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Homophobia in Film

Catherine McLearen

The perpetuation of stereotypes in various forms of media has a harmful effect on those who view it whether or not they are conscious of it. Stereotypical images have a particularly powerful effect on adolescents who seek representation of themselves in media and develop their own personalities based on the expectations they see on the screen. Film is particularly unique form of media that combines visual, audio and dramatic features to reach wide and diverse audiences. Using these techniques in congruence with one another, filmmakers seek to both reflect influence society. Thus, film has a significant power to mobilize the public and shape its opinion. In the instance of gender stereotypes, the reflection of societal expectations that gender and sex are dependent on one another and should determine the sexuality and behavior of individuals is shown. Filmmakers may choose whether they want their work to include and reinforce these characterizations or challenge them. Films that engage in gender stereotyping contribute to homophobia.

As film attempts to mirror society, stereotypes are an easily available way of presenting generalized characters but film's dual role as reflector and influencer of society makes this choice a dangerous one. To give an example, when women are portrayed in media as being sexual objects under the subjection of men, a decidedly and quantifiable negative impact on the self-esteem and body image of adolescent girls who view this characterization is recorded.¹ Recently, a shift has been taking place in films that elevates females from secondary roles defined by their relationship to male characters to roles that are more independently defined.

¹ Himani Joshi. Archana Kumari. "Gender Stereotyped Portrayal of Women in the Media: Perception and Impact on Adolescent." *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 20, Issue 4 (April 2015): 45

However, these films often still provide a flawed attempt at creating anti-stereotypical women and have had less commercial success than films that perpetrate stereotypes. This may suggest the preference of audiences to entertainment that is conducive to patriarchal ordering.² The problem and its harmful effect are evident and media can choose to be the “dominant medium for advocacy of gender equality and uplifting the present status of women in the society.”³ Instead of portraying the woman as either the victim or seductress, media’s crucial ability to affect positive social change may be put into work to challenge these gender stereotypes and elevate the status of women in society.

Hollywood has a long history of queer characterizations that have often unfortunately been stereotypical portrayals that reassert gender expectations and heteronormativity. From 1931 to 1968, the Motion Picture Production Code banned any sort of action involving or reference to sexual transgressions and other taboo subjects, forcing gender fluidity and homosexuality in particular to be othered. The Code referred to homosexuality as “sexual perversion” but rather than eliminating representation of homosexuality from film completely, the topic and such characters were forced underground and implied. The famous implication of the homosexual man in film was for years the “harmless sissy,” a man that “acted like a woman” and served as a point of mocking humor.⁴ The code was finally lifted in the 1960s but the state of mainstream queer representation in film has been practically frozen in time since for four decades. Through stereotypical representation, no representation at all or the reliance on the formula of repercussions for sexual and gender transgressions, “queer has become a serious

² Himani Joshi, Archana Kumari, “Gender Stereotyped Portrayal of Women in the Media: Perception and Impact on Adolescent.” *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 20, Issue 4 (April 2015): 46

³ Ibid: 51

⁴ Thomas Piontek, "Tears For Queers: Ang Lee's Brokeback Mountain, Hollywood, And American Attitudes Toward Homosexuality." *Journal Of American Culture* 35.2 (2012): 125

expression of a tragic metanarrative.”⁵ Since the 1960s, screenwriters in the post-Code era have had to balance any inclusion of “the sin of sexual transgressions” with consequences for those characters that act upon them and in the case of homosexuality the consequence has overwhelmingly been death.⁶ As far as this formula is concerned, little has been altered between Rizzo’s death in *Midnight Cowboy* (1968), Andy’s in *Philadelphia* (1993) and Jack’s in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). In fact, it is so prevalent that critics have taken to using “gay romance” and “tragic romance” as if they were synonymous terms.⁷ Thus, the question of whether the limits of stereotyped representation of queer people has actually been better than no representation at all.

