3. Queer Biopics?

The first two subchapters of my analysis focuses primarily on the content of the three films and examines how the films portray heteronormative structures as oppressive for the characters and how the emancipation of the main characters from these structures is enacted. The films present scenes that show the negative impact of heteronormativity and aggressive homophobia on the characters. The first subchapter is dedicated to the study of the representation of personal, institutional, and structural oppression, as well as violence. Although all three films address the different aspects of oppression, such as silencing, exclusion, legal and medical consequences, aggression, and police violence, they differ in the way they portray them. *Howl* works more on a symbolic level in this regard, commenting on more universal themes such as 1950s conformity and the oppression of sexual minorities in general than the other two films, which focus far more explicitly on the concrete effects of homophobic violence on LGBTQIAN+ characters. Thereby, the ambivalence of visibility becomes evident. On the one hand, it is often used to oppress the homosexual protagonists, but on the other, they have to 'find their voice' or 'use their own voice' to speak up against the oppressive structures they are surrounded by and render themselves audible and thus visible. These acts of emancipation will be examined more closely in the second subchapter. Comparatively, it can be noted that coming out plays a very important role for the characters. While in *Howl*, the process of writing is framed as Ginsberg's coming out, in *Stonewall*, Danny starts a revolution by finally coming out in public and Milk finds the political force of self-empowerment in urging all homosexuals to come out. Even though in all three films coming out is the deciding part of their emancipation, *Howl* focuses much more on Ginsberg's individual emancipatory moment than *Milk* and *Stonewall*, which rather emphasise the collective struggle of the LGBTQIAN+ movement. Although it is not possible to completely separate content and form, the final two chapters are more concerned with the formal-aesthetic composition of the films. The films differ greatly in their ability to offer a non-normative, ambiguous, or disruptive viewing position, which includes but is not limited to the depiction of queer desire and sex by way of the gaze, which will be analysed in chapter 3.3. To forge their assimilation to heteronormativity,

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it seems that the representation of homosexuals must be disengaged from queer sexual practices. Furthermore, the gaze sets an authentic and at times even intimate tone that varies in its effect from exclusion, straightwashing, and collectivisation. Although all three films seem to criticise heteronormative structures on the content level, on a formal-aesthetic level they partly reaffirm or even enforce them, which emphasises the difficulty in breaking aesthetic conventions in mainstream Hollywood. Moreover, all three films make use of specific narrative techniques innate to the genre of traditional Hollywood biopics. This tendency is apparent in the representation of archetypical masculinities such as the genius, the rebel, or the martyr, fitting "the most popular image of masculinity in everyday consciousness [which] is that of man the hero, the hunter, the competitor, the conqueror. Certainly, it is the image celebrated in Western literature, art and in the media" (Brittan 77). Hence, chapter 3.4 analyses how the central characters negotiate their masculinities and their homosexuality and in how far this becomes manifest in the narrative structure of the films. Thereby, I especially consider how the films' adherence to traditional narrative techniques and the use of these archetypes caters to the myth of a collective American national identity. Since homosexuality was seen as un-American behaviour in the 1950s, integration into the mainstream means making the protagonists national heroes who fight for liberty.

3.1 Modes of Oppression: The Negative Depiction of Heteronormativity

Defence of the Heteronorm

When examining how *Howl* represents heteronormativity and its transgression, one aspect becomes very clear from the beginning: the film establishes the normative system in close relations to literary artistry. The poem "Howl" is omnipresent throughout the whole film. Not only is it eponymous for the title of the film, but it plays a central role in all narrative strands. Therefore, it seems vital to analyse how the film interprets and draws attention to the content of the poem which criticises psychiatric institutions, capitalism, the repressive 1950s consensus society, and heteronormativity. Moreover, all narrative strands of the film – from the depiction of Ginsberg's personal and professional development to the court proceedings to the adaption of the poem – contain elements that establish heteronormative structures as negative on the screen. However, it becomes especially

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obvious when taking a closer look at how Ginsberg's poem, visualised by the animation in the film, portrays society as oppressive. The animated sequences are based on *Howl – a Graphic Novel* (2010) by Eric Drooker, who had worked in collaboration with Allen Ginsberg before and illustrated his poems in the collection *Illuminated Poems* (1996) (cf. Ginsberg and Drooker n. pag.). In this adaption of the poem the metaphors of Moloch and Rockland are central to the representation of heteronormative structures since they symbolise for both capitalism and (hetero)normativity and therefore for Ginsberg's perceived social oppression and marginalisation. Furthermore, the heteronormative system is represented by the depiction of the poem's opponents in court. The way the film draws a negative or even stultifying picture of those vindicators of the heteronorm eventually exposes their traditionally informed views as untenable and abandoned.

The following paragraphs will explore the depiction of the metaphorical figure of Moloch, "the Canaanite fire god who was worshiped by sacrifice of children" (E. Katz 193), as well as of the mental institutions symbolised by Rockland in the animated sequences. In the poem as well as the film, Moloch serves as "a metaphor [...] to identify the source of multiple social oppressions" (E. Katz 201): "Commercialism, militarism, sexual repression, technocracy, soulless industrialization, inhuman life, and the death of the spirit are the consequences of Mental Moloch" (Stephenson 55). Moloch has therefore been interpreted as a symbol for capitalism (e.g. E. Katz, Stephenson). Nevertheless, I focus on the depiction of Moloch the film employs to draw a negative picture of heteronormativity, which is, however, closely connected to the poems critique of capitalism as the reason for the oppression of homosexuality. The quoted line of the poem "Who lost their loveboys to [...] the one-eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar" (00:18:27-39), for instance, reverses the 1950s consensus practice to equate homosexuality with Communism (cf. Harris 223). The animation shows Moloch as a big factory building shaped like a giant bull, belching smoke, and looking demonically with glooming red eyes. Inside the building lives a devil-like figure that is released when the bull of steel opens its mouth. The whole scenery is kept in dark and red colours and underscored with very low-pitched and slow piano sounds, indicating the menacing potency emanating from the figure of Moloch. Allen Ginsberg, quoted in the foreword to *Howl – a Graphic Novel*, remarks that Drooker "really captured that sense of Moloch I was going for in the second section of *Howl* – 'Moloch whose buildings are judgement!'" (Ginsberg and Drooker, n. pag.).

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Likewise, Moloch is established as a strong symbol for oppression in the film, representing the "cluster of forces" (A. Rich 640) that the discursive structures of heteronormativity constitute and that makes the oppressed "lose sight of the material cause of their oppression" (Wittig 104). The animation conveys this by the enormousness of Moloch in comparison to the people: "Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch. Moloch the heavy judger of men!" (00:49:07-12). When the devil-like figure demands the people's children, they fearfully but willingly sacrifice them and throw them into the fire of Moloch (00:49:12-32). It implies a strong criticism of the collective oppression in society: the heteronormative members perpetuate their own submission and thereby forward their own destruction. Their obstinate adherence to the ideology of heterosexuality and capitalism is presented as the great defect of humanity in contrast to the government's reasoning that Communism and homosexuality are to be blamed for the corruption of American values. The sacrificed children are enclosed and alienated from each other: "Moloch in whom I sit lonely. Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! oloch!" (00:49:12-21). Especially the homosexual subject "is either divided inside himself or divided from others" (Foucault "Power" 778), revealing that they either must suppress a part of their own identity or else become marginalised by society. Thus, when the children re-emerge from their enclosure, Moloch has "frightened [them] out of [their] natural ecstasy" (00:49:39-45), has turned them into soldiers, all looking the same, marching in lockstep which demonstrates their complete conformity to the system of society. Additionally, the affiliation of the words 'natural' and 'ecstasy' demonstrates that the adherence to heteronormativity is not the one that should be considered natural, but a variety of different forms of sexual identities. However, the capitalist and heterosexual norms have "entered [their] soul early" (00:49:32-38), which emphasises that these norms are deeply entrenched in each individual in the constant performativity of heteronormative naturalisation. Not only does the repetition of the word 'Moloch' at the beginning of every line emphasise the feeling of oppression, but it stresses the omnipresence as well as the performative and reiterative character of heteronormative structures. In their reluctance to conform to heteronormativity, Ginsberg and the characters of his poem get excluded from society. Ginsberg explains what Moloch means to him during the interview sequences: "Peter and I saw Moloch one day when we took

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peyote[28] and were wandering around downtown streets. It's a god that you make fire sacrifices to. But in my mind, it was what drove my mother to madness" (00:49:13-20). The institutionalisation of Ginsberg's mother was a traumatic experience in the young poet's life. Moreover, he was in an asylum himself, where he met Carl Solomon, who was treated 'against homosexuality.' The film depicts these two characters to emphasise the oppression of people who do not conform to the heteronormative, capitalist system of Moloch. Hence, his mother's and Solomon's fate represents the oppression of Communism, on the one hand, and of homosexuality, on the other.

Rockland is the symbol Ginsberg used for the institutionalised discrimination of homosexuality, in which the oppressive structures of Moloch become manifest. While Moloch is a metaphor for an oppressive social system, which is, however, not tangible, I claim that the film depicts Rockland as a concrete tool employed by Moloch to marginalise every form of living that does not conform to the social norms. The metaphor of Rockland criticises mental institutions in general, but the film puts special emphasis on the institutional mistreatment of homosexuals. As the name 'Rockland' already suggests, the animated sequences of the film present the asylum as an enormous building made of concrete and steel, alluding to its stiff boundaries that cannot easily be undermined. Like Moloch, the "armed madhouse" (00:56:09-10), Rockland also embodies the feeling of oppression and enclosure which is additionally emphasised by showing the implementation of electroshock therapy. The film creates a desolate tone as well as an authentic touch by cutting in archival video footage showing the procedure of electroshock therapy, accompanied by low-pitched and slow piano sounds (cf. 00:26:39-55). This scene is paralleled later in the animation by the depiction of Carl Solomon's electroshock therapy which was used to 'cure' him of his homosexual desires. Having hospitalised himself to avoid a prison sentence, Ginsberg meets Solomon in a psychiatric institution. While section III of the poem is recited, the scene segues to Rockland again, where Solomon is institutionalised. As in the documentary sequence, he is put on a stretcher, screaming in horror, but ultimately, he surrenders to the doctors' treatment (00:54:09-17). When they lean over him to imple-

28 As Aldous Huxley famously expounds in his essay "The Doors of Perception" (1952), peyote is the name of a cactus endemic to Mexico and the southwest of the U.S.A. It contains mescaline, a hallucinogenic drug which strongly influences the perception of the consumer (cf. Huxley 1-2).

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ment the electroshocks, the lights above the operation table turn into the menacing eyes of Moloch (00:54:14-16), suggesting that the treatment is the realisation of Moloch's oppressive will. While the lines "I'm with you in Rockland where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void" (00:54:25-35) are recited, the animated images show the electro shocks literally entering Solomon's body and flowing through him, leaving a completely prostrated figure in a white hospital gown. This depiction can be interpreted as the attempt of homonormative society to re-enter the homosexual body and subject him to norms of conformity, since Moloch has not sufficiently 'entered his soul' to make him conform to the system. Nonconformity is met by institutionalised force that tries to squash the will of the individual by entering the body and the soul with electroshocks. Consequently, electroshock therapy becomes a symbol for the dividing powers of normative structures, leading either to a division "inside himself" or "from others" (Foucault "Power" 778) and, hence, to the socially enforced alienation of the homosexual from his own sexual identity or from heteronormative society. Solomon's fate, however, also concerns the lyrical I of the poem: "Ah Carl, when you are not safe I am not safe" (00:26:36-39). Solomon therefore becomes the "martyr in whom Ginsberg symbolizes his generation of oppressed celestial pilgrims" (Stephenson 54). Moreover, the constant repetition of the line "I'm with you in Rockland" (e.g. 00:55:34-38), implies that the oppressive structures of Moloch that are materialised in the asylum Rockland stretch far beyond the walls of the building – as long as one person is enclosed in Rockland, nobody can be completely free.

Nevertheless, it is possible to overcome the oppression, even though Moloch seemingly "maintains a monopoly on reality, imposing and enforcing a single, materialist-rationalist view" (Stephenson 53). In the animation, Ginsberg's 'visionary angels' become alive and start to attack both Rockland and Moloch:

> I'm with you in Rockland where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof. They've come to drop angelic bombs, the hospital illuminates itself, imaginary walls collapse. O skinny legions run outside. O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here. O victory forget your underwear we're free! (00:54:55-00:55:33)

While these lines from the poem are recited, the animated sequences show how Rockland as well as Moloch are destroyed by angel-like figures ("an-

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gelheaded hipsters" (00:21:42)) throwing books on them (cf. 00:55:00-33). Since the books represent the "angelic bombs" mentioned in the poem, a clear connection between literature and the transgression of boundaries is drawn by the film. Literary expression, symbolised by the books that are thrown, has the power to collapse social boundaries and thus heteronormativity. Furthermore, the passage suggests that the walls surrounding Rockland, as well as the confinements concerning heteronormativity, are not 'real' but imaginary walls, which have been naturalised to such an extent that they came to be accepted the concrete, inviolable walls of Rockland. In the animation they simply disappear into thin air, highlighting their actual fragility which was hidden by concrete walls that constitute the power relations, which are not static but always already entail means of subversion (cf. Foucault "Power" 794). Freeing Solomon means that "[c]onfinement, repression, alienation, and the dark night of the soul are ended" (Stephenson 56). As both the poem and the animation in the film suggest, the boundaries of heteronormativity can be exposed as socially constructed and can eventually be overcome.

The negative representation of heteronormativity as well as the emphasis on the power of literature to expose these structures as socially constructed, is obvious in another narrative strand of the film: the court scenes that restage the obscenity trial against the poem "Howl." Assistant District Attorney Ralph McIntosh (David Strathairn) as well as the two expert witnesses of the prosecution, Gail Potter (Mary-Louise Parker) and David Kirk (Jeff Daniels), deny the poem "Howl" any literary merit and declare it obscene. However, as Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik note, these characters "are unable and probably also unwilling to grasp both the form and the content of the poem" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 357). Thus, the film shows that the clear boundaries the experts draw are no longer valid in a multifaceted society. Their argumentation is presented as untenable, even ridiculous, and their traditional 1950s views as rather outdated in their strict adherence to normative ideals. Not only does their negative depiction on screen refer to the flaws in their arguments, but the film contrasts their reasoning with the much stronger arguments on the side of the defence and, thus, marks them as incompetent. Bruhn and Gjelsvik assume that the explicit references to homosexuality in the poem were "probably the main reason behind the 'obscenity trial' at a time when sodomy laws made homosexual acts a crime in all US states" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349). I would take their observations even further and argue that the court scenes in the film decisively reveal the strong connection between artistic and sexual freedom which reinforces my

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suggestion that the film adapts the poem as a symbol for the transgression of heteronormativity.

