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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Queer Representation in the Horror Genre: An Analysis of Queer Stereotypes

Honors Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

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By

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Queer Representation in the Horror Genre: An Analysis of Queer Stereotypes

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Abstract description: Queer representation has been present across all genres of film since the dawn of filmmaking. Much of the early representation of queer identities originated in the horror genre, specifically during the time of the Motion Picture Production Code (1934-1968). However, many negative stereotypes and tropes still common in media today originated in this time period. Films like *Dracula's Daughter* and *Bride of Frankenstein* included stereotypes like the overly effeminate, weak gay man, the aggressive, ugly lesbian, and the concept that queer people are predatory. Modern-day horror films have started to stray away from these harmful tropes, including more well-rounded and diverse queer representation. Films like *Jennifer's Body* still include queer villains but do not make their queerness what makes them evil. Films like *The Fear Street Trilogy* allow queer characters to be seen in leading roles. The leads of this trilogy have agency in their story and are not defined by their sexuality. 21st-century filmmaking is heading towards better queer representation. This includes exploring diverse identities, respecting the queer community through authentic storytelling, recognizing bias and negative stereotypes, and including queer people in the development of queer characters. Queer representation in the media is powerful and can save lives, so it is important that filmmakers strive for genuine representation when writing queer stories.

Keywords and phrases: LBGTQ+, queer representation, film analysis, cinema, thesis, honors thesis, honors project

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to queer Kentuckians who fight every day to love who they want to love and be who they are meant to be. Never give up. You are loved.

Introduction

LGBTQ+ people have been present across all film genres since the dawn of filmmaking. Long before homosexuality was decriminalized in the United States, queer stories have been told in cinema. However, much of this representation has not been positive, authentic, or uplifting. In fact, most examples of early queer representation were very harmful and stereotypical of what the general public thought of queer people at the time. While this may not seem of much importance, early representation of queer people has considerably affected the way queer people are viewed today. Only recently has positive queer representation become widespread, and with this positive representation comes changing public opinion of queer people. Analyzing the history of queer representation in film is necessary to demonstrate this shift. This analysis will highlight horror films across two eras, the Hays Code era and modern-day cinema, to identify and compare the tropes, stereotypes, and forms of queer representation present. The findings of this comparison will then be used to explain why representation matters and how media can perpetuate harmful portrayals of marginalized groups.

To understand the contents of this analysis, we must first define some terms. For the purpose of this analysis, a queer person is defined as any individual that identifies under the LGBTQ+ umbrella (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, etc.). Identifying as queer means identifying with a minority sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Because this analysis focuses on the horror genre, it is also essential to understand the definition of horror fiction. Horror fiction is a genre that “shocks, or even frightens the reader, or perhaps induces a feeling of repulsion or loathing” (Cuddon, 1984). The horror fiction genre is usually defined as “texts or narratives that aim to generate fear, shock or disgust (or a combination of these),

alongside associated emotional states such as dread or suspense” (Reyes, 2016). Horror generally makes the audience feel uncomfortable in a variety of ways.

Why analyze the horror genre?

Horror is a very unique, often overlooked film genre. The genre is rarely regarded as intellectual or analytical. The average person most likely believes that the horror film genre is nothing more than cheap jump scares and gimmicky monsters. This is far from the truth. Horror films can tell us a lot about the general public's fears at the time of a film's creation. Looking at horror through a historical lens can say much about what we were most afraid of or what society thought of as frightful or monstrous. For example, after the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan in World War II, we saw a rise in gigantic monsters portrayed in the horror genre (Wade, 2018). These enormous monsters were cinema's way of representing the destruction of such devastating weapons. Furthermore, alien horror films became increasingly popular with the rise of the space age and the moon landing (Wallace, 2022). This was indicative of societies growing fascination with outer space and the possibility of life beyond our planet. With the rise of the Hays Code, the end of the roaring twenties, and the strict censorship of cinema, this frightful group often included queer people. Queer identities were often shunned in this era, and cinema reflected this sentiment. Horror is one of the earliest genres to embrace queer identities if only to vilify or disparage them. Because queer people were demonized in society, queer stereotypes became the language of antagonists and monsters in horror films. Queer identities were frequently represented in cinema before the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934 but were often the object of ridicule. As previously mentioned, queer stories have always been a part of film history. However, many damaging tropes still used

today originated in the 1930s when the Hays Code determined what content was allowed in films.