Philadelphia (1993), the quintessential Hollywood film about a gay man with AIDS, was the first mainstream Hollywood movie that addressed the subject and yet it was not made until the epidemic had already been going on for a decade. The premise centers upon a homophobe, Joe, who is unable to accept the humanity of a gay man, Andy, until he nearly dying. Joe acts as an individual substitute for the male heterosexual audience so that experiencing his emotional arc is less likely to be met with resistance as he is “still a man” despite gaining compassion for a gay man.⁸ The ideological goal of the movie is one that suggests that homophobia is a personal aversion that can be changed on an interpersonal level rather than a socio-cultural phenomenon, as the author of *The Celluloid Closet* states it actually is.⁹ The film relies on changing the views of its audience through pity and thus hardly provides a progressive trend for queer representation in film.

⁵ Ibid: 129

⁶ Ibid: 130

⁷ Ibid: 128

⁸ Ibid 128

⁹ Ibid: 124

Brokeback Mountain (2005) is another highly regarded Hollywood first in gay cinema. Despite there being a long list of independent and made-for-TV movies on the subject, Brokeback has been widely accepted as the first mainstream film centering on the love story of two gay men. Critics and audiences commended Brokeback as being a “genre-busting” movie that “humanized gay love” both signaling and making room for a softer, more “civilized attitude towards homosexuality.”¹⁰ In Brokeback, Ennis’ father takes him to a ditch when he is still a boy to show him the bodies of two men brutally murdered for their homosexuality and from then on faces severe internalized oppression. Ennis’ tragedy stems from his homosexuality and it suggests that if it were not for this one defect he could be an “ordinary man.”¹¹ However, Making Love (1982) was really the first mainstream movie from Hollywood to deal with a gay male relationship. Though it has since been reviewed as having the mere depth of a soap opera with a gay twist, gay critics at the time of release held it in high regard simply out of a “hunger for representation” shared by gay audiences “desperate to see a reflection of themselves in a movie” and considered “visibility at any cost [as] a good thing.”¹² When it comes to Brokeback Mountain, released two decades later, the antiquated low bar of visibility politics should not be the level of measurement for a film’s ability to effect positive social change. One reviewer calls Brokeback groundbreaking because it is a dramatic gay love story where the men are not “hairdressers or drag queens.”¹³ In fact, much of the regard for Brokeback is due to the gay relationship taking place between ideal heterosexual masculine males, cowboys, and thus appeals to the less than presumably queer-friendly Midwestern audience.

¹⁰ Ibid: 123

¹¹ Ibid: 129

¹² Ibid: 127

¹³ Ibid: 131

Here is where the potentially corrupting business factors involved in movie production plays an important role in the evaluation of film's harmful use of stereotypes and what ability, if any, it has to challenge this model. Film is an art form but they realistically need funding to be made and marketing to make a profit. Advertising "is one of the most effective means of reaching a large, dispersed audience" and thus marketing is a crucial instrument employed to reach this profit making end.¹⁴ Central to creating a "mainstream" Hollywood movie is making the story one that is attractive to the most about of ticket buyers possible. Mihaela Frunza states that "regardless of what political philosophy a sponsor wants to convey, this means of communication will always be limited by the advertisement's inherent bias: the sales pitch."¹⁵ Ultimately, "the bottom line all but guarantees" that films dealing with controversial social issues are done in a way that will not alienate mainstream, paying audiences.¹⁶ Therefore, the "gayness" of Jack and Ennis in *Broke* is managed so that it does not pose a threat to the continuance of heteronormative society.¹⁷ In the end, Ennis is left alone and Jack is killed both presumably for their homosexuality. The reoccurring message here and in most movies with gay relationships is not to try this at home. While a movie like *Brokeback Mountain* causes its viewers to reflect upon the society that rejected the true nature of these men, it does not go so far as to threaten the comfortable existence of the heteronormative society in which they benefit because in the end the tragic lesson of sexual transgression is learned.

