

The Mirror of the Known

An Inquiry into Queer Engagement with Cinema

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Abstract

People that have compromised abilities to express themselves fully find alternative ways to engage with ways to image their identity. This is particularly done by engaging with culture. Queer cinema is part of this realm of alternative cultural engagement. While queer imagery is often toned-down, erased, ridiculed or vilified, queer visibility is an important aspect to efforts of liberation. This master thesis considers the respectability politics used in queer cinematic imagery as well as what that means for the engagement of queer people as spectator. The research is conducted by means of a focus group. We watched *Drive-Away Dolls* and engaged in a group discussion and a written assignment afterwards. The contribution of the participants determined the imagery that is elaborated on.

Key words

Cinema pedagogy, Respectability politics, Queer Cinema, Queer Visibility, Queer Identity, Sexual Imagery.

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Introduction

It was 1975, in the wake of the Stonewall riots and the first pride events in America when the movie adaptation of the musical play *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was released in theatres. The outrageous film reflected the political climate at the time (Ivan-Zadeh, 2020). Having *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as an outrageously queer film reflects how there was a need for non-isolated modes of queer expression, no matter the outrage in which it was received or the question of how effective it is in attempts at queer liberation. Through establishing itself as mass art, cinema has political and pedagogical opportunities because it articulates the human condition (Lahiji, 2021). Cinema reflects on the human experience and is thereby fundamentally loaded with ideas and biases of how humans perceive the world. Cinema, on the one hand, represents historical context and social dispositions. And on the other hand, cinema, as an iteration of mass culture, impacts collective memory. Cinema then becomes both an indicator and a catalyst of political dispositions (Giroux, 1995). Being a queer person today, I am urged to think with films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* because it says something about queer expression as it is finding its traction in society at the time it was made. From all of the commentary on political dispositions in cinema I've heard in my surroundings I induce that how people feel about the imagery is at least in part influenced by individual context. Queer people that took part in the Stonewall riots are more likely to feel liberated by the imagery of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as opposed to straight people that have had no previous direct contact to the queer experience, whom might feel disturbed by its transgression.

Visibility is an important feature in queer liberation. While commodified culture presents queer people as consumer products rather than social subjects, representation may lay grounds for further liberative attempts (Hennessey, 1994). However, historical accounts of liberative action always involve a discursive movement/counter-movement (Ayoub, Chetaille, 2020).

This can be seen in regulatory mechanisms that rose along with emerging popular cinema, particularly after the introduction of “talkies”, referring to the event in which cinema transitioned from mute to voiced actors. Societal changes at the time caused anxiety with societal leaders, resulting in them binding movies to Judeo-Christian morality. One result is the fierce restriction of depictions of homosexuality in Hollywood productions via the Hays Code (Nurik, 2018). These restrictions might have loosened throughout history but if these restrictions are institutionalised and normalised, dismantling them requires effort.

There is a similar response to the liberation of queer behaviour in society. Enforcement of queerphobic social structures made sure that queer people needed to put effort in obtaining the possibility of equal social mobility. Even in so-called liberated societies, a recurring narrative is that queer people are tolerated as long as they don’t act like it excessively. Like other marginalised communities, a method of obtaining equality is to adhere to what is deemed to be ‘proper’ behaviour (Jones, 2021). Similarly, queer people are restricted in their representation in popular culture due to heteronormative moralities in society (Hennessey, 1994).

This thesis aims to articulate what respectability politics look like and how that relates to the imagery of queer identities in popular cinema. Further, theory on the pedagogical implications of cinema assist understanding the political and educational impact of the depiction of queer experiences. In this study, I think with queer imagery as a carrier of the queer experience. As a carrier, the spectator is called upon to think of their own positioning, in this case, their own queer experience. I will adopt the concept of “situated knowledges” as proposed by Donna Haraway (1988) to understand that those that belong to the oppressed are situated as such that they have access to more knowledge about the structures that oppress them because they are aware of the effects. Whereas those that are not affected are not situated to be aware of these oppressive structures, they effectively profit from these same structures and are thereby not

inherently pushed to question them. Oppressive structures are intrusive to the oppressed, and thus cannot be ignored when one expresses themselves. Queer people are generally situated as such that they can be more aware of heteronormative social structures than non-queer people. From that point of departure, thinking with queer pedagogies in cinema would profit from having this conversation with those that are aware of the restrictive social structures queer cinema moves within. I am therefore interested in conducting this research by working with the following question:

How do queer people experience respectability through queer pedagogies in film?

By forming a focus group to talk about queer imagery in cinema, I will illuminate how the queer experience is formulated in cinema and how queer people can imagine themselves in the imagery. Emphasising queer voices in this analysis ensures that we can see how the popular depiction of an individual experience affects the individual themselves. The societal relevance of this research is the amplification of queer voices in the popular depiction of their experiences in cinema, which is a consumer culture product that historically functions in social structures that surpass their voices. The scientific relevance is that it contributes to theories of cinema pedagogy, connecting it to theories of respectability politics to offer a new understanding of the iteration of identities and experiences in popular culture and its educational traction.

Theoretical framework

The theory used to support this research comes in twofold. Theory on respectability politics shows that attempts at liberation sometimes take the form of adopting normative characteristics to gain social mobility. The concept of an imagined audience allows me to look at the role of the imagined audience in cinematic productions and how that relates to the curation of transgressive subject matter and identities with restricted social mobility. Furthermore, theories on cinema pedagogies allow me to understand what the educational implications are of cinematic imagery. Subsequently, this offers theoretical grounds to illuminate how queer people engage with queer imagery in cinema.