To expose their vindication of the heteronorm as abandoned, the film paints the experts of the prosecution in a negative light. Gail Potter (Mary-Louise Parker), a radio personality and English teacher, is the first witness called to the stand. According to Bruhn and Gjelsvik, she is "clearly the most satirically depicted person in the trial" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 357), since she is "represented as being foolhardily sure that she is expressing universal truths about literary art and criticism" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 357). Speaking and acting in a frumpy way and dressed in a grey lady's suit and hat, suggest a rather conservative mind-set at first sight and depicts Potter as the personification of consensus society. Asked about the literary value of the book *Howl and Other Poems*, she answers confidently: "I think it has no literary merit" (00:08:40-43). In her opinion the poem lacks objectively observable features that constitutes the quality of a work of literature:

> In order to have literary style you must have form, diction, fluidity, clarity. Now, I am speaking only of style, and in content, every great piece of literature, or anything that can be really classified as literature, is of some moral greatness. And I think this fails to the nth degree. (00:08:47-00:09:07)

Her evaluation of the poem's style and content shows that even though she claims to adhere to allegedly objectively observable facts, her interpretation is determined by moral categories. Moreover, she contradicts herself when naming Ginsberg's "use of language" (00:09:12-13) as another reason why the poem has no literary merit and should be banned as obscene. She argues that "he fails in rhetoric, of course, for one thing, because his figures of speech are crude, and you feel like you are going through the gutter when you have to read that. I didn't linger on it too long, I assure you" (00:09:17-29). Instead of objective facts, her subjective feeling of disgust when reading the poem strongly influences her perception of the poem. She expresses irrational feelings of disgust for homosexuality. Her irrational impression that homosexuality poses a threat to the traditional discourse and values of heteronormativity (cf. Herek 451) exposes her homophobic bias and, hence, reveals the anxiety to lose power and privileges (cf. di Blasi 8). All this gives rise to a certain irrationality in Potter's argumentation which weakens her position as an expert for literature. The way Potter is presented on screen especially elucidates her abhorrence of the disorder the

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poem administers. She identifies a transgression of "the taboo against sexuality outside of marriage and other moral constraints" (Grey 39), as well as stylistic boundaries in the poem and therefore considers it as obscene. In this portrayal, the film ridicules her conservative prudishness and her own artistic pursuit. She even gets laughed at by the gallery when recounting that she rewrote both *Faust* and *Everyman* (cf. 00:08:21-27).[29] Moreover, when defence attorney Jake Ehrlich (John Hamm) refrains from cross-examining her, she seems confused that her opinion seems so unimportant for the defence that Ehrlich does not even want to hear it. Ehrlich needs to repeatedly tell her that she is supposed to step down from the witness stand (cf. 00:09:34-47). Not only does this scene serve to stultify her but fits her preposterous and seemingly outdated adherence to social norms and order.

The other witness for the prosecution, David Kirk, an assistant professor for English Literature at the University of San Francisco, agrees with Potter's opinion that great literature needs to be arranged orderly. When asked by Ehrlich how literary value is achieved, he states: "I'd have to return to my three bases of objective criticism: form, theme and opportunity" (00:57:05 – 00:57:10) and emphasises his alleged objectivity when analysing literature and explains:

> I endeavoured to arrive at my opinion on an objective basis. For example, a great literary work, or even a fairly great literary work, would obviously be exceedingly successful in form, but this poem is really just a weak imitation of a form that was used 80 to 90 years ago by Walt Whitman. [...] Literary value could also reside in theme, and what little literary value there is in 'Howl,' it seems to me does come in theme. The statement of the idea of the poem was relatively clear, but it has little validity, and, therefore, the theme has a negative value. No value at all. (00:51:31-00:52:14)

He elaborates that the poem has no literary merit, because it copied the form of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "great literature always creates its own form for each significant occasion. [...] An imitation never does have

29 This representation is, in my opinion, quite controversial, as rewriting can be seen as a subversive strategy especially for women rewriting men's texts (cf. A Rich, "Re-vision" 18). Also, she is laughed at for this, and defence attorney Ehrlich is not at all interested in what she would have to say, which can also be interpreted as misogyny, as she is not seen as a serious scholar. This topic will be resumed and discussed more critically in the chapters 3.3 and 3.4.

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the value of the original" (00:52:34-59). Thereby, Kirk positions himself on the conservative edge of the long-fought debate about artistic originality. This can be transferred to the heteronormative claim that homosexuality is only a deviation, a 'copy' of the 'original,' natural form of heterosexuality (cf. Butler "Imitation" 313-314).[30] The film exposes the claim for originality and naturalness with regard to both literature and sexuality as in fact a social construct. The film facilitates this recognition when Ehrlich interposes by asking "And who did Walt Whitman copy?" (00:53:00-02). Kirk does not know whether Whitman was influenced by other poets himself, hence, rendering his line of argument untenable. His reaction shows that Ehrlich has successfully heckled him by that question: he grows more and more confused in the course of his cross-examination. When asked about his conception of 'validity in theme,' his reasoning becomes increasingly incoherent:

> [T]he poet expresses the usual Dadaist line that everything is created for man's despair, that everything must be forgotten and destroyed, and that Solomon's life apparently has had this kind of rhythm. Therefore, there is some validity of theme, in that area. (00:55:48- 00:56:04)

"So, there is validity of theme there?" (00:56:05-06) Ehrlich asks in surprise and Kirk recoils: "I am afraid I got my tongue tripped up there... this... I should have said 'clarity' instead of 'validity'" (00:56:07-14). Moreover, Kirk interprets Moloch in the poem as the expression of a "desire to wipe out all human memory of everything the human race has ever done" (00:56:41-46), which mirrors Potter's irrational fear of transgression either on the literary or sexual level. Confounding every single argument Kirk brings forward, Ehrlich forces him further into a corner until he gets completely embarrassed: "Uh... I'm... I'm confused" (00:57:27-30). Like Potter, Kirk did not reflect on the poem for a very long time, as he made up his "mind up after 5 minutes" (00:58:08-00:59:04), but still feels confident enough to express his opinion. Thus, Ehrlich eventually succeeds in confuting his criticism. Accordingly, Bruhn and Gjelsvik assume that "[t]he courtroom scenes depict the prosecutor and his witnesses as unable to

30 As Butler argues, there cannot be 'originality' when it comes to gender relations or sexuality, since according to her, sex as well as gender is always the performativity of heteronormative patterns that become naturalised through constant repetition (cf. Butler "Imitation" 313-314).

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connect with contemporary culture, whereas Lawrence Ferlinghetti's lawyer clearly represents progress and modernity" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 358).

Assistant District Attorney McIntosh, the third character in the film who vindicates the heteronorm, especially embodies Bruhn's and Gjeslvik's assumption. Repeatedly, he asks the witnesses if they are able to understand the meaning of the poem (cf. 00:20:55; 00:34:16) to eventually admit in his closing argument that he is in fact unable to understand it:

> [I]t's funny in our law, we are allowed to use expert witnesses to testify as to literary merit, but we are not allowed to bring in, we will say, the average man to testify that when he reads the book, he doesn't understand it. He doesn't know what it's all about. Perhaps it's over his head. [...] I don't understand it very well. In fact, looking it all over, I think it's a lot of sensitive bullshit, using the language of Mr. Ginsberg. So then, if the sale of a book is not being limited to just modern book reviewers and experts on modern poetry, but falls into the hands of the general public, that is to say, the average reader, this court should take that into consideration in determining whether or not 'Howl' is obscene. (01:01:16 – 00:02:33)

He thereby admits that he is unable to grasp the meaning of the poem and assumes that the average reader would not be able to understand it, either. Degrading the book by calling it 'sensitive bullshit' he argues that the 'average reader' needs to be protected from such obscene material. But who, according to McIntosh, is this 'average man' supposed to be? And why should a book be banned for the reason that some people might not be able to grasp its meaning? McIntosh's inability to understand more open and experimental forms of art and literature mirrors his and consensus society's inability to understand and accept forms of lifestyle and sexuality that deviated from the 1950s family-centred model of heterosexuality, since "[t]he taboos Ginsberg violated with such force in Howl were those most entrenched in society" (Grey 39). This is the reason why McIntosh, in his opinion, quotes the most critical lines of the poem, which are, without exception, either criticising capitalism and Christianity and/or explicitly referring to sexual practices. He takes umbrage at the reference at the beginning of "Howl" saying "All these books are published in Heaven" (00:07:23-26), indicating: "I don't quite understand that, but anyway, let the record show, Your Honor, it's published by the City Lights Pocketbook Shop" (00:07:28-35). Other quotes he recites include "With dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls" (00:21:05-16), "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly con-

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nection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (00:21:42-49), "who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (00:34:23-43), and "who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love" (00:35:15-31). McIntosh seems to think that merely the use of words indicating Christian symbolism such as 'heaven,' 'angels,' and 'seraphim,' in combination with words having a sexual connotation like 'cock,' 'balls,' 'genitals,' or 'blow'/ 'to be blown' justifies to ban the poem as obscene, because they transgress "the taboo against mocking and destabilizing the traditional partition between the sacred and the profane, against treating all phenomena, high and low, spiritual and physical, as simultaneous and on an equal plane" (Grey 39). Fixated on the relevance of particular words, McIntosh fails in understanding that in art and literature all parts often complement each other to one total work. This becomes especially clear when defence witness Mark Schorer eventually notes: "Sir, you can't translate poetry into prose. That's why it is poetry" (00:21:51-56). His reliance on the meaning of often tabooed words exposes McIntosh's ignorance of a deeper meaning of the poem and additionally emphasises the connection between poetry and sexuality in the film.

Furthermore, his and the prosecution witnesses' perception is depicted as untenable by contrasting their argumentation with the defence side in court. Thereby, as Bruhn and Gjelsvik suggest,

> [t]he two adversary positions may be re-phrased in terms of formal boundaries versus freedom of form which, following the proceedings of the trial, may be translated into the conflict between a normative understanding of human existence and morals and an openness of form mirroring the contingencies of life and morality. (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 358)

Potter's prudishness, Kirk's uncertainty, and McIntosh's ignorance are revealed as preposterous and outdated compared to the reliable literary criticism expressed by the defence witnesses Mark Schorer (Treat Williams) and Luther Nichols (Alessandro Nivola), whose argumentation is presented as far more coherent and underpinned with tangible examples. Even though in the actual trial the defence called nine witnesses to the stand, the film presents only two defence witnesses. The film seemingly does not want to convey the impression that the defence simply outnumbered the prosecution in size, but that their arguments outperformed theirs.

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Even though Schorer admits that "[i]t's not always easy to know that one understands exactly what a contemporary poet is saying" (00:20:59-00:21:03), he feels well-informed enough to make a proposal for interpretation: "Well, there are uprooted people wandering around the United States, dreaming, drugged. That's clear, isn't it? Even their waking hours are like nightmares, loaded with liquor and enjoying, I take it, a variety of indiscriminate sexual experience" (00:21:23-41). Schorer does not see any reason why the words the author has chosen should account for the banning of the poem. Likewise, defence witness Nichols proceeds on the assumption that he "understand[s] their significance and their general context" (00:34:18-22), when being asked: "Now do you understand most of the words in this poem?" (00:34:16-17). Making explicit that the words as such are not as important as their significance in context, he explains to McIntosh that Ginsberg plays with possible ambiguities words can have:

> *McIntosh*: Now, we all understand what 'blew' and 'blown' mean – I mean?
> *Nichols*: Well, I think they are words that have several meanings. [...] It can at one level mean that they were vagabonds – that they were being blown about by natural, literal winds. On the other hand, perhaps it does have a sexual connotation.
> *McIntosh*: In reference to oral copulation, right? (00:35:33-53)

Moreover, Nichols acknowledges the poem's potential to serve as a medium to protest social and political circumstances: "I think it's a howl of pain. Figuratively speaking, his [Ginsberg's] toes have been stepped on. He's poetically putting his cry of pain and protest into this book, 'Howl'" (00:33:46 – 00:33:57). According to Nichols, the trial will probably emphasise the subversive potential of the poem rather than possibly banning it as "'Howl' will have a wider readership than it might otherwise have had and may go down in history as a stepping-stone along the way to greater or lesser liberality in the permitting of poems of its type" (00:37:59-00:38:15). Thereby, Nichols shows the vindicators of the heteronorm that their own weapons can easily be turned against them.

Just as Schorer and Nichols, defence attorney Ehrlich "supports and follows Ginsberg's poems in insisting on bridging and perhaps even destroying the conventional boundaries of literature and obscenity, cursing and non-provocative vocabularies, heterosexuality and homosexuality" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 358). In his summation, he acknowledges the intensive effect

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literature and social and political reality have on each other and demands for greater liberty concerning both artistic expression and sexual freedom:

> There are books that have the power to change men's minds, and call attention to situations that are visible but unseen. [...] the problem of what is legally permissible in the description of sexual acts or feelings in arts and literature is of the greatest importance to a free society. [...] The battle of censorship will not be finally settled by Your Honor's decision, but you will either add to liberal, educated thinking, or by your decision, you will add fuel to the fire of ignorance. Let there be light! Let there be honesty! Let there be no running from non-existent destroyers of morals. Let there be honest understanding! (1:04:41-1:06:20)

Although Judge Clayton W. Horn (Bob Balaban) is considered a rather conservative judge, which the film highlights by including authentic newspaper articles that declare him as conservative, he seems not as bigoted or hidebound as Potter, Kirk, and McIntosh. To the great surprise of the gallery, he concludes in his verdict that "the book *Howl and Other Poems* does have some redeeming social importance, and [...] is not obscene. The defendant is found not guilty" (01:08:39-51). He explains: "The freedoms of speech and press are inherent in a nation of free people. These freedoms must be protected if we are to remain free, both individually and as a nation" (01:08:27 – 01:08:38). His verdict proves that conservativism and the interest to protect society from dangers such as obscene material does not necessarily indicate a strict adherence to oppressive heteronormative structures. He argues for freedom of form concerning literature but simultaneously connects his argument to the human body: "[L]ife is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same and conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike. We were all made from the same form but in different patterns" (01:07:46-01:08:03). Judge Horn is thereby presented as indeed able to see the different nuances that both art and sexuality entail instead of narrow-mindedly searching for clear boundaries. His perspective emphasises the view that clinging to old norms and rigid structures hampers mutual understanding. Therefore, the film celebrates freedom of form as well as sexuality in a merging of form and content itself and thereby perpetuates the claim for more liberality that Ginsberg expresses in his poem "Howl." In the logic of the film, the triumph of the poem in court as well as the 'angleheaded hipsters' against Moloch and Rockland in the animation constitutes a triumph to claim a position in the

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ranks of high-quality literature and indicates the possibility to transgress socially constructed boundaries.