What was the Motion Picture Production Code?

As with any new forms of media at their inception, film was unregulated in its early years. This meant no film ratings, content warnings, or content restrictions existed. During the recklessness of the roaring twenties, this was especially true (Mondello, 2008). It was during the time of the roaring twenties that film was deemed to be morally questionable and in dire need of regulations. The content in the films themselves was unregulated, but film-making was also unregulated. This resulted in a nationwide backlash and a call for the film industry to set some standards. From 1934 to 1968, Hollywood was dictated by a strict set of rules. The Motion Picture Production Code or the Hays Code “was this self-imposed industry set of guidelines for all motion pictures. The code prohibited profanity, suggestive nudity, graphic or realistic violence, sexual persuasions, and rape” (Lewis, 2021). The Motion Picture Production Code was the answer to the backlash and the previous lack of standards in the film industry in the 1920s. The Motion Picture Production Code was created in response to the threat of government regulation so that filmmakers could still have some control over their industry.

Under these guidelines, open LGBTQ+ representation was prohibited, and films had to censor their content heavily. LGBTQ+ representation was considered sexually perverse and was therefore banned. Nevertheless, some vague queer representation persisted. Queerness in 1930s filmmaking could only be depicted if it was coded and shown as monstrous, predatory, or weak. Queerness was often smuggled into Hays Code era cinema if it was villainous or the butt of a joke. This resulted in queerness being most often portrayed in horror films where these tropes were more common and accepted. Hays Code era horror films are filled with sly queer

representation, but this representation is often incredibly harmful and has left a lasting impact on modern-day views of queerness. Many horror films of the time included such negative stereotypes and harmful tropes. Two such films include *Bride of Frankenstein* and *Dracula's Daughter*. A thorough analysis of both is required to understand the nature of such harmful representation.

Queer Representation in *Bride of Frankenstein*

Bride of Frankenstein is a horror film directed by James Whale (an openly gay man) and released in 1935. The film is a sequel to the 1931 horror classic *Frankenstein* and begins directly after the events of *Frankenstein*. *Bride of Frankenstein* follows Henry Frankenstein as he tries to step away from his experiments of creating life. He is blackmailed by his mentor Dr. Pretorius into creating life once more. Together, they build a female companion for Frankenstein's first monster. The film contains two different perceived queer relationships that depict some harmful stereotypes.

The first relationship is between Henry Frankenstein and Dr. Pretorius. They are perceived as queer because they are two men trying to defy god and procreate. Dr. Pretorius compares science to love and says he wishes to "be fruitful and multiply" with Henry (Universal Pictures, 1935). Henry leaves Elizabeth on his wedding night to create life with another man. However, the film portrays Dr. Pretorius as a predatory "sissified" queer man that pressures Henry into leaving his heterosexual relationship to be with him (Russo 1987). The sissy is a standard shortcut in media for queerness and is not inherently problematic. It is problematic in this film because the "sissy" character is villainized, made to be preying upon a seemingly straight man. The combination of these queer stereotypes villainizes queerness and makes feminine men seem dangerous.

The second LGBTQ+ relationship within the film is between Frankenstein's original monster and an isolated blind man that the film calls the hermit. Throughout the film, the monster roams about the town facing constant rejection because of his horrid appearance. While he tries to figure out his place in this world, the monster comes across the hermit. Because the hermit is blind, he does not see the monster as a monster. He sees him as a cure for his loneliness. They live together in peace for some time as companions. The hermit teaches the monster the differences between good and evil and what true friendship is. Together, they are both finally happy until two men appear and warn the hermit of who the monster really is. The hermit does not care and just wishes for them to live in peace, but the newcomers take away the monster. Later in the film, the monster finally receives the bride that Henry and Dr. Pretorius have been creating all this time. After meeting, the bride is also immediately terrified of the monster. After being rejected again, the monster says, "we belong dead", ultimately killing himself, his bride, and Dr. Pretorius (Universal Studios, 1935).