Respectability politics

Theories of impression management emerged in social psychology to refer to how people alter their self-presentation with respect to their audience to issue some control over how people think of them (Pitkan, Marwick, Boyd, 2018). In impression management literature there is, however, a disregard for the structural differences between people that dictate and compromise the opportunities of individuals to issue this level of control. Respectability politics in its theoretical context, aims to understand how people of a compromised social status may try to gain social mobility through adjusting their presentation to accommodate what is deemed proper or normative behaviour. A prominent example is that of women of colour that downgrade their sexuality and upgrade 'white' morality in order to be gained access to privileges that white people enjoy. This tactic, however, surpasses the structural inequalities that made certain that they live with restricted social mobility in the first place. The inefficiency of this tactic is further explained by that respectability politics happen

through the formulation of an imagined audience. This imagined audience is the iteration of the social norms the person adopting it is up against (Pitkan, Marwick, Boyd, 2018)

In popular cinema, we find an imagined audience as well. Societally challenged people curate their modes of expression according to the societal norms that may offer them social mobility. Similarly, commodified cultural products often accommodate these same societal norms because their capital success depends on it (Giroux, 1996). As a film is being written and produced, it enjoys the scrutiny of how it might be received by the public. So as opposed to the imagined audience in respectability politics as an individual endeavour, the imagined audience of cinema is made explicit by working according to patterns in flows of commerce. If a production company sees for what kind of movies people are willing to pay, they can adjust their products accordingly. While the individual might have their own imagined audience, the one in production companies is a collective and an informed one. So if a film were to touch upon a theme that is deemed transgressive in society, it will be challenged by social norms that the collective imagined audience represents. Remaining transgressive imagery in a film without moderations is thus quite unlikely.

The imagined audience also challenges the spectator, this becomes most evident when confronted with cinema as public property. It is like watching a sex scene with your parents and feeling uncomfortable while without them, you might not think twice about it. Or rewatching a cultural pillar of your childhood and being appalled by the racist jokes you did not notice on your first watch. This shows how your social and intellectual context influences what you see, with the imagined audience operating as a mediating factor. It is the acknowledgement that as you are affected by cinema, other people will be too.

Analyzing respectability politics allows for a consideration of existing social norms. A woman asked to give a speech might choose to wear something that is not considered to be too sexual in order to achieve more respect, in turn, both upholds and emphasises that sexualized

behaviour is deemed not respectable. (Pitkan, Marwick, Boyd, 2018). In the context of queer cinema, one of the first blockbuster films that featured an explicit gay romance is *Brokeback Mountain* (2006). Theory on respectability politics as an individual endeavour may be applied to queer representation in mass cinema if we look at specifics around the fact the film is about a gay couple. They are white men, thereby adhering to a certain perceived neutrality. Moreover, they are very masculine men that are gay in their being, but struggle with their expression, accommodating to the idea that they are not ‘that’ kind of gay. The validity of the experience of masculine, white, gay men suffering from external and internalised homophobia is not meant to be degraded by theories on respectability politics. However, it is striking that a film such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* achieved a cult status while *Brokeback Mountain* became known as one of the first widely respected pieces of queer cinema. It appears that grades of transgression in the depiction of queer experiences in cinema is regulated by ethical restrictions that are similar to structures of social inequality in which real life queer experiences operate.

Cinema pedagogy

The Hays Code exemplifies how consumer culture calls for ethical boundaries, making cinema a vehicle for Christian morality. If cinema becomes a vehicle of moral structures, the implication is that morality enacts influence on the viewer through cinema. The policing of the morality of cinema in turn implies that guardians of specific moralities find that cinema has a direct influence on collective thinking. Theories on the pedagogical consequences and implications of cinema will offer insight into why respectability politics in cinema has direct influence on collective opinions of normative societal structures. These theories operate under the assumption that cinema is a product of the masses, be it by analyzing flows of commerce or thinking alongside the imagery. Evidently, there are multiple ways in which cinema influences how people think about real life issues, thereby accentuating that it matters how

cinematic content is curated. If the curation of cinematic content impacts how people think about real life, queer respectability politics in queer cinema impacts how people view the queer experience.

Educational infrastructures can be found in most cultural creations. Cultural creations refer to real life phenomena and experiences and can therefore generate an opportunity in the spectator to imagine one's beliefs and experiences differently. As these cultural creations are most often public property, they thus have the ability to challenge and lay claim to public memory. Film is a medium that has the ability to portray and imagine real life issues in different tones, forms and perspectives, this stresses the political significance of film. Film serves as a form of public pedagogy by combining entertainment with politics (Giroux, 2011).

When I was younger my mother was a big fan of historical drama films that centred around WWII. I have watched and rewatched *Zwartboek*, *The English Patient* and *La Vita è Bella* (among others) multiple times before I was 13. As I think about WWII, an event during which my mother was not born yet, I have my own memories of the stories and the imagery I was offered throughout my life. While I have no direct memories of the events, I take part in the collective memory of the people that are generationally related to those that have. By culturally depicting people, ideas and events, you solidify the memory as intergenerational property. Collective memory is shaped by not only formal education on the topic, but also the cultural depiction.

Nadir Lahiji (2021) theorises along the lines of Walter Benjamin and Alain Badiou that cinema has failed to live up to the political potential it had. Arts of the masses can be carriers of pedagogies of the masses and cinema has lost this potential due to capitalisation of the content. Badiou is mentioned to give light to the fact that mass art offers a contradiction between real life experience and the fascination of images, thereby assuring the pedagogical relevance. Images urge thinking and reflection. However, Lahiji argues that the capitalisation

of how these images are curated obscures the contradiction, the contradiction is lost in capital structures because the contradiction is not the primary objective anymore. If governmental figures acknowledge the influence that cinema has on collective memory it will set up capital and legislative incentives accordingly. The 1980 film *Cruising* had 40 minutes of the film famously cut due to explicit content in a leather bar. The 2015 *The Danish Girl* was banned in multiple countries due to so-called moral depravity. If governmental figures tend to meddle in films with “morally transgressive” themes, production companies will not be as inclined to offer a honourable account of these same themes.