Institutional and Paternal Violence

Unlike Ginsberg, Danny, the protagonist in *Stonewall*, is portrayed as the 'normal' everyday white American high school boy – except that he is gay. Even though the film has been criticised for centralising a white perspective, by showing Danny's experiences as universal, it raises awareness for the devastating conditions for a homosexual in the still widely conformist U.S. of the 1960s. The representation of institutional discrimination ranges from domestic and religious oppression implemented by Danny's father Mr. Winters as well as blatant police violence against Danny and other members of the LGBTQIAN+ community. Moreover, personal discrimination plays a role in the film, as Danny is rejected by his classmates as well as his high school lover Joe, who cannot admit his homosexuality. All cases of discrimination depicted in the film involve hegemonic masculinity. As the following analysis will show, the protagonist Danny is oppressed and constantly threatened by men who claim and/ or defend their hegemonic position. By offering an insight to the structure of institutional and personal discrimination implemented by hegemonic masculinity, the film draws a negative picture of heteronormative oppression of homosexuals. The main forms of discrimination – domestic and police violence – are symbolised by the juxtaposed spaces they are happening in: Danny's hometown in the countryside of Indiana and the urban neighbourhood of Greenwich Village in New York City. Combining and at the same time contrasting these two spaces, the film cuts back and forth between flashbacks of the last days before Danny had to leave home and the timeframe of his first experiences in New York. Having been rejected by his family and friends at home, Danny has to fend for himself in New York. In stark contrast to the bright and yellow house he grew up in, one of the first scenes in New York shows him huddled up on a park bench in the dark streets of Greenwich Village. To uphold the tone of the scene and connect it with the previous one showing his home, melancholic music is continued in an overlapping sound effect while a man in ragged clothes is looking for something eatable in a dustbin, finds a half-empty bottle of beer and drinks from it. Then he sees Danny, approaches him and tries to steal money from his pocket, thus, initialising the ongoing atmosphere of insecurity the film creates in

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the scenes showing the tough life on the streets of New York by night. The narrative method conflates the different forms of discrimination while creating a contrast between the seemingly safe yet oppressive places of his childhood, in which his sexuality is completely silenced, and the dangers of more outspoken and direct physical violence in the city.

The way the film portrays the aggressive behaviour of the New York City police against LGBTQIAN+ people[31] is evocative of the psychoanalytic explanation of homophobia which is found in 'latent homosexuality,' that is the "anxiety about the possibility of being or becoming a homosexual" (Adams et al. 440), as well as a more general take on homophobia as a conflict of masculinity. Especially the two police officers who attack Danny during his first days in New York seem to be stereotypical representations of homophobic masculinity. Danny's first encounter with the police occurs when he accidentally ends up at the piers, an infamous gay cruising spot in Greenwich Village during the time. Not aware of where he is, he stumbles around looking for his newly found friend Ray (Jonny Beauchamp), but the latter, who does not seem to notice, gets in a car with another man, probably a trick, and drives off. The moment he realises what is happening around him (gay men having sex with each other between trucks and cargo containers), the police arrive, and the officers start to randomly beat people up (cf. 00:16:57-00:17:07). Unlike most of the others, Danny seems too nervous and confused to run away and gets into the sight of an officers who immediately addresses him aggressively: "What are you looking at, faggot?" (00:17:09-11). Danny apologises and stumbles backwards, but the police officer hits him with his truncheon and Danny falls from the loading dock they are standing on while his assailant looks down on him. Showing the officer from this low camera angle that suggests Danny's perspective, illustrates the hierarchy of masculinities and the concomitant imbalance of power that is at work here (cf. 00:17:19). The officer jumps down from the landing and obtains help from a second officer, who keeps Danny from escaping by enclosing him between the trucks from the other side. The first officer keeps on assaulting Danny: "Oh, you're a pretty one, huh? You want to suck my dick?" (00:17:31-36), pushing him down towards his crotch in a bid of forced oral sex. All the while, the second officer contains Danny

31 Even though the film vividly shows the police's homophobic violence, it does not mention the racist tendencies within the US police force and thus fails to accord with an intersectional approach towards discrimination. This will be argued more thoroughly in chapter 3.4.

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by pushing his truncheon to his head, shouting: "Come on, suck his dick! Suck his fucking dick!" (00:17:38-43). Given their homophobic attitude, the representation does not admit doubt that the two police officers use sexual violence to demonstrate their masculine power. As Kimmel emphasises, the constant struggle for men is always having to prove their manhood to other men, a negotiation in which the "overriding emotion is fear" (Kimmel 276). While he pushes Danny down, the first officer constantly looks back and forth from his victim to his colleague, making sure that the latter does not mistake this act for homosexual lust or affection. Thus, he assaults Danny in order to prove his masculinity – albeit not to Danny, but to his colleague who for him is a representative of the system of hegemonic masculinity. As has been pointed out in the theoretical examination, violence is not only a means of oppression and marginalisation in the system of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Connell 'Social Organization' 44), "but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection" (Connell *Masculinities* 84). The officers' recourse to aggression as a means to suppress homosexuality might thus point to insecurities in their self-perception as heterosexual men and lastly to an instability of the system as such. Thereby, the film emphasises the notion that the officers sexually assault Danny in order to stabilise their own masculinity and to uphold the hierarchical order of hegemonic masculinity. Danny becomes the 'other' against which they "project their gendered identities, [...] to compete in a situation in which they will always win" (Kimmel 280). Moreover, Danny's degradation works on another level, namely by putting him in a 'female' position. This shows that homosexuality is "assimilated with femininity" (Connell 'Social Organisation' 40) to emasculate and oppress gay men. Trying to wriggle himself out of their grip, Danny eventually pushes away the first officer who tried to enforce oral intercourse. He immediately realises that this was a mistake as the second officer grabs hold of him, pulls his arms back, and detains him while the other one strikes his face with his truncheon, shouting: "She's got a temper, huh? Still got a temper, faggot?" (00:17:46-52). The sudden change to the female pronoun thereby marks Danny as a feminine subject. While making the sexual act thereby more acceptable for the police officer, the threat of rape or other forced sexual acts, which is one of the means of female oppression, is deployed as a mechanism of hegemonic masculinity to uphold power. Nevertheless, this act of sexual violence reveals the officers' latent homosexuality: they externalise their fear and hatred of any possible homosexual feeling they perceive in themselves onto the homosexual they encounter (cf. Wickberg 56), which results in extremely aggressive beha-

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viour towards Danny. This becomes palpable when they refrain from sexual harassment and start beating him again. When he falls to the ground and tries to escape by crawling under one of the trucks, they grab him, pull him back and continue to beat him until he lies on his side spitting blood. They leave him there and, in a final demonstration of his power over Danny, the first officer explains to his colleague: "You know what, I don't even want him to suck my dick no more. Look at his mouth. It's full of blood and shit. That's disgusting" (00:18:14-00:18:27). To keep his position in the system of hegemonic masculinity, he makes sure that he is the one to reject Danny, not the other way around. As they leave, the camera closes in on Danny's face while a sound advance already introduces the upcoming flashback to his parents' house and the family saying their prayers before dinner. Then the scene changes to the dining room in Danny's home.

Danny's family and high school mates' homophobic mindset seems to be informed by religious belief and traditional gender roles, which is a typical co-relation (cf. Herek 451). The stereotypical representation of the small-town American scenery depicts his hometown as a supposedly safe and happy place; however, a sad and stifling tone is added by combining the frames showing the rural scenery with melancholic music. Unlike the dark streets of New York, Danny's hometown is mainly portrayed in bright and soft colours. The house he grew up in has a yellow façade, white lattice windows, and a big garden with a white swing hanging from the branch of an enormous tree. It looks like the home of a typical mid-western middle-class white family and a safe place to raise children. However, the brightness and softness of the colour scheme in these frames is indeed only a façade. The film creates a contrast between spaces inside and outside the house to emphasise the oppression that accompanies these seemingly safe spaces. Coming from a religious background and a strict up-bringing, Danny cannot freely act out on his homosexual desires in his hometown, making his home restrictive rather than well-protected. Inside, the brightness of the house's façade dissolves into the dark, stifling, almost misty optics of the house's interior spaces.

Thereby, Danny's home comes to stand for a form of oppression that works along the lines of an outward appearance that denies his homosexuality and inward repression that is enforced through emotional violence. Unlike in New York, where the two police officers made his homosexuality hyper-visible by calling him "faggot" and used the threat of rape and direct physical force, the oppression in his hometown hinges mostly on a powerful covenant of silence. This is emphasised by showing the negative

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relationship between Danny and his father Mr. Winters (David Cubitt), who is stereotypically masculine, aggressive, and demands an adherence to the masculine gender role from his son while silencing his homosexuality. In the family, he is the one to impose norms and religious rules, which is alluded to in the beginning of the film when Ray assumes that Danny's father "was the preacher" (00:05:31-32) – which is in fact not true. Nevertheless, not only is his father the head of the family, but also the coach of Danny's high school football team and thereby stereotypically unites the homophobic views that are enforced by the institutions of religion, family, school, and sports club. Thus, he also bridges personal and institutional discrimination and is presented as the personification of small-town homophobic views. In contrast to the depiction of the police officers' homophobia, which is also connected to their own repressed desires, hinting at their latent homosexuality, the culturally engrained anxiety about his own status in society is emphasised in Mr. Winter's approach to his son's homosexuality. He seems to "equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control" (Kimmel 272) and any aberrations from these standards of hegemonic masculinity evoke anxieties in his definition of his own masculinity (cf. Kimmel 274-276), which "is met with efforts to silence, change, or destroy the differences" (Gutterman 62). Mr. Winters perceives Danny's homosexuality as a threat to himself, his family, his football team and, hence, to the system of hegemonic masculinity and the discursive structure of heteronormative society as such. In a scene depicting Danny and his peers during football practice, his father degrades him in front of the other players while they have to do press-ups: "Come on, Danny, you going to join us sometime before 1970 rolls around?" (00:12:24-28), while clearly favouring his classmate Joe: "That's right, Joe. You set the pace here" (00:12:19-21). The scene is overbearingly masculine: the boys being lined up and whistled and shouted at during the practice is strongly reminiscent of military training. Even more so, doing press-ups is a cliché proof of masculinity and if a man fails to keep up, he is seen as unmanly and needs to 'toughen up.' Even though he does not seem to be the weakest football player of the team and his look and body adhere to normative masculine standards, Danny is especially nagged at by his father, who seems to question his masculinity. The supposition that Danny's masculinity is doubted by his father is accentuated in a scene following the football practice. While he waits for his father, Danny leans against his car reading a book (cf. 00:12:58-00:13:04). This representation feeds the cliché of the homosexual being more interested in intellectual or affective stimulation

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found in reading than in the physical fitness football offers. While they are driving home, his father explains that he must demand more strength from Danny to make him 'a real man' in the sense of hegemonic masculinity: "I can't be any easier on you, Danny. I just can't. You understand that, right?" (00:13:08-16). Mr. Winters seems to be subject to the structures of heteronormativity, too. These first scenes already introduce the two main characteristics of the father's form of oppression: he tries to enforce his adherence to a stereotypically masculine gender role while at the same time supressing any behaviour that is perceived as feminine and most importantly marginalising and silencing homosexuality.

Mr. Winters even invites a police officer to Danny's high school who shows all senior students a documentary on homosexuality, which seems contrary to his covenant of silence at first. The scene starts with the spokesperson of the documentary stating: "But all homosexuals are not passive" (00:10:07-10) while the students are shown sitting in their classroom. Danny's father observes Danny closely while the latter is watching the documentary and sees how he moves restlessly in his chair and looks around at his classmates. When one of his classmates makes a discriminatory joke about the homosexual shown on screen, the other students laugh and Danny laughs with them, albeit seemingly nervous. This emphasises the homophobic atmosphere and the general public's discriminatory view of homosexuality, but it also shows the father's presumption that Danny might be homosexual. Later in the film he even mentions to his wife who doesn't "think it is true" (00:19:54-55) that "there are signs, and if you don't want to see them that's fine, but I do" (00:19:57-00:20:00). His greatest fear seems to be that Danny, who in his eyes is still a 'passive homosexual,' becomes active sooner or later and thereby dangerous, as the in-film documentary indicates. This seems to be the reason why Mr. Winter sees the need to take action himself, appropriate to his masculine role in the family. The action he takes is to work together with the most obvious representatives of institutional discrimination against homosexuals: religion and the small-town police. Significantly, Mr. Winters never utters the word homosexual during the whole film. Thus, his oppression is enforced through silence, which becomes performative as a complete denial of Danny's sexuality, feeding to the cliché of homosexuality as 'the love that dare not speak its name.' At dinner, Danny's younger sister Phoebe (Joey King) asks about the aforementioned documentary she and the other "younger kids were not allowed to see" (00:18:55-57) and supposes: "Mr. Truman Capote, who wrote *In Cold Blood*, is also a homosexual. Maybe that's why I wasn't

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allowed to see that movie either" (00:19:01-13). Their father reacts harshly: "Phoebe, we're having dinner. Thank you" (00:19:13-16), making clear that mentioning the topic is a distasteful affront to the abidance with good manners at dinner and demands obedience to this rule. Nonetheless, his sister does not experience the same oppression as Danny within the family. When Danny chuckles at a joke his sister directs at their father, instead of scolding Phoebe for being disrespectful towards him, Mr. Winter asks Danny aggressively: "You finding [sic] this amusing, Danny?" (00:19:31-33) to which Danny replies "No, Sir!" (00:19:33-34) and humbly looks down to his plate. To change the focus of attention and get out of this uncomfortable situation, Danny asks if he is allowed to borrow his mother's car to meet up with Joe later that evening. His father's face immediately lightens up when he hears Joe's name, and he approves of them hanging out. He seems to assume that Joe, who is the showcase quarterback of their football team and hence doing his gender 'right,' will have a positive influence on Danny regarding his sense of masculinity. This high regard of Joe's masculinity does not even drop after Danny's and Joe's affair has been found out. Instead of protecting his own son, Mr. Winters decides to protect the system of hegemonic masculinity which is symbolised by Joe. Before calling Danny to his office, Mr. Winter talks to Joe first. When Danny enters, he looks at him disappointedly and explains: "I know everything. Don't bother denying it. Joe told me. And I seen [sic] it coming, too. The sickness – you – seducing him. Taking the lead. [...] You got him drunk so he wouldn't even realise what was going on" (00:30:46-58). Even though the word 'faggot' appeared on Danny's locker, his father still refrains from uttering it. He transcribes his son's homosexuality by using words like 'sickness' or phrases like 'knowing everything.' Being the lonesome outsider in his school, Danny is falsely blamed for having been encroaching, even though the sex was consensual. It was Joe who asked Danny to meet up and who took the lead in the sexual encounter. But Joe, being the popular football star of their high school with a nice girlfriend, gets the benefit of passing as heterosexual and adhering to the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Mr. Winters perceives their affair as the dangerous moment that the documentary warned of, when the villainous homosexual becomes active. From his homophobic perspective, Danny fits the role of the villain and Joe becomes a victim. Moreover, Mr. Winters even interprets the presumed abuse of Joe – the best player on the football team of all people – as a direct attack on himself, his morals and his masculinity: "Oh, it's such a great way to attack me and ruin my quarterback" (00:30:58-00:31:04). Nonetheless, in line

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with the Christian belief system, he thinks that it is his duty to 'heal' Danny from his homosexual desires: "I want to do the right thing, Danny. You need help, son. And we're going to get you that help" (00:31:04-00:31:07). In order to get that help, Danny must subordinate himself to his father's rules and disavow his homosexuality in accordance with the covenant of silence. Even more so, he has to actively bid him for help in an act of symbolic denial. Continuously raising his voice as he speaks, his father shouts at him: "I need you to look me in the eye, Danny. And tell me you need help. This is a one time [sic] thing, Danny. Look at me. Say it! This is a one time [sic] thing, Danny. Say it! Say it!" (00:31:07-00:31:11). Danny, however, looks his father in the eye but does not say anything. They stare at each other in contempt for a moment until Danny storms out of the office and slams the door behind him. Ironically, the person who uses emotional violence by way of performative silence tries to force the oppressed Danny to speak – not to speak up for himself, but to utter the denial of his own feelings and lately his own identity. This scene makes clear that silence is a forceful power that is used to oppress homosexuality. By refusing to follow this performative act of naming himself and subordinating himself to his father's homophobic oppression, Danny uses the power of silence for his own ends. He thereby appropriates the performative of silence and exposes its dependence on the complicity of the suppressed in their own oppression. Of course, Danny's silence is not as powerful as the performative silence of hegemonic masculinity. His father's oppression through silence follows him to New York as well. This becomes obvious when he tries calling his father to get him to sign his scholarship papers which he needs to enrol at Columbia University, but his father refuses to talk to him and hangs up the phone without saying a word. This has severe consequences for Danny, since he has to live on the streets until he has submitted his paperwork – which luckily his mother helps him with later in the plot. Thereby the film emphasises that to subvert hegemonic masculinity and the rules of heteronormativity is a strenuous battle homosexuals have to fight – simply appropriating the normative performatives is just the first step to evade the system of hegemonic masculinity.