In recent years, the 'bromance' genre has emerged as a potential source challenging gender and sexuality stereotypes in society as mirrored through and influenced by movies. The

¹⁴ Mihaela Frunza, "Advertising, Gender Stereotypes and Religion. A Perspective from the Philosophy of Communication." *Journal of the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 14, issue 40 (2015): 72

¹⁵ Ibid: 72

¹⁶ Thomas Piontek, "Tears For Queers: Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, Hollywood, And American Attitudes Toward Homosexuality." *Journal Of American Culture* 35.2 (2012): 132

¹⁷ Ibid: 129

genre includes movies that revolve around the homosocial relationship between two or more men. This genre offers the potential for heterodoxy, defined as “unorthodox, transgressive, or subversive ways of [...] being heterosexual,” to make progress in the reduction of stereotypes in film and “theorize change in the realm of the dominant.”¹⁸ Because heteronormativity relies on the binary, challenging the concepts of males being traditionally masculine and females being traditionally feminine can do much to reduce pressures on strict expectations of gender norms and thus ease prejudices towards queer persons.

The female genre of ‘rom-com’ or the ‘chick flick’ is one where femininity and the heterosexual relationships are central, the audience views all aspects of the female lead’s life and the man is simply another factor in her life, often a savior but hardly one carrying any depth, all the audience needs to know is that he exists.¹⁹ In the male version, ‘home-coms,’ the homosocial relationship is central, the woman enters to man’s life to become a part of it and when it occurs, the issues of sexual inexperience among the female is sweet but weird and embarrassing among the males.²⁰ Bromantic movies like *The Hangover* (2008) provide the least opportunity for heterodoxy as the gender transgression exhibited by the feminized male character, Alan, are unattractively disordered and the subject of ridicule and pity.²¹ In *Wedding Crashers* (2005), two heterosexual men, Jeremy and John, are struggling to learn how to be heteronormative while maintaining their homosocial friendship. Their regard for each other is, however, based upon their admirations of each other’s heterosexual exploits.²² The women in the movie fit the two most common female stereotypes; that of the ‘old hag’ and the oversexualized seductress, except

¹⁸ Heather Brook. “Bros before Ho(mo)s: Hollywood Bromance and the Limits of Heterodoxy.” *Men and Masculinities*. vol. 18 no. 2 (June 2015): 250

¹⁹ Ibid: 252

²⁰ Ibid: 253

²¹ Ibid: 255

²² Ibid: 156

for John's slightly masculinized love interest, Claire. Claire's brother is gay but is characterized as a strange outcast who is a source of embarrassment to his father and humor for the audience. In one scene, Jeremy is tied up and both Claire's sister and brother attempt to sexually assault him. Because of his restraints, homophobic violence is avoided and Jeremy convinces the gay brother to hide in the closet from his father as he enters the room. The following day, Jeremy is irritated by both attempts equally but refuses victimization, reasserting his heteromascularity.²³ These movies do offer alternative ways of expressing gender but do not do enough to legitimately enforce heterodoxy as a way of eliminating the harmful effects of stereotypes. In these particular movies, queerness is utilized as a point of ridicule and 'bromantic love' is based in admiration of the heteronormative.

I Love You, Man (2009) offers the greatest potential for heterodoxy. Peter's inability to form male bonds is considered "abnormal and potentially damaging" so he sets out to find male friends before his wedding.²⁴ However, Peter's overt feminization is not met with pity or ridicule as it is with Alan in *The Hangover*. Instead, Peter is not considered weird for being well liked by women but because he does not also have close male bonds. Additionally, as opposed to *Wedding Crashers* where homophobia was a prompt for humor, in *I Love You, Man* Peter has a gay brother who represents the masculine figure Peter cannot be. At one point, their father proudly declares his son made him "an honorary homo" and professes his embrace of his son's sexuality.²⁵ The scene continues unhitched, whereas, the gay brother was a source of embarrassment in *Wedding Crashers*. Most revealing, is in one scene when Peter is mistaken by a bisexual man to be gay or bisexual himself and the character kisses Peter. Peter's reaction is not hysterical, angry or violent instead he explains the situation as a misunderstanding and is