The pedagogical significance cannot only be understood through the socio-political consequences. A measured response to a pedagogy of cinema also turns us to the imagery itself and what that means. As established previously, cinema is able to reference real life experiences and themes and may therefore provoke re-imagining one’s own experiences in the spectator. I shall therefore turn to the images themselves to offer a deeper understanding of what this relationship between imagery and spectator is and why it matters. Adopted from Deleuze’s ideas of movement through images and time, Cole and Bradley (2016) explore the idea of the navigation of knowledge through cinema. Their aim is to acknowledge that Deleuze’s exploration of thinking with images and time allows for knowledge production because there is more to be found in imagery and time than the image itself. If one engages with film, the imagery that is brought to our attention changes according to the spectator’s perspective. In queer cinema we can recognize imagery of queer life as something that provokes something different in all that watch it. Imagery of modes of living and modes of expression offer the spectator a chance to imagine their own position in their modes of life and expression. (Cole, Bradley, 2016) It resembles how children learn societal rules by playing with and looking at each other. Cinema, however chaotic, always conveys portrayals

of things, people and thoughts that occur in real life. This has affects the spectator because exposure mirrors the human experience.

When respectability politics come into play, the possibility of cinema to challenge normative narratives is limited. The result is that transgressive narratives are forged to work within the respectable norms of society. As explored in the section before, imagery relates to lives societal structures. The capital structures that limit the narrative freedom of cinema then take an equal shape to the curation of respectability politics, as they are both boundaries to expression according to the social norms that are carried by the imagined audience of the maker and the spectator.

Research Design and Methodology

A methodology that would do justice to the objects of investigation at hand is one that does justice to the queer experience, which is an experience that may be at odds with dominant worldviews and academic strategies. The queer narrative can be disruptive to these dominant worldviews, as can be found in many works of queer theory where academics challenge heteronormative and linear ways of thinking (Waite, 2015). The queer experience is not a coherent one in the context of coherence as envisioned by dominant academic narratives, and similar to how respectability politics surpass structural inequalities, the dominant, heteronormative way of thinking does not account for the queer. Which accounts for why queer theory has been establishing itself as a way of contesting dominant ways of thinking. As coined by Jack Halberstam (1998) I propose the queer scavenging methodology. To Halberstam, the scavenging researcher disrupts their own modes of thinking by looking in places that might seem contradictory (Waite, 2015). This mode of research would allow me to contest the disregard for queer experiences in some of the theory I propose without having to disregard the theory's potential. Adopting the role as queer scavenger, I will shift the weight and focus of the research from prospected outcomes back to thinking with the images and the experiences of the participants at hand. Doing social research, I might feel inclined to think of the participants' contribution in terms of how relevant it is to the point I am trying to make. This position would obscure contributions that are not directly relevant to the research but may be just as interesting. As scavenging researcher, I will let the contributions of the participants guide me to see where the weight lies, even if it seems contradictory with the theory.

Similar to adopting Deleuze's theory of cinema thinking as a way of positioning myself within the images to think of queer pedagogies in cinema, many researchers have taken Deleuze and Guattari their theory of rhizomatic knowledge and implemented it in their

research. In this, they use the rhizome as a metaphor, which can be understood as an open system of multiple interactions and connections. By using this in understanding ways of thinking they offer the opportunity to shift from a static body of knowledge, which is a dominant way of thinking in sciences, to the dynamic process of knowing. Deleuze urges to talk in terms of events, rather than essence (Bell, 1997). This brings me to decide I do not aim to explain how and why queer pedagogies are shaped and if they are supposedly correct or accurate. Rather, I want to create a space where we can articulate how the pedagogies are experienced. I propose to connect this to Halberstam's idea of scavenging methodology by adopting the role of scavenger. The theory does not need to be supported necessarily, rather than that the theory supports insight into the queer cinematic experience. The method shall emphasise thinking with cinema from within a queer experience, not to explain the theory but to engage with it.

To actualise this point of departure for the methodology I have chosen to bring together a focus group of 10 queer identifying people to watch *Drive away dolls* (2023). In terms of disrupting dominant narratives, the film is a disruptive one as a whole, to say the least. Being made by one of the Coen Brothers that is inclined to use their philosophical background to create controversial imagery (Delaere, 2022), it is quite an absurdist piece and one of the few cases of big cinema films primarily focussed on a lesbian storyline. By no means is it important to end up with a conclusion about the quality of the film, however, it is very expressive in the comedic envisioning of the gay experience and this encouraged a fruitful conversation between the people in the group. Many queer films are based on true people and stories, I have specifically chosen a film that is fictional because it does not call for a scrutiny of accuracy, leaving more space to talk about form of the images and the story and what that means. This also refers back to my position as a queer scavenger. By asking queer people to comment on this film I shall analyse the outcome to this of the discrepancy between the queer

experience and queer cinema to find out which mechanisms operate when the queer experience is turned from real life element to something that can be consumed.

Before we watched the film I offered a short introduction. I offered the participants a reminder that the film and how it is experienced is a product of influences and conditions (Corrigan, 2007, 22). This is the case for where the images come from as well as how the viewer experiences the images. Trying to obtain a neutral experience would be no more than wishful thinking. I told people to ask themselves why they find certain things striking while watching the film, in order to enforce their critical experience and to think of how their own experiences relate to the imagery in the film.

After watching the film we sat together and talked about our experiences. I provided the group with prompts to guide the conversation along key concepts that align with the theory of respectability politics and a pedagogy of cinema to see how people respond to the images within this narrative. The prompts only focused to guide the conversation in a grand scheme of key concepts to avoid guiding the conversation too much. In the end, as expected, I did not have to offer much prompts for them to start talking. This was fruitful to me because I was more interested in what they wanted to talk about than in obtaining my own desired answers. This aligns with the queer scavenger methodology because it leaves open the possibility to move away from logical connections to the theory, while remaining with the theme. The participants would come up with the imagery that they find interesting enough to talk about. This imagery is, accordingly, what affected the participants most, and is therefore the most interesting to talk about when thinking along the lines of imagery of affect and cinema pedagogies (Cole, Bradley, 2016). This offered insights that can engage with the theory, rather than confirm or refute it. The contribution of the participants allowed me to go back to the theory to see what could be explicated further, while being able to directly relate it to the things the participants said. The first part focused on the relation between personal experience

and the imagery in the film. Theory on respectability politics shows how people coordinate their behaviour to appease society, therefore I measured the coordination of the queer experience by asking queer people how the imagery relates to real life experiences and knowledges. This showed modes in which the imagery is mediated.