The love the hermit and the monster have for one another is pure and beautiful. They accept each other for who they are, set aside their differences, and look more than skin deep. On its own, this queer representation is quite positive and wholesome. The issue is that the film's queer relationships end poorly and are punished by society. The monster is an allegory for how many view queer people. They are seen as freakish, unnatural, and in some cases, unworthy of living. Viewing the film through a modern lens, the monster could even be seen as an allegory for queer people with HIV/AIDS. During the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, queer people with the disease were shunned and outcast for fear of also catching the disease, and many thought they "belonged dead". Watching the film as a queer person, queer existence seems quite

bleak and hopeless. Depicting this kind of queer relationship is dangerous and might make a queer person question their worth.

Both queer relationships end in the death of one of the members. This is an example of the classic trope “bury your gays” (Hulan, 2017). Hulan describes this trope as featuring “a same-gender couple and with one of the lovers dying and the other realizing they were never actually gay, often running into the arms of a heterosexual partner”. Dr. Pretorius dies, leaving Henry to live happily ever after with Elizabeth, and the monster dies, leaving the hermit to continue living alone or find a heterosexual partner to live with. Hulan goes on to say that creatives in the nineteenth century “killed off their queer characters as a point of safety”. The directors used a workaround to get past the strict Hays Code by clearly stating they were not endorsing homosexuality. As previously stated, this type of representation makes queer lives seem not worth living and can be incredibly harmful to queer viewers.

Queer Representation in *Dracula's Daughter*

Dracula's Daughter is a horror film directed by Lambert Hillyer and released in 1936. The film was produced at the height of the Hays Code, and the code's influence is blatant. The film follows the titular character Countess Marya Zaleska as she tries to free herself from the disease of vampirism. Along the way, she must quench her thirst for blood, taking many victims. One evening, after initially trying to suppress her craving for blood, the Countess caves, luring a young lady into her home under the guise of posing nude for a painting. The young lady Lili initially agrees and is told to undo her blouse for the portrait. She starts becoming increasingly hesitant and uncomfortable with the Countess' advances. Eventually, she decides to leave and tells Marya not to come any closer, but it is too late. As the Countess strikes, Lili calls out for help, claiming another victim (Universal Pictures, 1936).

This film depicts Marya as a predatory lesbian who forces straight women into unwanted sexual encounters. This is a common misconception that queer women face. If a queer woman compliments another woman, it might be perceived as her coming onto them. If a queer woman has to change in a locker room, straight women might falsely believe that she might be looking at them. This harmful stereotype has persisted for decades and still affects queer women today. The scene is an allegory for sexual assault. Lili is clearly uncomfortable with Marya, but she is coerced into doing what Marya wants against her will. Overall, the movie is an allegory for queer self-loathing and internalized homophobia. Marya spends most of the film trying to cure her vampirism and become normal. She wishes to be free of her curse. The film makes queerness seem like a shameful disease that must be cured to live a normal life. These harmful stereotypes can make queer people feel as if something is wrong with them and that they must change too.

The film also uses beauty or lack thereof to signal queerness. In the film, Marya is tall, dresses more masculinely, wears more drastic makeup, has harsher facial features, and has pulled-back hair. Whereas Lili, a straight woman, dresses very femininely, has delicate facial features, wears her hair down, and has a softer makeup look. This comparison makes it clear that because Marya does not follow the classical beauty of the standards of the 1930s, she is ugly and less desirable. This was a common way for Hays Code era films to code women as queer. This stereotype is commonly still seen today. Queer women are frequently assumed to be less beautiful if they are queer. If a traditionally beautiful woman is discovered to be queer, she is often told she is too pretty to be queer or that it is a shame she is queer. While this trope originated during the Hays Code, it is still commonly used in film and real life.