In contrast to Danny, Joe does not want to take on this battle. As his deception of Danny shows, he is complicit with Mr. Winters covenant of silence and therefore ultimately also with the system of hegemonic masculinity. Like Danny, he generally seems to be a 'normal' American high school boy but even better integrated into the heteronormative system, and he does everything to maintain this appearance. When Danny avows his love

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for him, Joe gets angry and makes unequivocally clear: “We're not faggots!” (00:23:01-03). Danny and Joe handle their sexual affair quite differently, even though both approaches seem to be highly informed by heteronormative rules and conventions as well as homophobic strategies of subordination and marginalisation by hegemonic masculinity. While Danny is anxious that they might be ‘sick,’ since he has genuine feelings for Joe, the latter takes their affair for a phase of juvenile sexual experimentation. His anger at Danny’s revelation makes very clear that he is eager not to describe himself as homosexual and even insults homosexual men as ‘creepy looking’ and ‘faggots.’ Thus, Joe denies any homosexual feelings within himself as a reaction to the discrepancy between his sexual desires and the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Consequently, the scene reveals that he also silences homosexuality even within himself, indicating that compulsory heterosexuality constitutes “an enormous potential counterforce” (A. Rich 640) within his self-awareness. Joe’s self-denial reaches its final peak when he rejects Danny after having been exposed and they are both called to Mr. Winters’ office. When Danny arrives, he sees from the corridor that Joe is already inside the office talking to his father. And as he comes out of the office, Danny whispers Joe’s name, but he passes by and avoids to even look at him. As has already been discussed in the paragraph above, it seems like Joe has lied about them and told Mr. Winters that Danny had seduced and abused him. Not only has Joe wrongly accused Danny and imposed his shameful feelings onto him, but it seems that he has subordinated himself to Mr. Winters’ rules; passing Danny without a word denotes Joe’s passing as heterosexual, his complicity is indicated by him turning silent from then on. He even refuses to talk to Danny when he visits him before Danny leaves town, after he has been thrown out of his parents’ house. He comes ringing the doorbell and Joe opens slowly and asks: “What do you want?” (00:34:40-41). Danny seems confused about his lover’s behaviour and replies: “Joe, it’s me! Why did you lie about us?” (00:34:44-50). But Joe just tells him “You should go Danny” (00:34:50-52) and closes the door on him. While Danny is still standing outside and looks at the door in disbelief, Joe leans his forehead to the wall in his home’s hallway, then punches the wall forcefully and starts to cry. When his mother enters, he quickly turns around and pulls himself together. The scene shows that Joe seems to feel bad about what he did to Danny and equally suffers from the heteronormative oppression that detains their affair. However, he is too repressed and ashamed to allow the feelings he might have for Danny and, thus, adheres to silencing homosexuality altogether. Especially in front of

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others, even his mother, he keeps up appearances. Consequently, he has become complicit in the system of hegemonic masculinity that seeks to subordinate and marginalise homosexuality at all costs.

And even at the end of the film, one year after the Stonewall Riots when Danny visits his hometown, neither his father nor Joe are able to talk to him openly. On his way to get the bus back to New York after visiting his mother and sister, Danny sees his father drive by in his car. He seems to have noticed Danny and stops the car in close distance to Danny who starts approaching the car. However, when he is almost there, his father changes his mind and drives off without talking to him. Thus, his father cannot or is not willing to let their dispute go. He still cannot accept or even tolerate his son's homosexuality, not to mention having an open conversation about it. Similarly, Joe stays repressed and silent and cannot emancipate himself from the oppressive structures of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. Danny goes over to see him and, as in the goodbye scene discussed above, Joe asks: "Why'd you come here, Danny?" (01:49:49-53). Danny explains: "I don't know. Just – Guess I just wanted you to know that – I really did love you. Maybe I still do." (01:49:54-01:50:09). But Joe has moved on as well: "Danny, I'm married. […] I'm going to have a baby. I don't know what it was that we had. […] Danny, whatever we – I'm not like you. If I'd known that you'd hold onto it like this, I – I just think you should leave" (01:50:10-56). Even though Danny points to the fact that their affair "maybe […] was kind of like love" (01:50:30-32) and Joe is at the verge of tears while he rejects Danny again, he is still not able to break the covenant of silence. When they shake hands, however, Joe suddenly pulls Danny towards him and hugs him passionately and they both cry in their embrace. Despite the fact that Joe cannot and will not freely live out his homosexual desires, this small sign of returned affection attests the feelings Joe might have had for Danny and, even if in silence, acknowledges their connection. At least, he thereby offers Danny closure in the aftermath of their abruptly ended relationship. Yet again, their encounter emphasises the contrast between rural and urban spaces. While Joe is concerned about his reputation, his career, and family, for Danny exploring his homosexuality opened new possibilities to shape his identity. The depiction of Danny's relationship with Joe and his father as well as the police violence in New York shows how deeply engrained the institutionalised and personal discrimination, rampant homophobia and violent oppression of homosexuals was into all social structures during that time. In contrast to Joe, however, who does not emancipate himself from the oppressive structures, and in opposition to his

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father, Danny is no longer willing to be silent and subordinate himself to the rules of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity.

Homophobia and the Religious Right

Much like Danny, Harvey Milk and other LGBTQIAN+ characters in *Milk* experience institutional and personal discrimination. Even though some heterosexual characters, especially Mayor George Moscone (Victor Garber), are depicted as important supportive allies of gay rights activism, the film emphasises the different levels of discrimination against homosexuals. Enhancing the ways in which heteronormative oppression is connected to homophobia, the film draws an almost exclusively negative picture of heteronormative society. Next to the main plot of the film depicting Harvey Milk's activism, the film covers the fate of several other homosexuals that cannot escape the repression they have to live in. They are discriminated against by friends, neighbours, and even members of their own families and suffer from the institutional oppression emanating from the police who is at times violent and at others ignorant. Moreover, the impact of the initiatives to repeal gay rights taken by Anita Bryant (not represented by an actress) and John Briggs (Denis O'Hare) of the religious right is shown. Thus, the portrayal of these individuals serves to expose how repressive the heteronormative society of the 1970s in America acted upon all levels of the homosexual characters' lives and thereby highlights the intractability of the situation for many homosexuals.

Despite the fact that San Francisco was to become "'the international gay Mecca'" (Shilts 57) at the time, the homosexuals living there were by far not free from discrimination and resentment. On screen, Milk recounts: "Even though the Castro was firmly our area by 1973, it wasn't safe for us" (00:17:30-35). Being a former Irish Catholic working-class neighbourhood, many of the original residents of the Castro highly disapproved of the migration of homosexuals from across the country to the area. This is made explicit by a scene in which Milk and Smith meet their neighbour, liquor shop-owner Mr. McConnely (Steven Wiig). He presumably belongs to the Catholic residents of the Castro and his facial expression shows that he obviously disapproves of Milk and his partner standing arm in arm and kissing in front of the camera shop they had just opened. He even retrieves a handkerchief from his pocket and starts wiping his hands thoroughly

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with a disgusted expression on his face after having shaken Milk's hand. When the latter asks him about the possibility to join the merchants' association constituted by the shops around the Castro, he warns them: "If you open those doors, the Merchants Association will have the police pull your license" (00:10:36-41) and explains to his baffled neighbours: "There's man's law and there's God's law in this neighbourhood and in this city" (00:10:44-49). Their neighbour's remark infuriates Milk and he exclaims: "For God's sake, it's San Francisco!" (00:12:16-18), to which Smith simply answers: "Yeah. Well, it's just like any other city in the country. They hate us. Real surprise" (00:12:18-22). Thus, the scene accentuates the homophobic social atmosphere prevailing in the US during that time. Not only was homosexuality socially frowned upon, but could also have severe consequences for some individuals, as other incidences of homophobia and personal discrimination against homosexuals in the film show. Often, homophobic acts are executed by direct family members of the homosexual. One example is the fate of Paul from Minnesota (Daniel Landroche) who calls Milk shortly after the latter has lost his third election. Even though he calls at an unpropitious moment, he catches Milk's attention by telling him: "Sir, I think I'm gonna kill myself" (00:39:19-20) and explains: "My folks are gonna take me to this place tomorrow. A hospital. To fix me" (00:39:34-40). Milk advises him to "just get on a bus to the nearest biggest city. Los Angeles or New York or San Francisco, it doesn't matter, you just leave. And you are not sick, and you are not wrong, and God does not hate you. Just leave" (00:39:45-59). While Milk still speaks to Paul, dramatic music sets in and the camera zooms out from a close-up of the boy's face to a medium long shot, revealing that he is confined to a wheelchair. "I can't. I can't walk, sir" (00:40:02-05), Paul answers with a trembling voice. Thereupon, the connection is disrupted, and Milk runs out to prevent a riot in the streets of the Castro. Even though it is a rather short scene, it has a highly symbolic character for the whole film. In general, Paul's character serves to demonstrate the tragedy as well as the hopelessness for many homosexuals in the U.S. during the 1970s. And more specifically, the example of Paul from Minnesota foreshadows a later event that is depicted in the film: in 1978 the religious right succeeded in overturning an ordinance that banned discrimination against homosexuals in St. Paul, Minnesota (cf. 01:28:59-01:29:02). Thus, Paul becomes a symbol for all LGBTQIAN+ individuals that were severely threatened by the new laws and regulations

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enforced by the religious right, while his inability to walk represents the intractability of the situation for many homosexuals.[32]

Furthermore, Paul's fate emphasises that homosexuals do not simply "have an issue" (01:27:54-55), as Milk's colleague and later assassin Dan White (Josh Brolin) calls it in a dispute with Milk, but that the discrimination against them seriously interferes with all levels of their lives. Obviously very drunk, White explains to Milk: "I've realized you just gotta get out there. You gotta be noticed, 'cause that's how it all works. You have an issue. See, that's your advantage. That's an advantage" (01:27:47-01:28:01). This infuriates Milk and he tries to explain to White that homosexuals do not simply 'have an issue,' but are severely threatened by heteronormative society and homophobia:

> Dan, it's more than an issue. [...] I have had four relationships in my life. And three of them have tried to commit suicide. And that's my fault, because I kept them hidden and quiet, because I was closeted and weak. [...] This is not just jobs or issues; this is our lives we're fighting for! (01:28:01-28)

Seemingly oblivious if not ignorant of what Milk has just said, White adds: "I've learned a lot from you, Harvey. [...] I'm going to get my picture in the papers, too. [...] I've got my own issues" (01:28:30-42), thereby hinting at his own precarious financial situation due to the fact that he holds the office as City Supervisor. While White is still slurring incoherently, their argument is interrupted by Milk's new boyfriend Jack Lira (Diego Luna). Having Lira appear at this moment in the film serves as another important foreshadowing device for the plot, hinting at the fact that Lira will commit suicide later in the film.

Lira's suicide has been linked to his inability to accept Milk's tight work schedule. According to film critic Roger Ebert, he is "neurotically jealous of Milk's political life" (Ebert n. pag.) and "what ultimately kills the fragile Lira is not leaving the closet but being neglected by the workaholic Milk, on whom he is too dependent for his self-esteem" (Alegre 189). However,

32 Screenwriter Black claims that the scene with Paul is based on a true story and he "felt not showing how dramatically Harvey was affecting kids outside of San Francisco seemed grossly negligent" (Black and van Sant 107). However, the representation of Paul as hopeless in his wheelchair then saved by Milk's message and inspired to achieve previously unimagined mobility (migration to LA) is a common trope in representations of people with disabilities in film that has been critisised by disability studies.

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this interpretation does not do justice to Lira's fate and reflects only one part of his personality. Rather, quite similar to Paul, Lira was rejected by his own family: "My father beat me when he found out. So, that's why I came here" (00:53:11-16). This traumatic experience affected his whole life and accounts for his unstable psyche. Thus, the "missing love from an abusive father was an early clue to unravelling Lira's inner life" (Lamble n. pag.). His portrayal in the film represents the prevalent struggle of many homosexuals to come to terms with the discrepancy between their own homosexual identity and the heteronormative structures their social reality predetermines – not only in public but also in the most private realm, in front of their families. The filmic representation of shame for not fitting into the heteronormative world indicates that Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' also works within the homosexual and constitutes "an enormous potential counterforce […] having to be restrained" (A. Rich 640). The social shaming and marginalisation, especially by close associates such as family members, can have serious effects on the homosexual's mental health, which was the case for Lira and is, as the film suggests, the main reason for his suicide.