I started the conversation by asking people to offer their first thoughts. This quickly turned into a conversation about the tone of the film and whether we agree with the extravagant way the characters and the story is portrayed. Further into the conversation, I brought up prompts to see what people thought of certain aspects of the film, so that participants can compare their analyses. Since the first part focused more on the respectability politics part, the second part focused on how queer people think about the pedagogical implications of the film. The prompts took a different shape to talk about what we think the film criticizes or endorses, as well as the experience of imagining the audience.

After the group conversation I gave the people there the opportunity to elaborate on their experience and opinion of the film. The theory puts an emphasis on the fact that cinema mediates queer imagery and this exercise offered an opportunity for the participants to specify how they feel this mediation occurs. First, they wrote down their own critique on how they would like the film to change in terms of the things that were discussed before. This part of the research allowed people to generate the shared ideas and opinions to formulate an image that is rooted in their individual experience. The focus group did not, as expected, fully give voice to everyone's individual experience and was therefore accommodated by an individual contribution. The first question for this last exercise is:

If you had all creative freedom, what would you change about this film to make sure that it teaches what you want people to learn about the queer experience?

This made sure I gave means to amplify what the contributing people want to amplify about queer pedagogies and desirable outcomes of these pedagogies in cinema, specifically by talking about the imagery within the film. The second question was optional. Aside from the fact that cinematic portrayals of the queer experience can be tested by asking how queer people would like to see it, I wanted to know how queer people experience the iteration of the ethical boundaries that are attributed in cinema. When being asked about being free from the pressure of making a great movie, Tricia Cooke, one of the directors, said to Indiewire (2023):

“There’s not a lot of earnestness. The points for me are: men can be clueless, or, women are powerful, strong, fun, interesting characters, or you can put queer people in the movie, and it doesn’t necessarily just have to be about them being queer, they can be in a genre movie. All of those things I wanted to say in that movie.”

They thereby specified the film was never meant to go up for the Oscars. Along these lines I offered an optional, additional question:

If the film would be made to go up for the Oscars, what do you think would be different?

This question was optional because opting not to answer this question can offer insights in how people perceive ethical boundaries through institutions such as the Oscars. If you do not have a sense of what that means to you, you might not be interested in answering this question.

Films that account for the experience of all queer identities are difficult to think of. Maybe even impossible as well as undesirable. This is important to note. This will, in its own way, contribute to the research because it allows us to think of the film thematically more than substantively. This particular element will be elaborated on further in the data section because it was also an integral part of the group discussion. The queer experience is not one experience, and just as all individual queer experiences are different, queer iterations in

cinema are too. From that point of departure, the research aims to provide the perspective of multiple kinds of people that identify as queer and enjoy cinema. The focus group consisted of a diverse selection from the queer community, which accounted for diverse perspectives. Out of the 10 people there were five people of colour, of which one black person, one North-African person and three mixed or biracial people. There were three that identified as lesbians, one as gay, one as heterosexual, and the rest as queer and/or bisexual. Three people identify as genderqueer/fluid or non-binary. Further, there were six people aged in their twenties, one in their thirties and three in their sixties. Two of the participants are in a romantic relationship with each other.

The film

Ethan Coen, predominantly known for his work with his brother, wrote and directed this film with his wife Tricia Cooke, who worked on many of the productions of the Coen Brothers as an editor. They describe their marriage as unconventional, having an open relationship and Tricia identifying as queer and lesbian. Tricia's experiences in the early 2000s served as inspiration for this film, but the production process took 20 more years to come to fruition. The film is the reaction to a severe lack of ridiculous, comedic films about lesbians. The story revolves around two lesbian friends that pick up a drive-away car to go to Tallahassee. They are mistaken for the people that were supposed to drive a car containing "goods" there and are henceforth being chased by the people that were supposed to do so. As their story unfolds, they evolve their relationship together in different ways. Once they find the goods in the trunk (a decapitated head and a suitcase full of dildo's, respectfully) they know they have gotten themselves into something sinister. They are caught but make it out alive because of one of the chasers getting into a fit for feeling compromised in his masculinity. They then return the suitcase to the rightful owner, receiving a sum of money. And living happily in a relationship together with their own "hers and hers" casts of the phallus they enjoined together.

Data analysis

We had been discussing elements of the film that struck us to think about our own experiences when halfway through the conversation I asked the group what they would think non-queer people would learn about the queer experience from this film and everyone burst out into laughter. A collective sense of discomfort echoes in its wake as I know that the group knows the stakes of fierce queer expression in an unwelcoming environment. Since we had taken time to sit with the imagery for ourselves, thinking about how others might perceive it might seem intrusive or even threatening. The following chapter will present the findings of the focus group. The contribution of the participants helps to illustrate how the imagined audience mediates how queer people experience queer imagery in film.

The first part of the analysis serves to elaborate on two main instances of imagery that were discussed the most: character development and sexuality. As indicated in the theory section, cinema pedagogies can be understood through how spectators engage with the imagery. I will look at how the participants engage with the character imagery and the sexual imagery, see what respectability politics the imagery enables through this engagement and how that relates to the pedagogical impact the imagery has on the participants.

The second part explains how the participants experience the imagined audience. Stressing how different ways of diverse representation have different effects on how we imagine other people seeing this film. Moving further into discussing the ways in which the imagined audience influences the way that the participants experience watching the described imagery. In a last section I shall argue that the participants assign a form of agency to themselves and others as spectators. I will explain why the agency of the spectator matters to what respectability politics in cinema look like and in what way it influences how the spectator is affected by cinematic imagery.