Analysis of Hays Code Queer Stereotypes

These films are just a few examples of queer representation that slipped through the cracks of the Hays Code. However, most representation at the time was predicated on negative stereotyping. Many other horror films from the Hays Code Era, such as *Psycho* and *Rebecca*, include villainous and heavily stereotyped queer characters. Because queer relationships were deemed immoral by the Hays Code, the only way queer representation could be hidden in films at the time was if it was heavily coded. Through the censorship of the Hays Code, the language of queer coding was born. This queer coding introduced many of the queer stereotypes that exist in film today. Queer-coded men were portrayed as weak, flamboyant sissies that were overly dramatic. Queer-coded women were portrayed as ugly, masculine, dominant, and overly possessive of other women. Transgender or cross-dressing characters were queer-coded as deranged and mentally ill (Sethi, 2023). Queer stereotypes like the sexual predator, the sissy, the diseased, and the converter all originated in this era. This stereotyping of queer people persisted far beyond the Hays Code era and is still prevalent in much of the media we consume today. This language is used to demonize, outcast, and ostracize queer people. When people minimize minority groups to their worst stereotypes and use that as representation, they do them a disservice. It prevents audiences from seeing these groups as complex, multifaceted human beings with unique stories to tell.

Introduction to 21st-Century Queer Horror

After the end of the Hays Code Restrictions in 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America created a new rating system that is still used today. While the Hays Code focused on controlling what audiences could view based on a stringent moral code, the MPAA rating system aimed to “help parents make informed decisions” (Motion Picture Association of America, 2018). With this new rating system, the MPAA no longer decided what was appropriate for an audience. They focused on giving parents the information they needed to decide for themselves if a film was appropriate for their child. This shift from using a subjective moral code that prevents certain content from making it into films to simply trying to provide and empower parents with information changed the entire film industry. This shift gave the film industry significantly more freedom with what content and language they could include. Sex and romance became much more common and diverse within the film industry, with some overtly queer characters starting to reappear. Queer people were no longer trapped behind tropes, stereotyping, and queer coding.

With the rise of the 21st century, queer representation has become much more common and nuanced. Queer characters became more prevalent throughout film and TV across all genres, and that representation became increasingly more well-rounded. Queer characters have reemerged as side and lead characters rather than being cast aside as the queer coded villain. Queer characters have started becoming normalized and more representative of the queer community as a whole. Two films that demonstrate this new wave of queer horror films are *Jennifer's Body* and *The Fear Street Trilogy*.

Queer Representation in *Jennifer's Body*

Jennifer's Body came out in 2009 and made huge waves not just in the horror genre but the film industry as a whole. This film stars Megan Fox as Jennifer Check and Amanda Seyfried as Anita "Needy" Lesnicki and was directed by Karyn Kusama.

The film follows two high school girls, Needy and Jennifer, from the small town of Devil's Kettle. The girls attend a Low Shoulder show at a dive bar before the entire bar catches on fire, and they are separated. Jennifer goes home with the boys from the band, but instead, they take her into the woods and perform a cultist ritual leaving her for dead. The next time we see Jennifer covered in blood and devouring the contents of Needy's fridge. Needy watches as Jennifer acts feral, puking up dark fluid. Jennifer retreats into the night. She shows up to school the next day looking fine and acting as if nothing happened. She is not even distraught about the fire. Jennifer seduces one of the school jocks, lures him into the forest, and disembowels him. The band starts gaining more popularity and is invited to play at the school's spring dance. Jennifer continues seducing men and ultimately kills them in gruesome ways. Needy starts to worry about Jennifer, and after voicing her concern, the two share a kiss. Jennifer tells Needy what happened to her in the forest and how the ritual went wrong because she is not a virgin. Needy researches the occult and realizes Jennifer has become a succubus. She seduces her prey and feeds off of them to remain strong and healthy. On the night of the dance, Jennifer seduces Needy's boyfriend and begins feeding off of him. Needy finds them as Jennifer kills her boyfriend. Ultimately, Needy kills Jennifer by stabbing her in the heart. Needy is taken to an asylum, where she learns she has absorbed some of Jennifer's powers.

This film was groundbreaking, divisive, and ahead of its time. When it was released in 2009, it received terrible reviews, primarily due to the film's marketing. The film's trailers and

promotional material heavily focused on the kiss between Needy and Jennifer, hoping to draw in a male audience. The marketing was counting on drawing in an audience of men that fetishize queer women and then delivering a film that is critical of the very same people. This marketing technique was ineffective, but in the years following the release of the film, the film has been regarded as a cult classic. However, this technique does show that even today, queer female representation is often not made for or by queer people. It is often made for straight men that hypersexualize queer women.

