a cultural norm in most societies. This institution, or system, benefits those who are heterosexual and disadvantages those who do not fit into the cultural norm of heterosexuality. Those who are queer--or different than the norm of heterosexual--are seen as deviant to what is normal and are thus subject to societal consequences.

Queer theory has three foundational concepts that are important to explain: normalization, heteronormativity, and the notion of queer (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Normalization is "the process of constructing, establishing, and (re)producing an all-encompassing standard used to measure goodness, desirability, morality, and superiority in a cultural system" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 818). Heterosexuality, for example, is normalized in Western cultures. To be heterosexual is what is good and desirable. The second concept is heteronormativity, which refers to the "structures of understanding" that exist in certain cultures that lead to benefiting those who fall under the definition of heterosexual and "other" those who do not (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 818). The third concept is the notion of queer. Whereas gay and lesbian studies focus on the binary ideas of gay and straight, queer theory is more interested in this idea of queerness, or anything that goes against what is deemed normal

by society. Queer, then, becomes that which is undesirable, that which is deviant to what is normalized.

Borrowing from the ideas of the social theory of social constructivism, queer theory asserts that gender and sexuality are social constructions (Jagose, 1996). What this means is that gender and sexuality are not identities that are essential to who people are, but rather have been constructed by society as normal ways to behave in certain contexts. Judith Butler (1990), commonly thought of as one of the pioneers of queer theory, takes this further by talking about the performative nature of identity: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (p. 25). In other words, Butler is saying that gender (and we can say sexuality as well) is a performance. Society has determined which performances are normal and all people, aware or not, perform to these standards or are "othered" by society.

Another pioneer of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), is well-known for her writings on the closet. She states that, for homosexuals, the closet is a normalizing force that keeps them silent about their sexuality and from disturbing normative concepts, such as heterosexuality. Due to these conventional societal norms, the tension that is created by potentially leaving the closet results in suppression and even violence.

Queer theory, in the context of film, looks at these places where gender and sexuality performance occurs and sees them as mediated sites of struggle. The theory utilizes Stuart Hall's theory of coding and decoding, but goes one step further (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2019). Queer theorists use a queer reading of texts, decoding mediated performances in a way that shines light on this point of struggle. These representations of performance either serve to

reinforce the hegemonic standards in place in society, or they counter those standards, challenging the status quo.

### QUEER THEORY AND FILM

In his book Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film, Michael William Saunders (1998) discusses the representations of gay people in film. He says that, in almost all cases, gay people have either been invisible in film or portrayed as monstrous in some way (p. 5). Alluding to the normative standards in place in recent history, Saunders goes on to say that it was "...only possible, at this point in Hollywood history, to get the censors to allow the screening of those depictions of homosexuality that showed gay men and lesbians as being abnormal, diseased, doomed to self-destruction or hopelessly criminal in character" (p.7). This type of portrayal of gay people only serves to reinforce the dominant hegemonic view that heterosexuality is the desired sexuality. Saunders notes that challenging this norm, even in mediated forms such as film, can be dangerous. The gravitational pull of societal norms is so strong, that any deviation from them can be seen as quite revolutionary. "That gay people themselves don't talk much about this fact is, perhaps, an indication of how clear it is to them that their being monstrous is an obvious assumption, deeply embedded within the national psyche, around which they've learned to move," Saunders notes (p. 3).

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2009), in their book America On Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies, discuss the origins of using queer theory to look at films. Beginning in the 80s, they say, homosexuality was increasingly being acknowledged in film, however problematic those acknowledgements were (p. 339). However,

the problem was that these representations were still seen in binary terms of either straight or gay, alienating millions of people who did not fit into either category. Queer theory, then, was seen as an alternative way to look at these representations, able to include anyone who did not fit into the standard heterosexual category.

Looking at films through a queer theory perspective can help identify these sites in film where gender and sexuality are performed, either in a way that reinforces or challenges heteronormativity. The following studies aim to do just this.

## STUDIES

### **Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film**

In this study, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2009) look at ten different full-length animated films and examine how the queering of villains lead to indicating their deviance while heroes were positively represented with heteronormative qualities. The ten films were chosen because they were all popular children's films and because of their known use of gender transgression. Various indicators were analyzed to reveal the gender performance of the villains, including physical traits, costumes, body movements, gestures, activities, and dialogue. These were all then compared to the protagonist of the film. The findings strongly show the queering of villains in these films. In the case of physical characteristics, facial features were found to be quite revealing. One example provided was that of *The Lion King*, "in which the slim face and pointed chin of the vengeful lion Scar is shown in close-up with his noble brother Mufasa, whose face is broad with a huge, heavy jaw" (p. 97). Costuming plays a role in the queering of villains in multiple films, including *Pocahontas*. The authors of the study state that "Ratcliffe's

costume crosses into deviance through its overt femininity; he is not merely wearing a fine suit, but a suit in fuchsia with a lavender collar, ruffled cuffs, bows in his hair, and high-heeled shoes" (pg. 99). Nonverbal gestures, such as raised pinkies while drinking and expressive hand movements with limp wrists, were also found to be favored by villains. Many other transgressions are pointed out throughout the study and the authors conclude that, while there is no conclusive evidence from any solitary film, the combined evidence of queering is clear. The portrayal of these villains "serve as sites of contest between normalcy and deviance," and serve to reinforce certain norms for audiences (p. 105).