²³ Ibid: 259

²⁴ Ibid: 260

²⁵ Ibid: 260

later untroubled as he laughs off the miscommunication, but not the bisexual man or his queerness, with his fiancé.²⁶ Eventually, Peter's homosocial relationship with another man threatens to destabilize his potential hetero-marriage, a relationship presented to be more mature, meaningful and preferable to all others as it typically is in bromantic movies and resolution only comes when equilibrium placing the heterosexual romance above the homosocial friendship is reached.²⁷ Overall, bromance films feature progressively inclined gender bending characters and portray homosexuality as something other than "loathsome or abhorrent."²⁸ However, this genre's potential for creating a new heterodoxic norm appears to be limited as it still engages in sexism and the prevalence of valuing heterosexual relationships over destabilizing homosocial relationships is present.

Ultimately, in these bromances, gay or feminized men are tied to the straight men's story through kinship as opposed to "chick flick rom-coms" where gay men are the "natural allies of women" and Brook additionally notes that the male's lesbian confidante counterpart has yet to appear in film.²⁹ As it relates to marriage, heteronormativity is reinforced through the elevation of marriage as a hetero-proving "alibi," as well as, a stabilizing and queerness-managing relationship over the male homosocial relationship.³⁰ The bromance genre suggests then that "homos can (sometimes) be bros" reflecting "the anxious recuperation of heteronormativity rather than a promisingly heterodoxical space."³¹ The question becomes whether or not it is better to create room for queer characters and relationships in this way than to outcast them completely. Again, the movies belonging to this genre are limited ideologically by their goal not

²⁶ Ibid: 260

²⁷ Ibid: 261

²⁸ Ibid: 261

²⁹ Ibid: 261

³⁰ Ibid: 261

³¹ Ibid: 261

to alienate the mainstream market and thus reassure its audience that their heteronormative society is not being threatened.

Over the years, Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes has been widely criticized for its portrayal of politically incorrect ethnic and gender stereotypes that allow the social group of the character to be easily identifiable. Looney Tunes' limited and stereotyped representation of women brings into the question the issue of visibility politics once again. The women are typically characterized as the 'old hag' type or as the seductress. But in the case of Looney Tunes, stereotyping takes its form as satire that may have been employed in order to expose the ridiculousness of and cracks in the heteronormative binary. The physical form and gender characteristics of females are overtly over exaggerated and are mostly applied by the performance of male cross dressing characters as if to show how absurd and trivial gender expectations really are.³² Typically, male characters cross dress with the goal of using femininity to fool other male characters and in doing so; the object of ridicule becomes not the feminized male character but the easily manipulated male who is fooled by a false and stereotypical image of womanhood.³³ Ultimately these cross-dressing and female characters are presented as stereotypes in order to criticize heteronormativity by satirizing misguided patriarchal standards.

Warner Bros is unique in its utilization of stereotypes because it seeks not to reinforce them but to hold a mirror to them in order to suggest the concept of gender as a construction and performance. Bugs Bunny, for example, is widely recognized to be a man by the heteronormative society that views him, however, much of his behavior, such as kissing male characters and his frequent female impersonations, suggest that Bugs is actually gender

³² Eliza Wells, "The Representation of Women and Gender in Warner Bros. Cartoon: A Performance of Satire" *Mary Wollstonecraft Writing Award*. Paper 3. (2015): 8

³³ *Ibid*: 6

ambiguous.³⁴ Despite this evidence, viewers find comfort in the exclusivity of gender, desire and sex in the heteronormative binary and thus will see it even where it does not seem to realistically exist.³⁵ Bugs and other characters are able to present themselves as a new gender within a split second and the characters around them are convinced completely of the transformation. This suggests that gender is not exclusive but rather a construction, perhaps even that the cartoons were attempting to establish gender fluidity by disconnecting gender from biological sex.³⁶ To achieve their goal, Warner Bros' use of satirical stereotypes was fundamental in their search to address sensitive social issues.³⁷ Warner Bros' use of stereotypes in cartoons, in fact, has led to the critique of gender as a construction and pointed to the absurdity of gender expectations and the very stereotypes the cartoons satirized. Thus, their use of satirical gender stereotypes is one that offers progress in dismantling the use and bringing in the question of the believability of gender stereotypes in society and other media.