Like the films previously analyzed, *Jennifer's Body* includes a queer monster character. However, it is not her sexual orientation or stereotypical attributes of her sexual orientation that make her villainous. While she is, in fact, the villain, this character serves the greater purpose of making a social commentary about female sexuality, Hollywood's over-sexualization of leading women, and the male gaze. In the film, the young, naive Jennifer is attacked. However, instead of remaining a damsel in distress like many young women are in horror films, she takes back her power and weaponizes her femininity. Jennifer is a strong queer female character that owns her sexuality. Her freedom with her sexuality is symbolic of the film's growing freedom of expression in terms of queer representation. Her sexuality is monstrous not because she is queer but because she is a threat to men's manhood (Ghidossi, 2020). Jennifer shows that women cannot stand idly by and watch as men stomp all over them. Women, especially queer women, have to be loud and messy when fighting for their rights. Queer women are human beings, not just the object of a man's desire.

Queer Representation in *The Fear Street Trilogy*

The Fear Street Trilogy is a horror film series based on the R. L. Stine book series of the same name. The trilogy was released only on Netflix in 2021. Leigh Janiek directed the trilogy, which stars Kiana Madeira as Deena Johnson and Olivia Scott Welch as Samantha Fraser. The films were meant to have a theatrical release in the summer of 2020 but were pulled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the cancellation of the theatrical release, Netflix bought the trilogy and released the films as Netflix Original Films (McNary, 2020).

The Fear Street Trilogy spans three time periods and follows Deena Johnson, Sam Fraser, and their friends as they try to solve the mystery of the curse that plagues their town, Shadyville. The first film, *Fear Street Part One: 1994*, introduces the witch's curse on Shadyville. After a vigil for a student that was recently murdered by a mysterious masked killer, Deena and Sam argue about their breakup. Deena leaves with the rest of the Shadyville students on a bus, but they are followed by Sam and some jocks from Sunnyvale who throw bottles at the back of the bus. The Shadyville kids throw a cooler out of the back door of the bus, and it causes the Sunnyvale students to wreck. Sam is thrown from the car injured and crawls towards the forest, unknowingly disturbing the grave of a witch. She sees a vision of this witch and the circumstances of her death. Sam is taken to the hospital, where the same masked killer arrives and kills her boyfriend. The rest of the friend group escapes the hospital and tries to tell the police what happened. The police do not believe them because the masked killer was killed shortly after taking his victims in the mall, so there is no way he could be alive to attack Sam and Deena. The group is attacked by many other killers from Shadyville's history who were all considered dead. The group realizes that Sam was cursed by the witch when she bled on her grave, and now all the cursed killers of the past are out to kill her. The group decides to set a trap

with Sam's blood to lure in all the killers and burn them. This does not work, and the friend group realizes the only way to stop this curse is for Sam to die. The group decides to try and kill Sam and revive her to break the curse. Deena stays with Sam, and they try to get Sam to overdose on pills. When this does not work, Deena is forced to drown Sam to make the killers stop. The killers slowly pick off two of their friends before Sam finally dies. The killers disappear, and Deena panics, trying to revive Sam. She uses epi-pens and CPR before Sam is finally revived. The two make up and tell each other they love one another. The subsequent two films follow Sam and Deena as they try to uncover the origins of the curse, understand the killers of the past, and end the witch's curse.

The trilogy is groundbreaking in terms of LGBTQ+ representation in horror. Each of the three films takes inspiration from classic eighties and nineties films but puts a new exciting twist on these classic horror tropes. The films draw inspiration from classic slasher films like *Scream* and *Friday the 13th* but do not fall victim to classic queer coding tropes from the past (Wong, 2021). The main character is a lesbian woman of color, and her love interest is a bisexual woman that dates both men and women in the films. We see multiple types of queer characters and watch their relationship blossom across the three films. The queer characters in this story are not sidelined or vilified. Instead, they take control of their stories and are actively involved in solving the mystery of their town. Deena and Sam are not full of harmful Hays Code Era horror tropes. They are fully fleshed-out, diverse, and engaging characters. They are not terrified victimized girls needing saving; they save themselves. These films do not bury their gays. Instead, they display their queer characters loudly and proudly. This trilogy is just one fantastic example of this trend. Queer characters are becoming more and more prevalent in horror as main characters and vital characters to the film's plot.