### **An Evil Threat to Marriage, Children and the Future: Queer Theory, "The Passion of the Christ," and Evangelical Political Rhetoric**

In his study employing queer theory, Richard Wolff (2015) compares two queer characters to other non-queer characters in the film *The Passion of the Christ*, and shows how the representation of each are depicted as evil and good, respectively. These characters are analyzed using queer theory in order to expose those that do not conform to identities that are deemed normal. According to the study, Satan and Herod are both seen as transgressing gender norms while Pilate, Claudia, Seraphia, Simon the Cyrene, and Mary all model traditional gender roles. The author provides ample findings that support the notion of queerness being an enemy which is to be fought and shows that, through the "binary presentation of the normal and queer, a clear hierarchy is established via cinematic and narrative means, affording the former, with whom the audience is encouraged to identify, sympathetic depiction, while representing the latter as eccentric, detestable and evil" (p. 16).

### **The Fist and the Corpse: Taming the Queer Sublime in Brokeback Mountain**

Davin Grindstaff (2008), in his study on the film *Brokeback Mountain*, looks at the film from a queer perspective in order to make sense of a paradoxical issue within the film. Though the film follows two men who are continually repressing their sexuality and experiencing homophobic violence, a sense of terror is mostly absent from the film. The author states that the reason behind this is largely due to the film's aesthetics, which allow the audience to avoid the normal anguish and turmoil that usually occur when witnessing such troubling matters. The author calls this the queer sublime. Conducting character analyses, Grindstaff goes on to show that the ways in which the film portrays the characters of Jack and Ennis advances notions of heteronormativity. For instance, when Jack and Ennis are alone in the mountains, there is a freedom to explore their sexuality. However, once back in society, they are forced back into their closets. "Their relationship," Grindstaff states, "although queer in private, remains normal in public" (p. 229). Because the relationship is hidden, and because of the way the film represents same-sex desire as a sort of gender inversion, the author claims that the characters can be portrayed "without challenging the binary, gendered structure of heteronormative masculinity" (p. 226). Grindstaff concludes that "*Brokeback Mountain* tells a cautionary tale, warning gay men to remain in the closet as a way to transcend their queerness and to avoid social oppression" (p.234).

### **Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-Out in New Queer Adolescence Films**

In this study, Gilad Padva (2004) looks at three different youth melodramas from the 1990s: *Beautiful Thing*, *Edge of Seventeen*, and *Get Real*. The author uses past literature to point out that there is often a master narrative when it comes to young people developing into adults. In western society, this master narrative includes becoming a heterosexual adult. Gay teens have to then choose whether to follow this master narrative, and in so doing hide a part of who they are, or face the consequences of going against the norms of society. Upon analysis of these three films, Padva finds that, although the representations of queerness are complicated due to fixed sexual orientations in society, these representations are positive and they present positive messages for young people. He says that framing homophobia as the issue, not homosexuality, and presenting the message that staying in the closet is worse than coming out allows these films to present coming out as "the only way for a queer teenager to achieve his/her personal, social, cultural, and sexual liberation" (p.368). Padva says that these films are important because young people "need these supportive visualizations of struggle and success, agony and happiness, destruction and attraction" and that these films "can give hope to the agonized teenager who sits at the back of the classroom, and tries so hard to survive the daily mental and physical abuse" (p. 369).

## DISCUSSION

In answering the question of how American films represent gay people and what those representations say about society, I believe that queer theory is quite useful. Representations of gay people in film have historically been very negative, and looking at the topic in a way that



explains how societal norms impact certain representations adds clarity to a somewhat confounding topic.

The studies mentioned above all seek to make sense of the representations of sexuality and gender in film. I believe they do help in revealing important truths about these representations. Using queer theory, and in the context of a heteronormative society, it is easy to see why queer representations have been so negative and still continue to reinforce deviant assumptions about people who cannot be categorized into the standard of heterosexuality.

It is encouraging to see that some films are beginning to challenge the status quo of heteronormativity. The teen melodramas discussed in one of the studies show that not all representations are negative. And as society continues to develop, hopefully more of these representations in film will become less "othering" and more inclusive of the wide array of people that exist in the world.

Queer theory, however, does have its share of limitations. Matters of intersectionality, such as race and class, are nowhere to be seen in discussions based in queer theory. Surely, the experience and representations of a black gay man are going to be vastly different than that of a white gay man. And an economically poor lesbian would undoubtedly be represented differently than a culturally elite lesbian. Queer theory does not have a way of distinguishing between these differences, which I believe could possibly lead to false assumptions and faulty conclusions.

Also, so much focus is spent on the superstructure of culture, that the base--or means of production--is mostly ignored. Political economy theory could add much to the conversation of representation. Looking at the economic reasons behind how gay people are portrayed could

prove to be very helpful in answering the primary research question, especially in the film industry, where economics drive so much of what happens.

More studies are needed on this topic, especially studies of more recent films that portray gay people. Many films discussed in this paper are over fifteen years old and some might say they represent another era. The large strides made in marriage equality and rights for LGBTQ people in recent years have begun to challenge heteronormativity in America like never before. Newer films like *Moonlight*, *Call Me By Your Name*, and *Love, Simon* are portraying gay people in ways that are beginning to redefine what is acceptable in our society in regard to gender and sexuality.

It will be interesting to see how, as culture continues to change and the acceptance of queer sexuality continues to rise, queer theory will be used in research. Can a focus on gender and sexuality be turned to a focus on different aspects that would be considered as going against societal norms? I think the answer to that question is definitely yes. I see queer theory as a useful theory that will continue to be used to examine societal structures and how the normativity of certain concepts continues to be either reinforced or challenged.

## CONCLUSION

When discussing the question of how gay people are represented in film and what that says about society, queer theory can provide many answers. It is useful in looking at the social structures in place and how they can dictate mediated representation. When gay people are portrayed as deviant, for example, it makes sense in the context of a society that is trying to reinforce heteronormativity. While queer theory can help explain phenomena of this nature, it

fails to look much at other important matters, such as race or class intersectionality and economics. A combination of theories is almost always needed to get the full picture of any topic, but queer theory is a great start in looking at gay representation in American film.

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