Imagery

While the participants engage in the moderated conversation, several kinds of imagery were brought to light more explicitly than others. To enable a scavenger methodology, I will let these topics guide the analysis back to highlight certain points related to the established theoretical groundwork. This section is an exploration of the movie-watching experience of the participants.

Mirroring the queer contradiction

The imagery in cinema carries more than the image itself, it is a catalyst for ethical, political and cultural considerations. Character imagery is formulated according to these considerations and relates to the spectator in such a way that they can question their own positionality in life (Cole, Bradley, 2016). This becomes clear in the participants discussing the characters of *Drive-away Dolls*. The film establishes a ridiculous tone and a part of that is the excessively branded two main characters. Marian is rather shy and uptight, goes to a lesbian bar to socialize rather than peddle her wears. Whereas Jamie is the loud Texan that gets them invited to a make-out party of the local soccer team in a town they have never been before. They are comedically established as opposites and move on to evolve into each other's way of being throughout the film as they go on this trip together. The participants mention they notice that in moving toward moderation the movie seems to disregard the reality of excessive characteristics in real life. So called 'moderate' behaviour refers to a kind of normative idea of how one must not be too shy and one must also not be too loud. However, most agreed that there is a gentil nature to the way they discover themselves together. Which is, in its own way, reminiscent of how the participants engage with their own coming of age narrative. The reality of excessive characteristics highlights the toning down of the characters in the film. This moderation between excessive characteristics is a mode of respectability politics because

it tones down what stands out. It pertains to a kind of social normativity in how shy or excessive one can be.

“I think that the film is quite explicit in criticizing both of the main characters’ way of engaging sexually with other people. Marian is too shy. She doesn’t go out, you know, she doesn’t go home with people from gay bars or lesbian bars. And Jamie does it too much. And in the end there is this sort of compromise between the two. Where Marian is engaging sexually more, with Jamie. And Jamie decides that actually she shouldn’t go to basement parties. And then they look each other in the eye lovingly and decide they’re gonna go home together instead.” – Rosa (24)

The ethical considerations in this imagery thus, at least for the participants, revolve around moderation. The pedagogical consequences can be understood by thinking of imagery as a mirror to the real life positionality of the spectator. Many of these pedagogical consequences come from the use of contradictions, because contradictions have the ability to create a tension where the affected is called to engage with how it relates to their existing knowledge. Some of the participants mentioned how they could relate to one or both of the characters in terms of their character growth.

“I guess it’s the... the holding back of the one girl, I had a long phase of that, holding myself back a lot. And these days I am a little bit more open. [...] and the carefulness at first, and then starting to like, get into it more. And yeah I think I it’s recognisable in that.” – Sam (20)

By envisioning the two main characters in the way that the film does, a spectrum is created, with the behaviour of the girls assigned to both ends. Films can unapologetically promote a certain way of life by being very obvious about criticizing some ways of living. More than that, the stark distinction between the two main characters called on to the participants to position themselves somewhere in the spectrum. How the spectator is affected is not only

determined by what the movies tells the spectator, affect moves via the engagement of the spectator, making it an ongoing and back-and-forth phenomenon. The spectator brings their own experiences to the table, and will subsequently assign a form of value to their journey.

Affection of queer joy

The participants expressed their experience that most queer films tend to focus around a coming out story or any form of queer trauma. While they find that those stories are important, they did enjoy seeing a film where that was not necessary for the characters.

“There tends to.. the focus is on always on a traumatic, of how hard everything is, and how fucked up we were made by society. Instead of just having a few good little story. Or like experiencing queer joy in a way and I think this film is also kind of nice in that way because they are just openly lesbian. They’re just doing their thing. It is put in a goofy way. But then it’s a Coen film, it’s also a comedy. So, it still even would, with the amount of queer cinema that is out there. Especially recently. It’s kind of hard to find queer cinema or films which have queer people in it where it’s not focused on that the fact that they are queer made their life more difficult. Which is of course important to recognise but it really doesn’t have to be the story all the time.” – Rosa

In the history of US cinema, censorship has played a big role. The Hays Code was a part of multiple forms of ethical regulations that were in place to ensure some films would not be seen by those most impressionable. The documentary film *This Film is Not Yet Rated* shows how MPAA ratings were implemented in the late 60s to make sure that certain films could not be marketed excessively and could not be seen in cinema’s by anybody under the age of 17. These ratings could determine the success of a film by means of ethical restrictions, the training and content of the rating system remains unknown to the public. One condition at the stage of a general audience rating was that violence was allowed as long as it was cartoonish.

So violence was not condemned in itself, it just has to be framed in such a way that the spectator would not take it too seriously. Another part of the rating system that worked with a distinct double standard is that queer content would often be rated for much older audiences than heteronormative content. The issue they assigned to this would often be that it could not be framed as sweet and genuine, rather than just be there. Kimberley Peirce, the director of the film *Boys Don't Cry*, expressed her difficulties with the rating system. There was an issue with the scene where the main character pleasures a woman orally because her pleasure was too excessive. It appears that, according to this rating system, transgressive content was allowed as long as it was framed in such a way that it could not be taken too seriously. There is respectability politics in comedic depictions, as audiences do not have to entertain the idea that this is a reality for some. The comedic veil of *Drive-away Dolls* leaves narrative mobility to not focus on queer trauma or coming out narratives. Like violence being allowed as long as it is cartoonish to the MPAA rating system, queers do not have to come out in a comedy. One participant expressed their discontent with the tone of the character imagery because it wrongfully portrays queer people as a laugh, which has been the case for a long time. They expressed their desire for a more heartfelt film that takes queer people seriously. The participants end up in a twofold conclusion. While queer people want to be taken seriously, it is also quite liberating to see a film that does not focus on the heavy parts of being queer. The film that is desired is one where queer people are taken seriously, without focussing mainly on queer trauma. Through the film we can imagine queer life as an uncomplicated life. This allows for the queer spectator to be confronted with queer life as something that is not compromised by being queer. We can imagine the good part about being queer. But like real life respectability politics, it surpasses the inequalities that are already there.