Analysis of 21st-Century Queer Representation

Queer representation in 21st-century horror films is a massive diversion from the representation during the Hays Code era. Not only have many modern queer horror films avoided the classic stereotypes and tropes that were previously discussed, but many are also self-aware of these tropes. Queer characters are still the villains, but they make a statement and prove a point. Queer characters still die in dramatic ways but are somehow revived and live to tell their story. Queer horror has not only broken free from many stereotypes but has also become more representative of the community. LGBTQ+ representation in modern-day horror has become increasingly diverse and substantially more positive. There has not only been a general increase in the number of LGBTQ+ characters in the horror film genre but also in the different types of representation. We are no longer just seeing gay and lesbian representation; we are starting to see bisexual and transgender representation. It should, however, be noted that transgender and nonbinary representation is severely lacking compared to the diverse representation of sexual orientations. This is something that needs to improve if queer representation is to become more inclusive of the entire LGBTQ+ community.

While the MPAA rating system is a significant improvement over the Hays Code, it is still imperfect. While the new rating system allows queer representation to be shown on the big screen, these identities are often hidden behind a higher rating (PG-13, R, NC-17) than comparable straight cisgender representation. It is common knowledge that sex, excessive violence, graphic gore, and substance abuse often result in a film receiving an R or NC-17 rating. However, many films will also be labeled with an R rating if they include queer characters. Even if these characters are not engaging in sexual activities, their mere presence in a film could raise the film's rating. The MPAA is "generally harder on films featuring gay sex or characters than it

is on movies featuring straight sex” (Abrams, 2018). This can be seen in the ratings of films like *Love is Strange*, *Battle of the Sexes*, and *Love, Simon*, which all received higher ratings, seemingly just for the inclusion of queer characters (Whitty, 2014; Dye, 2020). The MPAA likely rates these films more strictly because they have decided that parents would most likely want to know if a queer character is included in a film and factor that into whether the film is appropriate for their child (Abrams, 2018). This makes queer narratives much less accessible than straight and cisgender narratives. Because the MPAA and the general public have decided that queer existence is inappropriate for children, children will most likely not be exposed to queer stories until they are young adults and already have false preconceptions about queer people. This needs to change. Currently, the MPAA claims not to judge their ratings on the sexualities and gender identities present in a film. However, the MPAA needs to actively include statements regarding sexuality and gender in its guidelines. The MPAA needs to specifically outline that queer identities are not adult themes unless queer characters participate in adult activities such as sex, nudity, etc. Right now, their guidelines are also not very specific as to what constitutes an adult activity, leaving many films' contents open to interpretation. The MPAA should further define what is included in adult content and be explicit that simply being queer is not mature material requiring a higher rating. This would help reduce the discrimination against queer stories that is present in the current rating system. Further, this would help increase the number of queer stories that can be told and reduce the censorship of queer identities in the media. This would also allow for more queer representation in children’s content, which would help to normalize queer identities at a younger age.

What is good representation?

Knowing how much of an impact representation can have on a marginalized community like the LGBTQ+ community, how can we create authentic queer representation in cinema? Through analysis of Hays Code era representation, it can be determined that queerness should not be coded through negative stereotypes and tropes. Through analysis of modern queer horror, it can be determined that films should continue to explore transparent, authentic queer stories with uniquely diverse characters. One important way we can continue to track the diversity of queer characters on screen is through the Studio Responsibility Index.

Every year, GLAAD releases a Studio Responsibility Index in which they map “the quantity, quality, and diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) characters in films released by the major motion picture studios” during the said year (2022). This data set is a fantastic way to analyze the types of queer representation from year to year and trend the hopefully increasingly diverse and inclusive queer representation in film. By comparing the data from 2013 and 2021 (the most recent data set), it is clear that the amount of queer representation has grown substantially in the last decade. In 2013, there were 102 film releases from the major motion picture studios. In 2021, there were 77 films released theatrically by the major studios. Some examples of the major studios include Walt Disney Studios, Universal Pictures, Sony, Warner Bros, Paramount, etc. In 2013, 16.7% of films released from major motion picture studios included a character that identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender. This number has jumped up to 20.8% in 2021. Not only has the number of queer characters in popular films increased, but the racial diversity of these characters has also improved. In 2013, 76% of queer characters were white, 12% were black/African American, 8% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% were Latinx. In 2021, 61% of queer characters were white,