Furthermore, the marginalisation and shaming of homosexuals on the personal level is closely connected to the structural level of heteronormativity. Homophobia was still firmly integrated into the political environment of the 1970s, which led to the persistence of institutional discrimination against homosexuals. The depiction of police harassment against LGBTQIAN+ characters and the religious right's success in repealing anti-discrimination laws in many U.S. states at the end of the 1970s emphasises "that even America's largest and most vocal gay community was being systematically persecuted by homophobic police" (Ebert n. pag.). Authentic footage of police officers violently fighting back protesting activists in gay rights marches, spontaneous resistances, or bar raids, are interwoven into to the plot, drawing a bleak but simultaneously authentic picture of the situation at the time. In one of these clips a man recounts in an interview just after a police raid on a gay bar:

> Through the door there, the front door there, was just an explosion of police charging in here. I ran into the bathroom to hide with some other people. All we could hear was screaming and crunching and smashing. It was frankly the most terrifying experience I've had in my life. (00:16:27-49)

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Serving as an authenticity device, these scenes intensify the credibility of the homophobic atmosphere surrounding gays living in San Francisco. This is also conveyed by re-enacted scenes that show police brutality in the film. Milk describes the random harassments by police officers as follows: "The police hated us. […] They would come in and attack us and beat us just for fun" (00:13:16-23). He also mentions their unfounded charges when announcing his first candidacy for City Supervisor: "A week ago, police officers came into our area with badges covered. They sent 14 of our people to hospitals and to jail. The charges, 'Blocking the sidewalk.' Let's let our tax money go to our protection, not our persecution" (00:18:45-00:19:10). Thus, he criticises the extensive issue that, instead of protecting the LGBTQIAN+ community from discrimination, the police were often the source of harassment. This is unveiled when Milk receives an anonymous death note during the registration period of his first candidacy: "Harvey Milk will have a dream journey and nightmare to hell, a night of horror. You will be stabbed and have your genitals, cock, balls and prick cut off" (00:22:55-00:23:06). Seemingly anxious, Smith immediately wants to call the police (cf. 00:23:07-09), but Milk discourages him from doing so by saying: "They probably wrote it" (00:23:09-12) and pins the death note to the fridge door as a reminder of institutional discrimination and the importance of their political action.

Next to police harassment, Milk finds fault with the lack of protection gays obtain from police authorities. Since the police refused to help them when getting attacked, they had to develop their own system of protection: "We would have to wear whistles on our necks or in our pockets. And if you ever heard a whistle, you would run to help" (00:17:35-42). However, this system does not always work. Having received the message of a young man having been murdered, Milk rushes to the crime scene to find out what had happened. A police officer tells Milk that the victim was stabbed in the streets when walking home with his lover:

> *Officer:* 'Fruit was walking home with his trick when he got jumped. Name's Robert Hillsborough. Did you know him?'
> *Milk:* 'He used to come into my shop. Are there any witnesses?'
> *Officer:* 'Yeah, just the trick, Jerry Taylor.'
> *Milk:* 'Jerry's not his trick, he's his lover.'
> *Officer:* 'Hey, call it what you will. All we know is he's our only witness and he said he can't identify the attackers.'

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> *Milk:* 'Oh, you'd have a dozen witnesses if they thought you boys had any real interest in protecting them.' (00:17:43-00:18:08)

Not only is the police officer apparently indifferent to the crime, but he also talks disrespectfully about the dead, using the derogatory term 'fruit.' He even wrongfully accuses Hillsborough of having prostituted himself by assuming that his boyfriend was his trick. Deputizing for the homophobic perspective prevalent within the police forces during that time, the officer seems to regard homosexuals as criminals whose murderers are not liable to prosecution. The composition of the scene emphasises the feeling of oppression and defencelessness Milk experiences. When he arrives at the crime scene, the camera zooms in on a silver whistle lying on the street, besmeared with blood. The body of the whistle functions like a mirror in which the reflection of Milk and the officer is shown while they talk about the crime. By focusing on the whistle, the film uses it as a symbol for the feeling of insecurity and for the fact that no one, not even the police, helped them when in danger. The film stages the scene as the crucial moment for Milk to eventually decide to run for the candidacy as City Supervisor. He uses the incidence to raise awareness for the prevailing discriminatory legal situation for homosexuals in his first speech: "Robert Hillsborough was murdered for walking home with his long-time partner. He was stabbed 15 times. The last words he heard were: 'Faggot, faggot, faggot.' […] Why do they not bring these murderers to justice?" (00:27:51-00:28:17).

Besides the systematic persecution and institutional discrimination by homophobic police, homosexuals were seriously threatened by a strong political opposition to their legal equality during the 1970s. A group that steadily gained popularity at the time was the religious right, which succeeded to repeal gay rights ordinances and thereby reinforced institutionalised discrimination against homosexuals. Emphasising their blatant homophobia, *Milk* draws a negative picture of the religious right movement and its infamous leaders Anita Bryant and Josh Briggs. This effect is achieved by showing the dramatic scale their action has for those affected by the rescindment of gay rights and by negatively portraying Bryant and Briggs, exposing their argumentation as preposterous and strongly informed by homophobia, and finally by celebrating the victory of forestalling the introduction of Proposition 6. Unveiling the massive impact the repeal of anti-discriminatory laws had on the homosexuals' lives, the film shows the gay community being anxious about the outcome of the campaigns the religious right initiated. Milk recounts: "We were really, genuinely

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frightened by Proposition 6. And with Anita and Briggs gaining strength, we were very pessimistic. We didn't think that there was any chance that we could beat it" (01:35:42-56). The campaigns of the religious rights are almost exclusively represented by authentic video material of news reports, making the threat for homosexuals seem very authentic and realistic. Since the historical documents show how bleak the situation for homosexuals in fact was, the film does not have to exaggerate the situation by restaging it. Additionally, the news coverage about Bryant's campaigns is often framed by scenes of protest, showing people who are outraged by the repeal of anti-discriminatory laws. The news that her first campaign in Dade County, Florida was overwhelmingly successful, for instance, is presented by cutting in a TV report. The report shows a diagram with the preliminary statistics of the referendum, revealing that "[t]he vote is going now 18,930 for repeal. 8,869 against repeal" (00:38:25-33) and, as the reporter explains, thereby making it "very definitely that the ordinance is going to be repealed. With this margin, it's over" (00:38:36-48). Celebrating her victory, Bryant explains in an interview: "Tonight, the laws of God and the cultural values of men have been vindicated. The people of Dade County, the normal majority, have said, 'Enough, enough, enough'" (00:38:44-00:39:01). In stark contrast to that, a group supporting the LGBTQIAN+ community is shown marching the streets of the Castro and shouting angry paroles including "Civil rights or civil war! Gay rights now!" (01:18:57-01:19:04) and "Anita, you're a liar! We'll set your hair on fire!" (01:19:33 – 01:19:40). The film shows the anti-gay movement gaining more and more strength, as more cities and counties across the country follow Bryant's lead. Again, news coverage is cut in to inform the viewers that also voters in St. Paul, Minnesota (cf. 01:15:13-25), Eugene, Oregon (cf. 01:15:25-33), and Wichita, Kansas (cf. 01:15:45-01:16:01) have repealed laws protecting homosexuals against discrimination, and again the film frames these news reports with LGBTQIAN+ communities fiercely protesting the campaigns. Emphasising that anti-discriminatory laws are protecting civil rights that should not be liable to repeal, Cleve Jones (Emile Hirsch) makes clear to his fellow protestors that "Anita Bryant's coming for you!" (00:40:57-00:41:02). In his opinion, Bryant's campaigns are direct attacks on their community: "Tomorrow morning, the gay citizens of Wichita will also awaken to find that they too have lost their civil rights! You have whistles. You use them when we have been attacked. Tonight, we have been attacked" (01:17:43-59). Yet again, the film thereby also emphasises the whistle in its symbolism for the threat to LGBTQIAN+ individuals.

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Eventually, the anxiety portrayed by the film gains its peak when Briggs starts Proposition 6 in California. The campaign is directed against Milk's newly passed gay rights ordinance. Milk's campaign manager Anne Kronenberg (Alison Pill) explains: "State Senator John Briggs is Anita Bryant's go-to guy in California for sure. He filed a petition for a state-wide referendum to fire all gay teachers and anyone who supports them" (01:05:02-13). As in other incidences, the film has Milk comment on the so called 'Briggs Initiative,' highlighting the fact that those laws the religious right calls for are seriously impairing homosexual lives:

> Well, I think what you saw, you saw some very committed opposition to his proposition. And I think that's only going to continue. People have very emotional reactions to this. This is their lives that are on the line. (01:06:44-55)

By showing the gays' outrage as well as their anxiety, the film justifies the fight against Bryant, Briggs, and the religious right, since they are directly attacking the gays' civil rights by reinstalling institutionalised discrimination against them.

Another mechanism to foster a negative perception of the religious right is the depiction of the campaign leaders Bryant and Briggs as the evil antagonists of the gay rights activists, while at the same time stultifying their arguments and exposing the irrationality of their homophobia. The first impression the viewer gets of Anita Bryant is a news report in which she is shown singing "Yes, Jesus Loves me" (00:34:53-00:35:01). While a slow melody is playing, the camera zooms from a close up of her face to a long shot, revealing that she is in a church, singing with a choir of ministrants. Thereby, the film highlights her religious affiliations. While the following clips present Bryant in several TV appearances, a voiceover introduces her as having become "America's most controversial woman overnight" (00:35:01-21). Already in the first clip, she makes her opinion on homosexuality very clear:

> *News reporter:* 'There are those people who say that it is kind of an eye for an eye law that is at work here, that you're denying homosexuals many of their rights as well.'
> *Bryant:* 'You see, if homosexuals are allowed their civil rights, then so would prostitutes or thieves or anyone else. God puts it in a category of morality.'

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> *News reporter:* 'Doesn't that necessarily follow that you believe that homosexuality ought to be illegal?'
> *Bryant:* 'I do believe that it should be illegal.' (00:35:43-00:36:05)

While Bryant is speaking, the camera slowly zooms out, showing the TV set running the news report and then tilts to the left to capture Milk who is watching the interview with concern. The extract from the interview shows that Bryant puts homosexuals on the same moral level as criminals, thus exposing her narrow-minded belief system grounded in the untenable assumption that LGBTQIAN+ rights threaten the morals and values of America's society. Likewise, Briggs is presented as drawing clear connections between criminals and homosexuals. In his first appearance on screen, he explains the aim of his campaign as follows:

> My proposition promises to protect our children from these gay perverts and – these gay perverts and paedophiles who recruit our children to participate in their deviant lifestyle, including the ones who do it in our public schools. The time has come for us to root them out. (01:05:48-01:06:09)

Their negative portrayal will be kept up throughout the rest of the film. Without mentioning the reasons for their uncompromising crusade against homosexuals, the film offers only a rather one-dimensional portrayal of them, thereby emphasising the absurdity of their argumentation that homosexuality can be objectively considered degenerate and unnatural. Since the film does not exaggerate Bryant's character by restaging her actions, the viewer gets the impression of having direct access to her preposterous reasoning. Not only does this serve as another authenticity device but exposes both Bryant's and Briggs' arguments as reflecting "the irrational fear of difference, the narrow, intolerant, and bigoted outlook, the commitment to tradition rather than growth and maturity" (Wickberg 55) residing in homophobia. They are presented as untenable, even ridiculous at times. For instance, the absurdity of Bryant's views become obvious in the following quote: "I love homosexuals, if you can believe that. I love them enough to tell them the truth" (01:42:02-07). As the film shows, her sole aim is to fan fears about the deteriorating state of morals in U.S. society: "I believe that more than ever before, that there are evil forces round about us, even perhaps disguised as something good, that would want to tear down the very foundation, the family unit, that holds America together" (00:35:21-43). Both statements show how irrational her argument is, since

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the reason that two men cannot (biologically) reproduce does of course not mean that they plan to destroy the traditional family model of heterosexual marriage. Alluding to this view, however, Bryant exposes her campaigns as premised on homophobia, revealing that she cannot explain her fears rationally and therefore needs to find reasons why homosexuals seek to destroy American society. Whenever their arguments fail in credibility, both Bryant and Briggs use God as their last resort. On a campaign visit to San Francisco, Briggs is confronted by an angry mob of teachers in fear of losing their jobs. To escape the situation, he deflects: "You know what, you can argue with me; you cannot argue with God" (01:06:22-28).

In contrast to Bryant, Briggs is played by an actor. In the TV appearances and political debates that are restaged in the film, Milk constantly succeeds in stultifying him by overriding his arguments. In a public debate between the two taking place in a school in San Francisco, Briggs claims:

> You know, Mr. Milk, we don't allow people who practice bestiality to teach our children [...] gay people don't have any children of their own. And if they don't recruit our children, they'd all just die away. You know? And that's why they're all so interested in becoming teachers, because they want to encourage our children to join them. (01:34:38-01:35:10)

Fully aware of the absurd homophobic view this statement displays, Milk easily responds:

> And how do you teach homosexuality? Is it like French? I was born of heterosexual parents, taught by heterosexual teachers in a fiercely heterosexual society. So why then am I homosexual? And no offense meant, but if it were true that children mimicked their teachers, we'd have a hell of a lot more nuns running around. (01:35:12-34)

While the homophile audience applauds Milk for this witty remark, Briggs is booed for his statements which are equally informed by the irrationality of homophobia as Bryant's. In a debate in front of a highly homophobic audience, however, Milk does not have such an easy game. He is even warned not to go there. Nevertheless, he is presented as much more confident while Briggs becomes more and more startled and even flounders when talking:

> *Milk:* In your statements here and all these newspapers and tonight, you say that child molestation is not an issue. If it's not an issue, why do you put out literature that hammers it home? Why do you play on this myth

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and fear? [...] You yourself had said that there's more molestation in the heterosexual group, so why not get rid of the heterosexual teachers?
Briggs: We are not talking about homosex – About child molestation. Nearly – The fact is, nearly 95 percent of the people are heterosexual, so, if we took the heterosexuals out and the homosexuals out, you know what, we'd have no teachers.
Milk: We'd have no teachers, no more molestation. So, you're saying that the percentage of the population is equal to the percentage of child molestation?
Briggs: No, no, no, I'm not saying that, no.
Milk: That's what you just said.
Briggs: No, no, no. I'm not saying that at all. I am saying that we can't prevent child molestation, so let's just cut our odds down by taking out the homosexuals and keeping in the heterosexual groups. (01:36:22-01:37:31)

Albeit Briggs' reasoning does not make much sense, the audience is on his side. Instead of stultifying Milk, the scene emphasises the irrationality of homophobia. The followers of the religious right do not seem to care about the integrity of their leaders' statements as long as they are taking radical steps against homosexual equality.

Eventually, the gay rights activists successfully fight back Proposition 6 in a notable victory, even though preliminary opinion polls had predicted "75% for approval state-wide" (01:08:13-15). During the count of votes after the referendum, the young boy Paul who wanted to commit suicide earlier in the film, surprisingly calls Milk from Los Angeles:

Paul: When I saw that you won the Supervisor seat, I got a friend to put me on a bus to LA.
Milk: Who do you know in Los Angeles?
Paul: Nobody. [...] I just didn't want to die anymore. I met your friend Don down here. I turned 18 and I voted today against Prop 6. I don't think I'd be alive right now if it weren't for you.
Milk: No, you did that all by yourself, Paul.
Paul: Don wanted me to congratulate you on what he says looks like a big win for us tonight. Congratulations, Mr. Milk. (01:43:31-01:44:03).