Conversely, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) reinforces the binary with the particular goal of promoting a heteronormative ideology that specifically pits the sin of queerness against the goodness of the heterosexuality. Released in a contentious political environment, the characterizations in *Passion of the Christ* in congruence with its marketing to evangelicals play into the idea that the nation was engaged in a culture war. Engaging in the debate over gay marriage, same-sex couple adoption and the Presidential election, many believed that the fate of the nation's children, Christian heteronormative ideals, and the future were at stake. *Passion of the Christ* constructs queers as the enemy that must be fought by that which is

³⁴ Ibid: 5

³⁵ Ibid: 5

³⁶ Ibid: 5

³⁷ Ibid: 9

holy and good.³⁸ This gender-bending “queer enemy” is characterized as indulgent in a corruptive, harmful and predatory sexuality that threatens children, marriage and the future.³⁹ The film suggests the only way to overcome this evil is for the good and holy heteronormative characters to prevail. Since film is a medium audiences connect to as a reflection of themselves, Passion of the Christ’s audience would then logically be susceptible to translating this plot into their own struggle with good over evil as it applied to their contemporary life.

The gender ambiguous Satan character, played by a woman but voiced by a man, is described as being “beautiful, disturbing, seductive and predatory” which established evil as a “distortion of something good [that] is weird [and] shocking.”⁴⁰ Satan’s first encounter with the character of Christ has been interpreted through a Freudian lens suggesting that Satan tempts Christ with a phallic snake that slithers from beneath Satan’s robe, or as interpreted; homosexual contact, that Christ righteously refuses.⁴¹ Later, Satan’s queerness and its harmful effect on children is overtly depicted when Christ is baring his cross. In the scene, the camera alternated quickly between the Madonna, representing the goodness of a healthy mother-son relationship, and the queer Satan holding a shockingly unnatural demonic baby, depicting the concept of “evil distorting what is good.”⁴² The characterization of Pilate and his relationship with his wife, Claudia, are historically inaccurate but when applied to the struggle of the culture wars during the time of release present a relevance of the purposeful mischaracterization. During this time and place, marriages were based on economic and political convenience, the dominance of the man, and subjugation of the woman, as well as, the belief in homosocial friendships between

³⁸ Wolff, Richard (2015) "An Evil Threat to Marriage, Children and the Future: Queer Theory, "The Passion of the Christ," and Evangelical Political Rhetoric," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 39. Pp 3

³⁹ Ibid: 3

⁴⁰ Ibid: 5

⁴¹ Ibid: 6

⁴² Ibid: 8

men as the more rewarding relationship to engage in.⁴³ However, Gibson constructs their marriage as the modern day ideal of a beautiful, soft wife who remains out of the public eye and an authoritative, handsome husband who seeks justice for Christ in order to please his wife emotionally.⁴⁴ Pilate is depicted in stark contrast to Herod who is the character responsible for the crucifixion of Christ and is presented as a “vulgar transvestite” and “sexual deviant.”⁴⁵ Through the use of less than subtle characterization and cinematic techniques, Gibson shows Herod and Satan in stark contrast to the purity of Pilate and Claudia, Christ and Madonna. The former are characterized as reprehensible, self-gratifying and a danger to children while the latter are characterized as assuming traditional gender roles and being brave, virtuous and holy. The binary presented among these characters is a reflection of the heteronormative binary Gibson was seeking to promote. The audience is encouraged to identify with the heterosexual while expressing disgust over the queer.