The sexual contradiction

The main characters and their journey from excessive to compromise is highly related to how the film portrays their sexual behaviour. That requires some more attention. The previous section establishes the shared experience of the participants in that the main characters represent two ends of a spectrum where the middle ground is portrayed as the desirable end. The participants find that a middle ground is established in their sexual journey. More than establishing a middle ground, the portrayal of their sexual journey leads to a certain type of sexual relationship. The characters end the movie in what appears to be marriage, some of the participants expressed their discontent with this in light of the rest of the film.

“That they come to be this like happy couple so now they’re together and they’re having a certain type of sex and they’re having a certain type of relationship, and now everything is okay and good. And being too sexual or not sexual enough is not okay so there’s one certain type of sex to have. There’s one certain type of relationship to have, and it feels very heteronormative. That type of relationship that is approved.” – Celeste (26)

The discontent of the participants is not necessarily based in that they have an issue with marriage but that it conveys a message that there is one desirable way to shape your sexual journey. It points to the kind of respectability politics where queer people tend to adopt heteronormative characteristics to convey the message that queer people are not so different from non-queer people, to conclude that it is therefore unreasonable to deny them equal rights (Jones, 2021). It is the interesting contradiction between historical contexts and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The world must celebrate that queer people can get married right now, while the institution that is marriage carries a heteronormative history that is suppressive to queer people in the first place. Opponents of same-sex marriage are legitimized in their opinion by being able to refer to the foundation of an institution (Eskridge, 1993). Gay marriage is the epitome of gay mainstreaming, which mainly serves to appease general

audiences and their normative standards, thereby disregarding parts of the authenticity of the queer experience (Grundmann, 2006). With this in mind, the participants assume a heteronormativity to the ending of the film in that it is implied they would get married. This heteronormative conclusion happens in the context of how the movie characterizes itself as comedic and absurdist, as well as the either ends of the spectrum in sexual behaviour for the main characters. Having this context allows the spectator to engage with the possibility of multiple modes of sexual behaviour, before being guided toward a moderated, heteronormative version. The issue that the participants have with this is that it does not account for the diversity in sexual preferences that they experience in their own life and recognize in the people around them.

“I would want it to show that all types of sex that you feel comfortable with having, that you feel joy in exploring, that you feel safe in or pushes you in a way you feel good about is okay. I would want it to be more fluid, more open to our sexual diversity and authenticity. Yes to exploring this together, yes to maybe some uncomfortableness along the way because it’s not always peachy but maybe more acceptance of sluttiness or asexuality or figuring it out. But I liked their exploring together though.” – Celeste

The critique shows a desire to engage with queer imagery according to the diversity of the queer sexual journey as a whole. The respectability politics of having a heteronormative ending offers a possibility of the spectator to imagine themselves in the happy pursuits of marriage as an end goal to a 90 minute sexual journey.

The pedagogical symbolism of the phalluses

Aside from the marital context the participants felt a slight unease with the emphasis on the use of one of dildo’s in the suitcase in exploring their sexuality. In exploring their sexuality together, the main characters end up using one of the phallic casts which reveals itself to be

the high point of their sexual journey. A selection of the participants felt a particular discontent with the idea of the penis symbolizing the necessity of a masculine element in the ultimate sexual journey. Karolina (61) messaged me later on to express their discontent with the phalluses because they were afraid that non-queer viewers would see this and confirm their suspicion that when push comes to shove, lesbians cannot have sex without a phallus. Rosa expressed how this particular element made it feel like the film was written by a man.

Furthermore, it is not only the perceived objective of having a penis involved in a lesbian sexual relationship, the cast is one that is made of a republican senator (Matt Damon) known in the film to stand for traditional family values. The heteronormativity in the sexual journey thus goes further into the explicit sexual content. This is related to an equal kind of respectability politics as the previous section that focusses on the form of the relationship of the main characters, because it centralizes a form of heteronormativity. It also pertains to a respectability politics as mentioned in the section on the use of comedic tonality. Because the phalluses are introduced as a comedic plot point, it is more likely for the spectator to discard the storyline. The absurd framing may function as a masque while the foundation still sparks discontent with the queer participants.

Sexual imagery is a very tender element to cinematic representation in itself, especially when the imagery falls outside of the normative spectrum, which is the case in the sexual imagery of queer experiences. Because real life sexual exploration can be quite delicate and something that is rarely talked about thoroughly and publicly, cinematic imagery is one of the most accessible modes of engaging with ideas of sexual performance. The spectator can find themselves feel uncomfortable or excited by this imagery because sexual imagery allows them to engage with ideas of their own desires, similar to how the spectator is affected by imagery of character development to evaluate their social positionality.

“The moment that the little girl she was watching the neighbour, that I recognise very much. And it was not that I was looking to my neighbour, but when I was young I find it also very exciting when I see two women. And sometimes I saw on television and there was a programme and there was a Dutch actress and she was dressed like a man and she was for the play she was chasing one of the maids. And I find it very, very exciting, that’s what I recognized.” – Karolina (61)

Accordingly, not all participants felt the same discontent with the imagery of the phallus. Because it pertains to a certain type of sexual conduct where the phallus is not necessarily masculine.

“And also in relation to the sexuality or like how the focal point of the dildos or like it’s also again how you approach the sexuality from the point of view of the lesbians too. Because that’s also part of the experience. And it’s not necessarily always interpreted from a heteronormative point of view if that makes sense.” – Nussy (23)

In a lesbian sexual relationship, the use of an artificial phallus does not necessarily pertain to something masculine. But this particular element is for the queer or well-informed people to know. The fear of non-queer people perceiving it as a masculine feature is, evidently, still something that the queer spectator brings with them in their cinematic experience. Sexual imagery and the portrayal of desire and pleasure has specific pedagogical consequences as it pertains to something that is generally quite intimate to the spectator. Sexual pleasure is often very personal to somebody, so engaging with sexual imagery in film can feel intrusive. Even more so if the spectator finds that it misrepresents an honest experience.