It is not before Paul's last remark that Milk realises that Proposition 6, against all odds, hasn't come through. The symbolism of this scene ties in with the earlier scene about Paul. He and his wheelchair came to stand for

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the hopelessness and intractability of the discriminating legal situation for homosexuals which the religious right had re-established in many states. The fact that Paul is still alive and managed to get to L.A. despite being confined to a wheelchair, symbolises that there is a reason for hope for all the LGBTQIAN+ individuals still suffering from discrimination and inequality. Milk, noticeably touched by Paul's call and exhilarated by the enormous victory they just achieved, tries to communicate this notion of hopefulness and inspiration in his victory speech after the referendum:

> Tonight, it's become clear to everyone out there that they do know one of us, and now that they do, they can see that we're not sick. They can feel that we are not wrong. And they know that there must be, that there should be a place for us in this great country, in this world. A message of hope has been sent to all those young people, to all of those who've been afraid by this wave of hate, to all of those who have lost their homes, lost their hometowns. Tonight, we are clear that there is a place for us! My brothers and sisters, we can come home again! (01:45:31-01:46:22)

At least in California, Bryant and Briggs have lost their ruthless battle against equality for homosexuals. The negative depiction of the personal discrimination, police harassment, and the political activism of the religious right and its followers, the insidious dangers for homosexuals on all levels of their lives are emphasised, and homophobia is exposed as irrational, untenable, absurd, and even ridiculous at times.

3.2 Coming Out: The Emancipation of the Central Characters

Ginsberg's Artistic Breakthrough

This chapter seeks to analyse in how far *Howl* enacts Ginsberg's emancipation from the heteronormative structures that have been examined in chapter 3.1. As has been argued before, the film draws a close connection between literature and sexuality, and I will delineate what mechanisms it applies to stage the liberating process of transgressing moral and artistic boundaries. Thereby, the poem "Howl" gains special importance in structuring the narrative of the film. Not only does it serve as a connecting device for the historic figures and events the film portrays and the film as a work of art, but it is accredited a deeper metaphorical meaning: it symbolises Ginsberg's fight for the social acceptance of homosexuality. Thereby, it

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is central for his struggle with his sexuality and with the heteronormative structures that strongly suppress him and eventually the poem becomes a symbol for the transgression of heteronormativity. Thus, I will examine the individual process by which Ginsberg finally reaches a stage of affirmation, no longer feeling ashamed for his homosexuality and making his sexuality visible through the performance of the poem.

Ginsberg's acceptance and affirmation of his homosexuality is expressed in the way the poem "Howl" is depicted by his recounts in the interview sequence and flashbacks shot in black-and-white that intersperse his narration. In the film, the people who influence his poetic work and thus also the process to accept his sexuality, especially his father (not represented by an actor), Jack Kerouac (Todd Rotondi), Neil Cassady (Jon Prescott), and Carl Solomon (not represented by an actor), each symbolising a different form of repression that Ginsberg must overcome. Apart from his father and Solomon, Kerouac and Cassady shaped both his identity as a poet and a homosexual, as they taught him a more open approach to his own feelings. After years of struggling, Ginsberg meets Peter Orlovsky (Aaron Tveit) who initiates the final step of self-acceptance and with whom he is eventually able to live out his homosexuality. The film connects Ginsberg's emancipation to the process of writing and performing "Howl," highlighting the poems symbolism for the transgression of heteronormativity and eventually also Ginsberg's coming out.

To begin with, Allen Ginsberg's father Louis Ginsberg, being a poet himself, strongly influenced his son's writing. Ginsberg recalls his own writing merely as a mimicry of his father's: "I started writing poetry because I was a dope and because my father wrote poetry. So, I began writing rhymes like him" (00:09:56-00:10:07). The imitation of his father's writing, however, soon began to put pressure on the young poet and he remembers feeling ashamed for his writing, even anxious:

> The beginning of the fear for me was: what would my father think of something that I would write? At the time writing 'Howl' I assumed that when writing it that it was not something that would be published because I didn't want my daddy to see what was in there. So, I assumed, it wouldn't be published therefore I could write anything that I wanted to. (00:03:43-00:04:05)

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This means that Ginsberg could only write "Howl" once he felt that he was unattainable from his father's judgement.[33] Ginsberg had to emancipate himself from his predecessor who predetermines the normative structures of the surrounding influencing the young poet's identity. These structures are supposedly heteronormative, as he seems to be struggling with his sexual interests within his family. He explains: "Until I was 18, I was a virgin. I was unable to reach out to anybody's body, to reach out to desire. I just felt chained" (00:10:29-42). Thus, he felt ashamed for his homosexuality in front of his parents and did not admit his homosexual identity to anyone before going to Columbia College.

It is at the university where he meets Jack Kerouac, "the first person [he] really opened up to and said: 'I'm a homosexual'" (00:12:17-29). Through the friendship with Kerouac, Ginsberg takes the first step towards accepting and affirming his sexuality, that is rejecting his father's poetic form: "And then I realised that if I actually admitted and confessed the secret tenderness of my soul, he [Jack] would understand nakedly who I was. So that sincere talk replaced the earlier imitative rhyming that I was doing for my father" (00:11:55-00:12:16). Moreover, it implies the refusal to imitate his father's heterosexuality. The connection between poetry and sexuality that the film plays with becomes very clear, as his father symbolises a traditional adherence to norms concerning both poetic form and sexuality. In contrast, Kerouac teaches him that, to become a good poet, he has to be honest and express his feelings: "Jack gave me permission to open up. He is a romantic poet and he taught me that writing is personal, that it comes from the writer's own person, his body, his breathing rhythm, his actual talk" (00:10:52-00:11:12). Nevertheless, even though Kerouac showed him "that people would never really be shocked by an expression of feeling" (00:12:34-41), he can only turn to him in terms of poetic expression. Ginsberg feels that he "needed to express [his] feelings to him, but he [Kerouac] didn't want to hear them" (00:11:19-24). Ultimately, Kerouac is not sexually interested in Ginsberg and their relationship remains platonic.

Kerouac's and Ginsberg's mutual friend Neil Cassady, in contrast, is presented as being less interested in Ginsberg's poetry than in a physical connection. While Kerouac influences his intellectual development, Cas-

33 His experiences can be described with Harold Bloom's notion of 'anxiety of influence.' To examine Bloom's rather complex argument in *The Anxiety of Influence – A Theory of Poetry* (1973) in great detail would take me too far afield at this point, but, to become a 'strong poet' in Bloom's sense, the succeeding poet hast to 'kill,' i.e. abandon, his predecessor to emancipate himself from his influence (cf. Bloom 8-10).

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sady, who celebrates a hobo lifestyle and enjoys unconventional sexual encounters, influences Ginsberg's physical development in the process of accepting his homosexuality. While traveling throughout the U.S., they begin a love affair, even though Cassady "had 6000 girls around the country keeping him very busy" (00:28:52-57). Ginsberg remembers it as the first time for him to have sexual contact with another person:

> One day Neil and I were thrown together in bed at four a.m., by circumstance, with no place else to go and no place else to sleep. And I remember being a little scared and not quite sure what to do. I sort of like turned over, stiff in my body and got to the edge of the bed. And he saw that I was shy. At the time I was still scared of feelings in other persons. So he put his arm around me and pulled me and put my head on his breast and gave me love, actually. (00:29:32-00:30:21)

The journey with Cassady is a time of utopian enjoyment of their homosexuality and they manage to ignore the heteronormative structures. The literal freedom experienced by travelling mirrors their sexual liberation. When their journey ends, however, they bitterly realise that they cannot escape the oppressive structures of conformity that soon afflict them again. Cassady ends their relationship in a letter:

> I really don't know how much I can be satisfied to love you, I mean bodily. You know, I sometimes dislike pricks and men and before you had consciously forced myself to be homosexual. You meant so much to me. And now I feel I was forcing a desire for you bodily as a compensation to you, for all you were giving me. Allen, this is straight. What I truly want is to live with you from September to June, have an apartment, a girl, go to college, see all and do all and become truly straight. (00:31:32-00:32:23)

Even though Cassady seems to be very experimental with his sexuality, he eventually wants to lead a 'normal,' 'truly straight' life and, thus, cannot or does not want to entirely break out of the oppressive heteronormative structures.

Another character that influences Ginsberg's development and reveals the repressive heteronormative structures is his friend Carl Solomon. While in the asylum where they met, they "spent months sitting around and asking [them]selves whether the authority of the doctors and their sense of reality was right for [them] or whether [they] were right or, you know, what was happening" (00:24:04-19). They try to challenge the structures

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that oppress them which are so firmly embedded into society that even they are uncertain who is in fact right or wrong. Moreover, Ginsberg explains that "Carl was having problems because he was receiving shock therapy" (00:24:20-25). Hence, the oppression takes place on a physical level. Fortunately, Ginsberg was spared this treatment: "I didn't have any of that, no medication, no shock, 'cause I promised the doctor that I would be heterosexual and that's how I got out" (00:24:25-31). Leaving behind Solomon, Ginsberg manages to escape the asylum but only because he promises to conform to the heteronorm. Solomon, in contrast, is further oppressed, thereby becoming the character that symbolises the sad peak of heteronormative oppression.

Even though Ginsberg eventually gets out, the time in the asylum also constitutes a deep cut in his life:

> After I got out, I had a period of fear, [...] I was questioning my sense of reality versus the social sense that was being imposed on me. It was a position that many people in the hospital came out with, a total self-rejection, a rejection of their own universe – lip service, actually, to supposedly acceptable social patterns. (00:27:53-00:28:31)

The heteronormative mechanisms of shaming work within Ginsberg, who calls his own identity into question since his homosexuality either alienates him from himself or marginalises him from society. By depicting the influence of the people in his life, Ginsberg's self-liberation only glimmers through in the film. It is not before he meets his lifelong partner Peter Orlovsky that the final step of his self-acceptance, symbolised by the poem "Howl," is eventually initiated: "It was when I met Peter that everything changed for me. It was as if the heavens showered with gold. Finally, somebody loved me like I loved them. The first time, I felt accepted in my life, completely" (00:44:46-00:45:11). Thus, Orlovsky is presented as the final piece in the puzzle constituting Ginsberg's acceptance of his identity. With him, Ginsberg gradually realises that he no longer wants to hide his homosexuality in public either. Despite having finally found love and acceptance in his relationship and being able to live out his homosexuality in private, he is unhappy about the public repression of their happiness through the omnipresent structures of heteronormativity. While working for an advertising company, he designs an advertisement billboard for a toothpaste called *Pepsodent* (cf. 00:43:43-00:44:10). For an advertisement poster, he arranges a picture which shows a happy family of mother, father, and children with cards showing the words "Bright!",

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"White!", "Wholesome!" and "Alluring!". Through the combination of these words with the picture of the family, the scene suggests that being heterosexual, implying being married and having children, is perceived as the normal and thus only way to be wholesome and alluring. This scene is intermitted by a scene that depicts Ginsberg and Orlovsky at home (cf. 00:44:20-00:45:22), directly contrasting the heteronormative family with their homosexual partnership. While there is in fact no difference between the family life and the homosexual couple, the latter is not allowed to live out their relationship in public. At this point, Ginsberg still cannot dislodge the influence of the heteronormative structures: "I was still trying to act normal. I was afraid I was crazy. I was sure that I was supposed to be heterosexual and that something was wrong with me" (00:45:25-38). The incongruence of his public and his private life causes a fragmentation of his identity that leads to a writer's block. For this reason, he seeks advice from his psychiatrist Dr. Hicks (not represented by an actor) who finally induces the watershed moment in Ginsberg's life when he asks him what he really desires to do. Ginsberg answers honestly: "All I would really like to do is just quit all this and get a small room with Peter and devote myself to my writing. Contemplation, and fucking, and smoking pot. And doing whatever I wanted" (00:45:43- 00:46:08). Dr. Hicks gets him thinking by simply asking: "And why don't you do it then?" (00:46:09-12). This dialogue segues into a scene showing Ginsberg and Orlovsky howling in the streets of San Francisco (cf. 00:47:31-35). This represents the final act of shamelessly making their sexuality visible and also audible – they are howling themselves free, which figuratively connects the sexual liberation back to the literary expression in "Howl." Thus, having been influenced in various ways, Ginsberg finally realises that the heteronormative structures oppressing him constituted "a fear trap – illusory!" (00:46:39-45) and is finally able to overcome his shame to make his sexuality visible.