While bromance movies and “mainstream” gay love movies are measured in their representation as to not alienate hetero audiences, Gibson’s exaggerated gender stereotyping in *Passion of the Christ* was used to target marketing towards the evangelical audience as they sought their own representation to justify their struggle in the ‘culture war.’ The movie was promoted as a historically accurate teaching tool and respected evangelical leaders were solicited to support it as such.⁴⁶ The publication of *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (2003) and release of *Passion of the Christ* (2004) worked to affirm evangelical values and galvanize the community, which felt “victimized” by the

⁴³ Ibid: 12

⁴⁴ Ibid: 11

⁴⁵ Ibid: 13

⁴⁶ Ibid: 17

“homosexual agenda” during the gay marriage debate raging that election year.⁴⁷ In addition to cinematic expressions of the dire need to win in the culture war, Gibson even stated in interviews that his role as director was guided entirely by “the holy ghost” as he suggested the entire production was effectively “the frontline in a battle between believers [...] and demons.”⁴⁸ As the concern over child-rearing ran central to the gay marriage debate, the viewers of *Passion of the Christ*, through cinematic techniques designed to evoke emotional reaction, were exposed to the undebatable stance that men and women assuming traditional gender roles in a traditional marriage will raise healthy children and promote a moral future, whereas, queer persons would expose children to predatory behavior. The affirmation of evangelical values in *Passion of the Christ* meant the affirmation of harmful stereotypes that contributed to the legitimacy and prevalence of a homophobic mentality. Effectively, to lose this culture war would mean to sign the future and the children over to Satan.

Research in “Intervening in the Media’s Influence on Stereotypes of Race and Ethnicity: The Role of Media Literacy Education” by Erica Scharrer on the power of media to promote or challenge stereotypes of various social groups yields results of the harmful effect these stereotypes have on adolescents. Furthermore, Sharrer presents media literacy education as a solution to reducing this harm and preventing future inaccurate and stereotyped characterizations. The study shows that individuals process their own experience and views with media messages and either internalize or reject that message. Because various forms of media play such an occupying role in the daily life of youth, media also plays a significant role in their formation and understanding of stereotypes.⁴⁹ Quantitative studies show that intervention by

⁴⁷ Ibid: 19

⁴⁸ Ibid: 18

⁴⁹ Erica Scharrer. “Intervening in the Media’s Influence on Stereotypes of Race and Ethnicity: The Role of Media Literacy Education.” (2015). *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 71, No.1 (2015): 183

media literacy education can successfully promote knowledge, as well as, shift attitudes in viewers.⁵⁰ At as young as 12 years old, adolescents are able to identify the limited characterization of minorities offered in media, the negative effects this has on those groups, white individuals' perceptions of and interaction with those groups as a direct result and the potential of media to instead positively defy stereotypes.⁵¹ Educating these adolescents in media literacy, that is how to recognize these issues and when media is selling something or promoting an ideology, can help to promote diversity and multiculturalism.⁵² Through media literacy education, individuals from a young age can learn how to recognize and critique stereotypes. In doing so, the nature of such stereotypes is examined unlike before and their chance to inspire harmful misconceptions among audiences is significantly reduced. The increasing acknowledgement of gender stereotypes and the failure of visibility politics will then decrease the success and use of them in the future.

In conclusion, film has the unique ability to both reflect and shape society. Moving forward, filmmakers have the choice to either perpetrate or challenge stereotypes. The research concludes that stereotypes of various social groups in media has a significant harmful effect on adolescents who view them. From these representations, adolescents learn how they are expected to behave, as well as, how they are expected to treat other social groups. Movie marketing can be used to exacerbate the problem by promoting stereotypes to reach an ideological or political goal and by limiting potentially stereotype-challenging characterizations in order to prevent the alienation of mainstream audiences. Simply presenting visibility of queer characters, satirizing gender expectations and introducing heterodoxy as ways of combating stereotypes are progressive but limited in their approach. Educating individuals on the

⁵⁰ Ibid: 173

⁵¹ Ibid: 183

⁵² Ibid: 183

corrupting force movie marketing has on the ideology and characterizations in movies offers the best option challenge to the perpetuation of stereotyping and limits its harmful effect.