Conducting the imagined audience

The following section turns its attention to how the participants think about the perception of the imagery that is specified before. Effectively, this conversation formulates how the participants perceive an imagined audience and what internal as well as external elements influence this perspective.

Diversity and tokenism

The film itself contains almost entirely a lesbian narrative, Roel mentioned they were unsure how much they could contribute to the conversation since they do not identify as a lesbian. In consumer culture, flows of capital often simplify the representation of a diverse group of people. This commodification has happened while shifting the terminology from gays and lesbian to queer, resulting in consumer culture to present queer liberation as one narrative (Nair, 2006). A unified queer community is easier to sell than a fragmented and contradictory one. Although this form of commodification happens through economic exchange, commodification influences social structures as well (Hennessey, 1994). The unification of the queer narrative creates a unified objective that is to counter heteronormativity. The community is diverse but is united in their attempts at liberation. Despite the unification, lived experiences do account for a lot of diversity within the community. Commodified culture has the liberty to disregard these lived experiences and enact a unified queer narrative. The queer spectator therefore has a privileged position in knowing about these lived experiences while a non-queer spectator may not. Both lesbians and non-lesbians in the queer community feel how it is disingenuous to straightwash the lesbian experience in character development and their sexual journey. People that do not know of the diversity within the community might take such imagery at face value, while the informed can sense when a form of representation is insincere. There are multiple ways in which queer cultural products can account for the diversity of experiences. The biggest cross the board consensus the participants had was that in

order for people to learn about the queer experience from cinema, one must not ask of one film to be representative enough but must watch as much films as possible.

“If you’re just someone that just goes once in five year to a movie then you won’t learn. But hey, that’s also with reading one book in five years. Yeah. So I think the ones that go to movies more often, I think they can see it.” – June (62)

If the film would include more aspects of the queer community, it has the danger of resulting in tokenism. This would mean that a narrative would be represented to check a box, rather than that it is actually necessary for the story (Grant, 2017). Commodified culture takes liberties to disregard lived experiences, at the discretion of the viewer, because the viewer brings their own lived experiences into the cinema. In the simplicity of commodified cultural representation, tokenism is often adopted without the complexities of the experience that is represented. Tokenism thus, is not the way to increase the informative span of the cinematic content. Those that are ill informed might come to this film and judge the content accordingly, but the participants enforce that these are not the people that should take the same issues seriously. They stressed how this is an absurd and comedic film that is not made for people to learn from it. There is a genuine conversation to be had about the character development and the sexual imagery among queer people or those that know enough about the queer experience but as soon as we start talking about what other people might experience in watching this film, we know that this is not a film that is to be taken seriously. The comedic masque serves to overshadow the more severe topics.

“But I wanted to see a little more people of colour in it. And In a way of showing the struggles a bit more. Especially at that time period. Because like I think that it was a little more different that time than now.” – Sam

The film manages to engage with a form of systematic critique, but it remains rather surface levelled. There is an encounter between one of the main characters, a woman of colour, and a police officer. This encounter aims to critique police attitudes but is very short lived. Some participants expressed their desire of the film to have more explicit critique against the police since especially queer people of colour have had severe experiences with them in real life. There is a scene where the other main character says “*Lesbians, do not let the sun go down on you in Florida*”. This is a direct reference to the signs that would mark sundown towns. These were American towns and counties, predominantly between 1890 and 1960, that took violent steps to make sure that black people would not live there, intimidating them to not stay there after dark (Loewen, 2009). The line is said by a white character and refers to queer inaccessibility, something of which they have little explicit issues with in the film itself. It seems that the film dips its toe in systemic critique but manages to overrule a genuine minute to flesh it out by framing itself as absurd and a comedy. The erasure of racist history and narratives shows that film is embedded in ideologically dominant structures. While people of colour are subjected to imagining themselves in a cultural narrative that denies their subjectivity (Franklin-Phipps, Smithers, 2020). Intersectionality and a diversity representation of the queer experience is not necessarily questioned by those that are unaware of its reality. While those that are, may be alarmed with certain decisions a film may make to structure the imagery in such a way that it disregards a diversity of experiences.

Queer cinema as a safe space

The queer cinema go-er could ask themselves if it is desirable to gatekeep queer films to specific audiences. The participants relate this to the character imagery and the grade of excessive content. One participant expresses their discontent with excessive imagery in queer characters because they want to see imagery that helps queer people get out of typecasting and being the comedic relief.

“Cause it like, for us, it’s like okay to look at queer films and okay girlyies like go on. But thinking of typical straight people watching queer movies they also get to see like typecasts.. like... for me it gets me to think that they won’t... know. Movies like this won’t help us to like get to the normal. So yeah it’s not for me I think. Like the typical dykes, I’m not sure.” – Roel (26)

The experience of knowing that ill-informed non-queer people are going to watch this imagery unsettles some participants. They have the contextual knowledge of the reality of the queer experience to watch this imagery. A part of this knowledge is that we know that ill-informed people will jump to conclusions before attaining the knowledge necessary to engage with this imagery in an authentic way. Next to the character imagery, the sexual content sparked a similar kind of discomfort with some of the participants. As established before, sexual content in cinema has an ability to engage with the spectator in quite an intimate way. This has a direct effect on the experience of the spectator.

“But I was quite uncomfortable by the thought of straight white older men sitting in the cinema with me and watching the sex scenes because it felt very intimate and very.. I didn’t want people to fetishize it, I didn’t want people to look at it in a sexual way... but not in a sexual in like a... I don’t know how to use the right word, but in a way that makes it look pervasive.” – Nussy

Other participants strengthened this sense of awareness of the other in a cinematic experience as it relates to the real life experience of queer people being watched and fetishized. Moreover, the participants mention a specificity to the way they experience the fetishization of lesbians, they have experienced straight men projecting their sexual desires onto lesbian imagery. June mentions that a part of the queer community is not to exclude anybody, they want to call on to all people to overcome the discomfort that is a pregiven in queer life and see

that straight people watching this film is an honour. They express that queer liberation is not going to come from excluding people.