The film suggests that the way leading out of oppression for Ginsberg is his literary expression. He realises that he cannot exclude parts of his identity from his creativity:

> The problem when it comes to literature is that there are many writers who have pre-conceived ideas about what literature is supposed to be. But their ideas seem to preclude everything that makes the most interesting in conversation. Their faggishness, their solitude, their neuroses, their goofiness, their campiness, or, even their masculinity at times. (00:15:26-52)

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The final step of affirmation is pursued through the writing and the performance of the poem "Howl." Ginsberg speaks about poetry almost as if it was a sexual orgasm:

> Poetry generally is a rhythmic articulation of feeling. And the feeling is an impulse that begins inside, like a sexual impulse, you know. Almost as definite as that. It's a feeling that begins in your stomach and rises up through the breast and out of the mouth and ears, right. And it comes forth as a croon or a groan or sigh. So, if you're trying to put words to that by looking around you and trying to describe what's making you sigh, just sigh in words. You simply articulate what you're feeling. (00:38:28-00:39:11)

Poetry is described here as an expression of one's emotions that slowly builds up, similar to a sexual act, and finally ends in an orgasm-like literary release that reveals the poet's innermost being. The ability to express his feelings in his poems and thus reveal his homosexuality becomes a liberating act of self-acceptance for Ginsberg. Expressing his homosexuality through literature, hence, constitutes Ginsberg's statute of being absolutely frank with his feelings. He is convinced that poets will achieve total truth once they behave and write the same way in public as in private: "The trick is to break down that distinction, [...] to write the same way that you are" (00:16:48-00:17:10). Therefore, he argues that the "poem is misinterpreted as a promotion of homosexuality. Actually, it's more like a promotion of frankness, about any subject" (01:10:30-42). He goes on to explain:

> When a few people are frank about homosexuality in public, it breaks the ice. Then people are free to be frank about anything and that's socially useful. Homosexuality is a condition, and because it alienated me, or set me apart from the beginning, it served as a catalyst for self-examination, or a detailed realization of my environment and the reasons why everyone else is different and why I am different. (01:10:56-00:11:46)

Making homosexuality visible becomes a social practice to challenge and eventually also subvert heteronormativity, and it even serves as a role model for all kinds of social transgressions. This highlights the enormous impact the poem had on American culture. The Beat poets' "open speech – in an age of denial! – has something to do with the fact that today national debate includes, as legitimate topics for discussion, things such as homosexuality [...] Unashamed personal revelation in literature, particularly in the 1950s, risked violating not only critical canons, but legal statutes" (Ball 97). Con-

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sequently, "'Howl' has emerged into the mainstream of literature as an agent of change" (Shinder xviii) that "queers gay masculinity of the American 1940s and 50s and prompts us to a more complex public discourse today" (van Engen 13). In the film, Ginsberg's frankness as well as his shamelessness is depicted as a mechanism to challenge heteronormativity:

> The crucial moment of breakthrough came when I realized how funny it would be, in the middle of a long poem, if I said: 'Who let themselves be fucked in the ass and screamed with joy!' instead of 'and screamed with pain.' That's the contradiction in that line. American audience would expect it to be pain and, instead, it's 'screamed with joy!' Which is really true. Absolutely, 100%. And, again, I have a line, like 'Who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love.' It was an acknowledgement of the basic reality of homosexual joy. That was a breakthrough in the sense of public statements about feelings, emotions, attitudes, you know, that I wouldn't have wanted my father or my family to see, and that I even hesitated to make public. (01:09:18-01:10:22)

These are also lines that were recited in court in order to argue for the ban of the poem. Thus, Ginsberg realises that he is truer to himself when he is not conforming to the norm and does not answer the expectations of the 1950s American belief system. Referring to the line about the motorcyclists, too, Dagmar van Engen usefully points out, that "[b]y taking delight in what was at that time a disgusting, painful, and punishable sex act, this line twists and reinterprets the gay male identities available at the time" (van Engen 8). She explains that the characters of the poem aim to

> reiterate a perverse image of gay masculinity in a way that is no longer painful and perverse but can provide delight. They queer homophobic constructions of gay identity through refiguring the painful and perverse as an instance of pleasure. If men can find pleasure in anal sex, then the normative claims of the 'old' masculinity lose their grip and gender can change. (van Engen 8)

Furthermore, the "various modes of Epstein's and Friedman's *Howl* [...] become multiple ways of interpreting the 'bookmovie' that is Ginsberg's poem" (Marcus 46). The film emphasises freedom of speech as an important American value yet again and suggests that there is never just one perspective on any topic by showing various interpretations of the poem. These range from the assessment of conservative literary critics who deny

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the poem any literary merit, to comments of the author himself and the adaption of the poem in form of animation and staged reading. The variety of possible interpretations that the film presents might be interpreted as symbolising the variety of possible forms of living, or in short as a variety of sexualities that do not conform to heteronormative structures. Through the way it presents Ginsberg's individual negotiation of his sexual identity, the film becomes an homage to "Howl," seeking to perpetuate the poem's subversive potential.

Danny's Coming Of Age

Danny's story of emancipation is a story of coming of age – the whole plot of the film revolves around this topic in a Bildungsroman-like fashion.[34] From defying his parents, struggling with unrequited love to finding his place in his peer group, Danny traverses the typical stages of coming-of-age: "friends, fitting in, and finding love" (Uytdewilligen 1). Moreover, the film explicitly references other typical coming of age films, especially *The Wizard of Oz*. This could be seen as a metafictional note to the coming-of-age theme of *Stonewall*. Ryan Uytdewilligen summarises the plot of *The Wizard of Oz* as follows:

> The fantastical journey follows young Kansas girl Dorothy getting whisked away by a cyclone into a magical land full of munchkins and witches. But poor Dorothy just yearns to go home and sets off to see the one person who can make it so, the wonderful Wizard of Oz. Along the way, she meets a variety of friends who help her and each other achieve an inner goal they never knew they had all along. If you look at the lessons (Courage, compassion, knowledge, even homesickness), they are all stereotypical desires, troubles and tribulations of youth during the coming-of-age period. (Uytdewilligen 30)

Not only was *The Wizard of Oz* a typical coming of age film, but the quintessential cult film for the LGBTQIAN+ youth. Due to its camp style, the film was popularly queered and turned Judy Garland into an icon of LGBTQIAN+

34 In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the Bildungsroman is defined as follows: "The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into maturity; this process usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (Abrams & Harpham 255).

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youth culture. Since the protagonist Dorothy accepted those who are different, the expression 'friend of Dorothy' "has long been a code for being gay" (Frank n. pag.) and her "journey from Kansas to Oz mirrored many gay men's desires to escape the black-and-white limitations of small town life [...] for big, colorful cities filled with quirky, gender-bending characters who would welcome them" (Frank n. pag.). The same holds true for Danny, who is also suddenly uprooted from his home and transferred to a different world where he meets a variety of characters that help him on his way. Moreover, Ray assumes that Danny is from Kansas as well. Thus, *The Wizard of Oz* seems like the fantasy version of Danny's journey to emancipation and, by interspersing references to this film, *Stonewall* connects the coming-of-age theme with coming out. Analysing Danny's "recognition of [his] identity and role in the world" (Abrams & Harpham 255), this chapter seeks to outline how the film enacts the young protagonist's coming of age as his coming out. Accordingly, the following paragraphs will focus on the traditional themes of coming of age: the defiance of the parents' rules, unrequited teenage love, and peer group affiliation. Not only does Danny get expelled from high school after his love affair with a classmate is found out, but is also socially frowned upon and dismissed by his parents. Because of that he flees to New York – a place where he finds his peers and is finally able to emancipate himself from the oppressive structures upheld by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. This is portrayed along the lines of Danny straddling of gay liberation: he is torn between rebellion and assimilation and negotiates his coming-of-age in between these dichotomous scale points. These are symbolised by Ray and his gang of street kids versus Trevor (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), a member of the Mattachine Society and Danny's lover for a short period of time. While Ray and the others often disobey laws and regulations, Trevor tries to keep Danny out of trouble and holds the assimilationist opinion that homosexual rights should be fought for by blending into the heterosexual norm.

The plot sets in, similar to other coming of age narratives, when Danny gets thrown out of his parents' house, after his father discovers Danny's affair with his class-mate. Therefore, the connection of coming-of-age and coming out is made explicit from the beginning of the film. Being the main representative of hegemonic masculinity, his father and his rules are the first authorities that Danny has to emancipate himself from. On the one hand, the scene when he defies his father's rules by being silent and not letting degrade him further is also the moment when the process of emancipation sets in. On the other hand, this moment is initiated by his

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classmates, who outed Danny.Therefore it is not started by himself but rather by the repressive social structures surrounding him. One of the first flashbacks shows his outing and thus the moment that sets the whole plot of the film in motion. When he is in the car having oral sex with his lover Joe, two of Joe's friends sneak up to them, thinking Joe is in the car with his girlfriend. When they open the driver's door to spring a trick on Joe, they catch Danny in the act of fellatio. Completely taken off guard, Joe slams the door and drives off with screeching tires. His friends remain behind, looking at each other in shock: "What was that?" (00:25:01-02). The next day, Danny encounters them at school. They stare at him contemptuously while he is walking down the corridor, eventually finding the word 'faggot' sprayed on his locker – the truth has been revealed (cf. 00:29:01-52). The whole scene is very suspenseful with slow piano music emphasising the menacing scenario for Danny. Even though this part is missing from the plot, they must have reported the sexual encounter between Danny and Joe. Not showing how and who they told what they saw emphasises the fact that the oppression of homosexuals is not an individual act of discrimination but structurally engrained into heteronormative society. The stereotypical slur Danny finds on his locker is an insult that operates as a mechanism of heteronormative control. Besides silencing, making his homosexuality hyper-visible is used to keep Danny in his place. This shows that it is not safe for Danny to be outed here and since he did not initiate the outing himself, it is not an act of emancipation but rather another form of oppression by heteronormative society. Thus, the real process of emancipation does not set in until he leaves home.

As has already been discussed at length, Danny refuses to follow his father's rules since this would mean to bid for his father's help. Danny is not willing to do that and rather leaves home than accepting the disgrace of asking the oppressor for help and thereby having a part of his identity taken away from him. This depiction is also typical for coming-of-age plotlines: Danny dissociates himself from his parents, his hometown, and his friends and, hence, from the heteronormative and religious background he came from to find his own place and his role in the world. Danny's leave is depicted as devastating for his mother (Andrea Frankle) and sister, since especially the latter does not want Danny to go (00:32:22-00:33:44). After the dispute with his father, his mother awaits him with tears in her eyes (cf. 00:32:43-46). He storms upstairs to find his suitcase packed, assumingly by his mother. The depiction of his mother and sister stresses the point that the oppression of homosexuality is deeply inscribed in the heteronormative

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system that is upheld by patriarchy. Stereotypically, it is the father that symbolises this form of oppression while women are oppressed just as much and incapable of acting against heteronormativity. Thus, his mother and sister are forced to be complicit with heteronormativity and cannot protect him from the rule of hegemonic masculinity. Even if Danny's individual act of dissociation is still quite passive, not accepting the oppression anymore is the first step in his journey to emancipation.

Another typical part of coming-of-age plots and, thus, relevant for Danny's coming out, is unrequited teenage love. During the plot of the film, Danny gathers several experiences with unrequited love. The first one is of course the affair with his classmate Joe. While Danny is more of a loner, who is perceived as "just weird" (00:21:12-13) by their other classmates, Joe is popular at school and in his football team, has a girlfriend and seems to get along with everybody. He is Mr. Winters' favourite player on the football team. No one is suspicious of him not being 'normal' – he is credibly passing as heterosexual. Moreover, Joe refuses to accept his homosexuality as an identity. When he and Danny meet on an empty farm to have sex in Joe's car, Danny addresses the documentary on homosexuality they were shown at school earlier the same day: "That fucking film!" (00:21:58-00:22:01). To cheer up the mood, Joe tries to make a joke about it: "Yep, they were creepy looking men. Half the fucking faculty look like those guys" (00:22:02-07). Thereby, he degrades homosexuals to the cliché of older paedophile men who would assault high school boys like them. Even more so, the way he uses the pronoun 'they' others them and makes clear that Joe himself does not belong to this group of 'creeps.' Danny, on the contrary, is more concerned by the assertions the film made about homosexuality, since he thinks he and Joe belong to the group of homosexuals: "Joe, don't be stupid. They meant it for us. At least, he [Mr. Winters] meant it for me. He even dragged poor Sheriff Goodwin along. I'm telling you, he's on to us" (00:22:08-18). Joe does not seem interested in this kind of conversation with Danny and starts kissing him and initiating oral sex, when Danny asks him: "Do you think we're sick?" (00:22:36-38). Again, Joe is not willing to discuss his feelings and tries to downplay their affair: "It's just nothing. It's not anything. Cool it. We're just fooling around. Sarah won't do anything, and you don't even have a girlfriend" (00:22:38-51). But Danny does not want to give in yet and even reveals his true feelings for Joe: "It's more than that. I just – I really like you, Joe" (00:22:52-55). This, however, infuriates Joe: "Don't fucking say that. This is just for now. We're not faggots" (00:22:59-00:23:03). Joe, who wants to fit

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in with heteronormativity and thus acts according to the gender role hegemonic masculinity assigns him, rejects Danny's expression of his emotions and thereby their homosexuality. In contrast, Danny starts to see his homosexuality as an identity and not as an act of normative transgression. In line with Foucault's theory about the "implantation of perversions" (Foucault *Sexuality* 37), both Danny and Joe have internalised the oppressive structures of heteronormativity. However, these structures induce different emotions in them. Drawing on Sedgwick's definition of shame, I submit that Joe feels guilty for what he does; Danny, in contrast, feels ashamed for what he is (Sedgwick 'Queer Performativity' 51). This difference leads Joe to detach himself from his homosexuality, while Danny can no longer accept the oppression, because he perceives his sexuality as an identity trait. Thereby, as Sedgwick has pointed out, shame is on the one hand "a permanent, structuring fact of identity" (Sedgwick 'Queer Performativity' 61), but on the other hand "has its own powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities" (Sedgwick 'Queer Performativity' 61). Thus, this also marks the possibility for subversion: once Danny has defined his identity in connection to his shame, he is now able to fight for his rights by way of no longer accepting the shaming. Joe's denial of his homosexuality moreover leads to a denial of their relationship. In the act of betraying Danny by lying about their affair and blaming Danny for having taken advantage of him, Joe has pushed Danny further into the direction of emancipation. In contrast to Mr. Winters, who symbolises the oppression that is put on Danny from without, Joe comes to stand for the oppression that works inside the homosexual himself. Since Joe has turned against him, also this form of oppression has turned against Danny and he can no longer maintain his self-delusion. He thus needs to break with Joe and leave his home, because his emancipation would not be possible without disposing of his internalised oppression.

After he has left his hometown, Danny needs to find his group of peers and eventually his "identity and role in the world" (Abrams & Harpham 255). The film depicts this in his oscillation between queer rebellion represented by Ray and the gang of queer street youths and assimilation represented by Trevor and the Mattachine Society. Arriving in New York, Danny immediately goes to Greenwich Village and walks down Christopher Street, an area where gays settled during the 1960s. He seems amazed by the open display of homosexuality, when he sees a couple leaned at a car and holding hands as he walks down the street and enters a diner to have breakfast (00:01:47-00:02:00). While he is sitting at the counter, a

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TV set in the background broadcasts the Apollo 10 space mission and the moderator announces the successful landing of the astronauts: "Colonel Tom Stafford, Commanders John Young and Eugene Cernan appear to be in excellent condition after their splashdown in the Pacific today, where they were picked up by the USS Princeton" (00:02:18-31). This could be seen as a cinematic technique to set the timeframe of the plot. The black-and-white images and the broadcast of this specific space mission dates the scene clearly at the end of the 1960s (the Apollo 10 mission ended on May 26, 1969). Taken as a metaphor for Danny's situation, however, the TV broadcast obtains another meaning in foreshadowing the plot that is about to unfold. Like the astronaut, Danny has finally landed at a place where he belongs now that he arrived in Christopher Street. After a short encounter with a trans* person (Queen Tooey), the street youth Ray enters the diner, starts a conversation with Danny and directly addresses his background. He assumes that Danny comes from a pea farm in Kansas and that his father is a preacher, but he also knows that Danny has not voluntarily left home:

> *Ray:* I already got you all figured out, okay? [...] Let's see, grew up in Kansas, right? On like a pea farm, or whatever, kissing goats. And your daddy was the preacher, but secretly a little whoopsie, right? And Mama probably baked apple pies and wrote your name in your underwear with tiny thread. [...] Once you realized what you really were, you had to run away from home to find your ass, and quick.
> *Danny:* And what am I?
> *Ray:* Well, you certainly didn't come to Christopher Street for the pizza.
> Danny: I didn't run away from home. Kicked out.
> *Ray:* Hey look, run away, kicked out – all that really matters is now you're here, right? And you don't know what is what. Welcome to New York and keep up.
> (00:05:35-00:06:01)

The conversation unsettles Danny at first, but it immediately conveys a sense of mutual understanding and thus belonging. Ray then introduces Danny to the group of street youths: "Danny, meet my little ladies of the night. Queen Conga, straight off the boat from some godforsaken island. And this Beatle groupie over here, that's Quiet Paul. And the chicken bone is Little Lee. [...] And this pathetic creature is Orphan Annie" (00:06:07-36). From the beginning on, the street youths are depicted as rebellious. They are a group of queers with diverse backgrounds, from

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white lower-class to Latin and African American, who are homeless and earn their living by prostitution. When Annie compares Danny with a boy named Justin, who seems to have been Ray's lover but disappeared, Ray attacks Annie with a broken bottle: "Don't you fucking talk about Justin, you little bitch" (00:06:45-49). Danny seems intimidated by this sudden outburst of aggression and is about to leave when Bob Kohler (Patrick Garrow), an older homosexual and friend of the group, interferes to de-escalates the situation. This first encounter shows how rough their life on the streets is. Due to his midwestern, white, middle-class background, Danny seems to be way better off than the others, but by including him to the group, the film suggests that they are all the same, no matter where they are from. They all landed on the streets because of their sexual identity and, hence, have made the same or at least similar experiences.