18% were black, 7% were Latinx, 7% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% were multiracial, and 4% were Middle Eastern. However, the diversity within the queer identities represented has not noticeably improved in the last decade. In 2013, 64.7% of queer characters were gay men, 23.5% were lesbians, 17.7% were bisexuals, and 11.9% were transgender females. In 2021, 69% of queer characters were gay men, 25% were queer women, 13% were bisexuals, and 6% were transgender. Most queer characters are white, gay, cisgender men. This is disappointing, to say the least. While it is exciting that the quantity of queer representation is improving, it is clear that the quality and diversity of queer representation have remained relatively stagnant over the past decade. Good representation of a community is when the community is represented in its entirety. In order to improve queer representation in cinema, filmmakers should include more transgender, nonbinary, asexual, and intersex characters. There has been much more gay, lesbian, and bisexual representation in cinema, but these identities are not the only ones deserving of the spotlight. Filmmakers should also explore the exciting narratives that come with having intersectional identities.

Another way we can categorize types of representation of marginalized communities and track improving quality of that representation is the model of progression created by Cedric Clark in 1969. Clark created a model that shows a progression through four stages of representation of minority groups. The stages are non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Representation in media of any minority group typically starts with non-recognition and progresses through each stage until the group is respected. Where a minority group is in this process can tell one how the community views and treats the minority group as a whole. Stage one, non-recognition, is defined by an utter lack of representation. This is when there is no visible representation of a group at all, for better or for worse. Stage two, ridicule, is

characterized as a minority group going from a sheer lack of representation to some representation at their expense. This is when we start to see a minority group in the media, but they are only included as the butt of a joke. Much of the Hays Code era representation that has been analyzed in this thesis falls into this stage and is full of harmful stereotypes. This era only included queer representation that was meant to ridicule queer people. Stage three, regulation, is when minority groups start to be portrayed in varied roles. However, they are confined to more socially acceptable roles and made palatable for a general audience. This is most of the current representation we see. Only specific queer identities are highlighted in TV and film. For example, most queer representation is white cisgender gay men because that is seen as more palatable. We rarely see intersectional identities portrayed on the big screen. Stage four, respect, is the stage that filmmakers should aim for when setting out to create a film with queer characters. Stage four allows minority stories to be told without censorship, ridicule, or constraints. This means queer characters are not stereotypical or constrained to specific roles. Stage four representation allows queer characters on screen to be as diverse and authentic as the queer community itself. We are slowly moving into this stage, as shown by the increased diversity in the GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index. We are moving away from only showing one type of queer identity and moving towards diversity, understanding, and mutual respect. By recognizing the ridicule of the past and the regulation of representation in the present, we can create queer stories that are well-rounded, well-researched, and representative of all aspects of the community.

Another tool that can be used to track whether or not a film includes good queer representation is the Vito Russo test. GLAAD developed the Vito Russo test inspired by the more well-known Bechdel test (2022). To pass the test, a film must include an identifiable queer

character, and the character must not only be defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity. Further, the character must significantly impact the plot so that their removal would be noticeable, and the character's story must not be outwardly insulting or stereotypical. This test is an excellent starting place for filmmakers trying to tell authentic queer stories. This test covers many mistakes that filmmakers make when writing queer characters. Many films will throw in a queer character in an attempt to include diverse stories but do not actually make the character relevant to the plot whatsoever. This is not good representation. Some films include queer characters in their stories, but their queerness is the only defining characteristic of the character. This is common with the gay best friend trope and is also not good representation. The queer characters in *The Fear Street Trilogy* pass the Vito Russo test. The films includes two queer characters that are not only defined by their sexual orientation. They are the main characters and, therefore, significantly impact the plot. Their portrayal is not insulting or stereotypical. These films are a perfect example of good, impactful queer representation. This is how queer representation should be in most films.