This sense of who gets to see queer content and who does not highlights a tension that is found in the participants and their experience of the cinematic imagery. Queer people can feel uncomfortable as soon as other people come into our narrative, and might therefore desire the content to be fitting. Most queer people know that there are many different roads to self-discovery, that does not mean we might feel threatened by the idea that others have the freedom to assign value to our behavioural imagery. Most queer people know that using an artificial phallus in lesbian sex is not necessarily a masculine feature, that does not stop the fear that straight men might see it as a confirmation that masculine features are a necessity to sexual activity. Queer people know that there is a specificity to their knowledge as the queer experience defies social norms. This contextual knowledge influences the pedagogical considerations of the spectator when experiencing a film.

The agency of the spectator

The assessment of the cinematic imagery done by the participants is relative to the individual context of the spectator. They show an ability to engage with the imagery from personal experiences but also show how the idea of other people seeing this film influences the same assessment. For queers people it is alright to see a queer film where the development of the characters leads them to a middle ground because the queer spectator knows that this is one of many valid endings to self-exploration. At the same time, the queer spectator can be discontent with the imagery of the middle ground because those that do not know of valid alternatives might conclude the middle ground to be deemed desirable. The participants attribute a form of agency to the spectator. They do so with themselves by assessing the

imagery according to their personal experiences and knowledge, as well as when imagining other spectators by assessing the same imagery to be possibly problematic without similar contextual knowledge.

Personal experience determines the imagery. While a film can be objectively assessed in content and visuals, the cinematic experience and pedagogical consequences are determined by what the spectator brings with them.

“Because when I walked into this movie or Love Lies Bleeding or any of those newer lesbian movies. I just went as I’m going to enjoy this as a queer movie that is made for me. And not to give something to straight people or how they see us. So that shifts maybe the narrative and how you interpret the movie or what happens in the movie” – Nussy

The queer spectator has the ability to engage with this film as something that is to be enjoyed rather than that it has any significant pedagogical consequences. By adopting this position as the spectator, the participants elude to that the ethical nature of the imagery is dependent on the ethical disposition of the spectator. If the queer spectator goes into a cinematic experience expecting to enjoy it and nothing more, the queer spectator has the ability to surpass perspectives of those that might compromise this joy. However, by surpassing these perspectives they are not entirely vanished. As soon as a certain type of imagery brings the queer spectator to think about how the non-queer spectator might see it, the problematic nature of the imagery may be uncovered. The imagined audience intrudes into the experience of the spectator and mediates the assessment of the imagery.

“Now the other way around. You want to see millions of great movies that aren’t queer. But there are great actresses, great movies, great whatever, and you go in there being queer. Maybe you fall in love with Julianne Moore. And it’s just a straight movie. But you think she’s great, that she is, Julianne Moore. That is what is happening to you.” – June

June eludes to the effect of personal projection onto cinematic imagery. Queer people have had experience in not being taken seriously or fetishized, this context makes it more likely for the queer spectator to feel uncomfortable when acknowledging that queer cinema is public property. The spectator has the ability to project their personal desires onto cinematic imagery. This element of cinematic engagement highlights how people are more careful with imagery of societally compromised people than others. Similar to respectability politics in the context of physical expressions or self-presentation, the imagined audience moderates ideas of acceptability of the person in question. A straight person might watch an outrageous, non-queer sex scene without having to think about fetishization if it has not experienced real life fetishization as such. People from marginalized communities have to be more careful with how they outwardly present themselves due to the context of historical accounts of assault or discrimination. They therefore attribute more agency to the imagined audience than those that are not societally compromised. The participants attribute an agency to the spectator by saying that the film should be enjoyed rather than taken seriously, because if they think of the non-queer spectator taking this film seriously, they are compromised in their own joy.

Conclusion

Cinematic production companies and governmental bodies have restricted queer imagery in many ways through film history. This uncovers a queer exclusionary societal context that has a say in who gets to see what types of imagery. Queer visibility can, accordingly, feel quite liberating because it has been compromised by societal and capital structures. However, queer visibility operates under the same normative structures that urge the queer person to think twice about how they express themselves. Queer people can choose to adopt excessive behaviour and physical expressions to feel liberated from the heteronormative structures that compromise them. But they can also accommodate their behaviour in order to operate within the norm, because being outside the norm proves to be a possibly dangerous endeavour.

When a queer person experiences queer imagery in cinema, a similar tension arises. The liberating feeling of raw, expressive queer imagery is compromised when the queer spectator allows the imagined audience into their cinematic experience. Respectability appears only to be an objective when the imagined audience enters the stage. The imagined audience thus directly influences how the queer spectator is affected by queer cinema. The queer spectator has lived experiences in the normative context that produces respectability politics in the first place. Consequently, context does not only determine the cinematic imagery, it determines the cinematic experience.

“How do queer people experience respectability through queer pedagogies in film?” can be answered by acknowledging that while being affected by the imagery, internalized societal norms influence the judgement of the spectator. Lived experiences of those that hold marginalized identities are often subjected to oppressive structures. This research shows that oppressive structures do not only influence the construction of cinematic imagery. The oppressive structures take the shape of the imagined audience and influence the cinematic experience of the oppressed. This research shows that talking to people about cinematic

imagery that concerns their identity offers insight into the societal structures they are subjected to. It particularly shows how societally compromised people experience public representation in similar ways to how they conduct individual presentation. Cinema is a product and a catalyst for public memory, it shows political and ethical assumptions by choosing what is deemed right or profitable for public portrayals. By re-evaluating the academic status of cinema, further fruitful research can come from engaging with cinematic imagery.

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Appendix A

The following image contains the poster that was used to conduct the sampling.

The background is the background of the official movie poster for *Drive-away Dolls*.