Many people think that the best queer representation in film comes from coming out stories. Coming-out stories have become increasingly common in cinema and can often be an excellent conversation starter. Following a queer character throughout their journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and eventually, authentic living can be incredibly gratifying and comforting, especially for closeted queer people. Seeing a fellow queer person come out of the other side of such a daunting experience can push you to move forward and do the same. Films like *Love, Simon*, *Moonlight*, and *But I'm a Cheerleader* have become staples in the queer community. While coming-out stories are necessary, they should not be the only queer stories

told and certainly should not be the only queer stories where queer characters are the protagonists.

The best queer representation does not make sexuality or gender identity the focal point of the character, as seen by the Vito Russo test. Queer people want to see queer characters in medical dramas, cooking shows, comedies, horror, etc. It can be exhausting when a community's only representation is rooted in their trauma and difficult life experiences. This one aspect of their identity does not define queer people, and they should be given the opportunity to tell other parts of their stories. Queer people want to be represented across all genres, in all character types, and across all forms of media. Queer people are tired of watching the same stories over and over again when there are so many more rich narratives to tell. In real life, queer people are parents, grandparents, siblings, and children. They are doctors, lawyers, teachers, and firefighters. Queer people are atheists, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. They are black, white, brown, and interracial. Queer people are everywhere and can do anything. Queer people deserve to watch stories that are as diverse as they are.

Why does representation matter?

Any marginalized community will tell you that seeing their community positively represented in media helps that group feel seen, valued, and appreciated. Negative stereotypes affect the group that is being represented. According to the United Nations, “Persistent exposure to discrimination can lead individuals to internalize the prejudice or stigma directed against them, manifesting in shame, low self-esteem, fear and stress, as well as poor health” (2018). Constant consumption of harmful media can be highly detrimental to one's mental health. Good representation can help queer people find community and feel less alone. In 2022, 45% of queer youth seriously considered suicide, and 14% of queer youth attempted suicide (The Trevor

Project, 2022). However, 89% of queer youth also reported that seeing LGBTQ representation in TV and movies made them feel good about being LGBTQ (The Trevor Project, 2022).

Representation can save lives (Franklin-Wright, 2021). Many queer individuals have no other queer people in their lives. The only representation they can take solace in comes from the TV, films, and even social media. Just knowing that other queer people live happy, fulfilled lives, even if they are fictional, can make whatever someone is going through right now seem more manageable.

Negative stereotypes also affect how others view the group that is being represented. The effect of these stereotypes can be seen on both a micro and macro scale. On a micro-scale, day-to-day interactions and discrimination of queer people are informed by the media they consume. Over the years, as positive LGBTQ+ media has become more common, overall views of LGBTQ+ people have become more positive. 51% of the U.S. population said homosexuality should be accepted by society in 2002, whereas 72% said homosexuality should be accepted by society in 2019 (Kent & Poushter, 2020). While many factors have contributed to this, positive LGBTQ+ exposure has made an impact on people's views. On a macro scale, violence against queer people and the law-making surrounding the LGBTQ+ community are informed by the stereotypes we see. Lawmakers are disproportionately straight and cisgender, yet they are the ones passing legislation that directly affects queer individuals. From Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill to Anti-Drag legislation, lawmakers have a lot of power over queer lives. If the queer media they consume is full of harmful stereotypes, they will pass legislation that reflects this. For example, suppose lawmakers only see media where queer people are depicted as predatory groomers like in the films mentioned previously. In that case, they will believe all queer people are groomers and pass legislation to keep discussions about LGBTQ+ identities out of schools

under the guise of protecting the children (Wallace-Wells, 2022). Positive representation is vital to understanding a community and has numerous real-world implications.

In a world where queer rights, safety, and acceptance are constantly challenged, negative stereotyping in media can be especially damaging to those being stereotyped and how others view and treat the stereotyped group. Consumption of harmful media can make queer people feel unsafe, unwelcome, and unworthy. Consumption of the same harmful media by others can change how they view queer people and negatively affect their real-life interactions with queer people. If a person's only experience with queer people is watching a film with negative stereotyping, they will think the entire community is like that stereotype. Positive, thoughtful representation can do a lot for a community. We must do better and work towards accurately representing marginalized groups.

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