However, Danny's set of values does not fit the morally reprehensive behaviour of the street youths. They are stealing, shoplifting, and show no respect for authorities. After his initiation to the group, Danny immediately gets to know their criminal side and does not seem to approve of it. Queen Conga, one of the gang members that especially acts against Danny's moral values, steals a hat by throwing in a shop's window with a brick and just takes the hat. Danny is horrified while the others are only amused about this criminal act (cf. 00:07:53-00:08:01). Conga poses with the hat and the others cheer her on, leading to a campy presentation of their group, who has a theme song: "We are the baddest girls, we wear our hair in curls. We wear no underwear, we show out pubic hair" (00:08:10-20). The people passing them are shocked by such an open display of queerness. Danny seems equally shocked, if not disgusted. When the police are called to the scene, the gang runs away laughing (00:08:21-26). Moreover, they steal food from the supermarket in the Village after they just escaped the police (cf. 00:08:29-59). Even though Dany does not approve of these acts of delinquency, he seems to relax when they sit together and share the stolen food. He is amused by their effeminate manner while they are talking about their idols Judy Garland, the protagonist of *The Wizard of Oz*, and Barbara Streisand (00:09:03-26). Later in the plot, Ray smuggles him into the cramped hostel room they share at times, but he hesitates to enter the room, shocked by the sight of the filthy room with around ten people sleeping on the floor (00:25:46-00:26:34). This sight clashes with his middle-class background. Clearly, his set of morals and his lived reality differs from theirs to a great extent

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Due to their different set of moral values, Danny soon turns his back on his new group of friends, seeking more adequate role models. Ray's counterpart on the side of the assimilationists is Trevor, an older homosexual Danny meets on his first night at the Stonewall Inn. Trevor is a member of the Mattachine Society, an organisation formed in the 1950s to improve the rights of homosexuals in legal ways. In opposition to the street youths, they are portrayed by the film as respectable, white, middle-class males – 'the normal gays,' as Steven Seidman would call them (cf. Seidman *Closet* 14) – who want to assimilate to dominant heteronormative society. Like Ray, Trevor seems to know all about Danny right after they met: "you don't seem like the type of guy who wants to hang out at the Stonewall and turn tricks with your girlfriends" (00:59:24-31). Even more so, Trevor immediately thinks he knows what is best for Danny and that he does not "have the right friends" (00:59:43-45). He invites him to the meetings of the Mattachine Society, "an organization that fights for gay rights. Take Stonewall, for example. You know it's run by crooks who rip off and poison gay men. We deserve the right to own our own clubs" (00:48:06-23). Since Danny already questions the street youth's lifestyle, he decides to join the Mattachine meeting. When he arrives, an older white man in a suit is standing on the stage under a banner with the slogan "Gay is Good" on it. He explains the Society's agenda:

> More and more, we are seeing that homosexuals will no longer tolerate discrimination. People will recognize that gay is good. The American people will start to understand that firing us for being gay is just plain wrong. And that is the day we are working for. But we have to fight in a peaceful way and resist the radicalism that I see starting to take hold in some quarters. Don't forget, wearing a suit and tie will make them understand you're just like them. That's how we win. (01:04:05-43)

The man on stage is Frank Kameny (Arthur Holden) who co-founded the Mattachine Society in Washington D.C. (cf. Carter 38) after he lost his job as an astronomer with the U.S. government (cf. Carter 21). He famously coined the slogan "Gay is Good" (cf. Carter 255), which is shown on a banner behind him. The film reflects the Mattachine Society's educational approach towards the heterosexual majority of American society as well as their assimilationist views. Central to the assimilationist position was the endeavour "to win acceptance by the dominant culture" (Warner *Trouble* 50). Portraying Kameny as rather conservative in his suit and tie, the film seems to take a critical stance towards this agenda. When Danny seeks

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advice from Kameny and asks him about possible career options at NASA, Kameny disenchants Danny's dreams of becoming an astronomer: "You can't be a homosexual and work for the government. You're gonna have to find something else. We're not there yet, I'm sad to say. Sorry. But we will be. It's a long journey, a long road" (01:05:14-32). Upset by this discouraging outlook, Danny storms out of the room but is stopped by Trevor. He tries to explain that it will take some time until equality will be achieved and that "[p]eople like Frank Kameny have been fighting this battle for years. No one has done as much for our cause as he has" (01:05:47-56"). Danny, however, is furious:

> What, by wearing a suit and tie? Come on. Is that really what you want? What, to blend in? I mean, we are different, right? You know, I'm beginning to realize just how different we really are. [...] You know, I'm getting to really feel like – like I just want to break something, you know? (01:05:57-01:06:09)

After his experiences with Joe and his family, Danny does not want to blend in anymore and suppress his homosexuality. While the assimilationists highlight their similarity to heteronormative society in order to be accepted, he emphasises their difference. Moreover, they insist on peaceful protest whereas Danny is so infuriated that he wants 'to break something' and thereby indicates his disposition to rebellion. Not only does this reflect one of the central issues between the position of assimilation versus rebellion that is in many ways still prevailing in political debates about sexual equality today, but it also shows Danny's youthfully rebellious attitude that is typical for a coming-of-age story. The older generation represented by Kameny and Trevor doubt that "rioting [i]s an effective or desirable form of protest" (Stein 10). By depicting Danny's anger at these "politics of respectability" (Stein 10), the film tries to convey the impression that he does not share this view.

Seemingly contradictive to that, however, he accepts Trevor's invitation to dinner and begins a love affair with him. He even moves in with Trevor right after their first night spent together, takes up a job at the local mini market to pay rent, attends evening classes to graduate from high school and, thereby, assimilates himself. This upsets his friends, especially Ray. When Danny picks up his belongings to move in with Trevor, Ray confronts him with his irritation:

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> Let me tell you something. The difference between us – I don't have a choice. And you just wanted a little time slumming in the streets. What, so tricking was just an adventure in your story? I know what this is. This is a little funny story about Ray. And Lee, and Paul, and Cong, and Annie! Funny fucking story, isn't it? (01:12:24-48)

Here, the film reveals the main criticism of assimilation: the "claim to normality justifies social integration but only for normal-looking and acting gays and lesbians" (Seidman *Closet* 14) which creates a "hierarchy of respectability" (Warner *Trouble* 49). Through Ray's condemnation of Danny's behaviour, the film seems to denounce assimilationist strategies. At the same time, Danny sympathises with this lifestyle, even though he misses his friends (cf. 01:17:50-58). The film thereby "unintentionally captures its own deceit" (Jung n. pag.): "The street life was always a kind of drag for Danny, who, actually, would be attending Columbia in the fall. He hustles just long enough to work through his identity and start the movement before going off to live the good life in Morningside Heights" (Jung n. pag.).[35]

Moreover, it shows the instability of Danny's identity, since he is still torn between assimilation and rebellion. Eventually, his inner conflict culminates with the climax of the film. Coming home one night after work, Trevor seems to have gone out. Danny decides to go to the Stonewall and finds his lover dancing closely with another young man to the same song he had put on for Danny the night they met. Danny watches them as they eventually even kiss. This infuriates Danny who rushes off to pack up his things in Trevor's apartment and is about to leave New York when he is suddenly kidnapped. After an action-like rescue by Ray, he is happily reunited with his friends at the Stonewall Inn, where soon the riots will begin. During another unannounced raid, a crowd of patrons, bystanders and passers-by gathers in front of the bar. As the police violently arrests some of the gays, the crowd grows more and more angry and some of them start shouting and booing, some of them even pushing the officers who try to arrest patrons. Suddenly, Conga retrieves a brick from his bag: "I've had it with this bullshit" (01:35:14-16). Danny is immediately alarmed and tries to keep Conga from throwing the brick: "No, you're gonna make it worse!" (01:35:17-18). But Conga is furious and replies fiery:

35 Morningside Heights is the neighbourhood in Manhattan where the Columbia University campus is located and is considered a white island in the midst of urban districts inhabited by people of colour.

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> How can it get worse? This was the mob, and those fucking money grabbing pigs! A society hating and oppressing us for being gay! And still want to be polite? 'Cause it's gonna take away your precious fucking scholarship if you get arrested? Come on! (01:35:18-33)

Right in this moment, Trevor enters the scene and sees Danny with the brick in his hand: “Danny? What are you doing? No, that's not the way, Danny” (01:35:36-44). Trevor, of all people, wanting to stop Danny infuriates him to such an extent that he eventually throws the brick with a loud roar. Followed by the eyes of everyone present, the brick darts through the air and smashes one of the windows of the Stonewall Inn. Danny turns around and screams: “No, Trevor, it's the only way! Gay power! Come on!” (01:35:52-56). The crowd follows suit: chanting “Gay power” as well, they start throwing bottles and stones and attack the police officers, eventually pushing them inside the Stonewall. By this act of rebellion, Danny finally seems to have resolved his inner conflict and chosen his side. From being silenced to his forced coming out, from being called faggot to shouting ‘Gay Power,’ Danny’s coming-of-age is brought full circle. Not only has he emancipated himself from the oppressive structures of heteronormative society, but also from the assimilationists. Thereby, the film seems to take a critical stance towards assimilation. However, by telling Danny’s and not Ray’s story, it does in fact exactly what it seems to criticise. Making the beginning of one of the most important events in the history of the gay liberation movement – as the film wants the viewer to believe – a personal matter of a white, cis-gendered, middle-class male, marginalises those who were the actual initiators of the riots. Even though the film tries to criticise assimilation by having the central character turn against this position, it establishes an assimilationist undercurrent in its meaning that is fully revealed in the formal-aesthetic composition of the film.

Milk’s Self-Empowerment

Before his career as a gay rights activist and politician, Milk was a closeted homosexual. This is made obvious in one of the first scenes of the film, when he picks up his later partner Scott Smith (James Franco) in a dimly lit subway station (cf. 00:04:24-00:05:59). The symbolism could not be more blatant at this point: the homosexual part of Milk’s identity literally has to stay underground and cannot be lived out on the surface. For this

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reason, he issues a warning to Smith after they have had sex in Milk's apartment:

> You can't respond to just every strange man that picks you up on a subway platform. It's too dangerous. […] The New York Police are the toughest. They're arrogant and they're everywhere. I'll show you all the cruising spots, but you have to be very careful, little Scotty-san. […] I'm just discreet. I know a lot of people. If they see me, I could lose my job. (00:06:44-00:07:14)

Even though the comment is meant ironic and playful, it also shows Milk's initial fear of severe discrimination and creates an atmosphere of anxiety that will prevail throughout most parts of the film. This impression is enhanced by the scenes that precede the "subway station encounter" (Scott *Freedom Fighter* n. pag.). As Anthony O. Scott points out in his film review,

> we have already seen real-life news video of the aftermath of Milk's assassination, as well as grainy photographs of gay men being rounded up by the police. These images don't spoil the intimacy between Harvey […] and Scott Smith […]. Rather, the constant risk of harassment, humiliation and violence is the defining context of that intimacy. (Scott *Freedom Fighter* n. pag.)

At the same time, the scene indicates that change is about to come, not only for him but for the whole gay minority. Amused by Milk's seemingly outdated closetedness, Smith points out "Oh, you're one of those. Well, I think you need to find a new scene. Some new friends" (00:07:14-22). Then the plot jumps to their relocation to San Francisco together, where a gay neighbourhood is just about to be established: "the place where everyone wanted to go. To drop out, to fall in love. […] The new place for us refugees was a little Irish Catholic neighbourhood in the Eureka Valley, six blocks square, the Castro" (00:08:12-38). Calling the gays who moved to San Francisco "young people who were looking for a home away from home" (00:14:01-04), Milk generates a comparison with 'refugees.' The phrase emphasises the feeling of being uprooted and that "there is no place in this great country for them, no place in this world" (00:44:04-11). Having finally left the closet, Milk stresses the importance for homosexuals to be out and proud and it will become his major weapon against the Briggs Initiative. The following paragraphs will focus on the positive depiction of the social practice of coming/ being out of the closet on the screen by showing how the film draws a negative picture of the less radical 'gay establishment' of

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San Francisco who prefer to blend in with heteronormative structures and by discussing the liberating effects visibility and shamelessness have for the gays' lives as they reverse the heteronormative mechanisms of marginalisation and shaming.

"The meaning of the closet – of being in or and out – changed dramatically with the gay liberation movement" (Valocchi 760) and became a controversial issue amongst different groups of homosexuals during the 1970s. Fearing severe social and, in part, legal punishment, many "activists were very sensitive to the potential risks of coming out which included job loss, family rejection, and public stigma" (Fetner 19). However, it is also "bound up with the whole process whereby persons come to identify themselves as homosexual, and recognize thereby their position as part of a stigmatized and half-hidden minority" (Altmann 118). This process of self-identification, hence, helped to create a social group who became able to resist their oppression. Thus, coming out became a "radical political act" (Fetner 19-20) of self-empowerment, since it

> was both a political act of resistance and an important personal transformation. Incorporating the feminist critique that the personal is political, liberation ideology held that to reveal one's true self to the outside world is the first step in creating a world that values sexual difference. (Fetner 19)

Contrasting the views of the more reserved 'gay establishment,' represented by David Goodstein (Zvi Howard Rosenman), owner of the gay magazine *The Advocate*, and his partner Rick Stokes (Stephen Spinella), and Milk's radical ideas about the political and social liberation of homosexuals, the film emphasises the divide running through the LGBTQIAN+ minority. When Milk runs for city supervisor the first time, Goodstein refuses to give Milk an endorsement in his magazine. He explains his decision as follows:

> I worked for a financial institution in New York. I was very discreet. One night I went to the Metropolitan Opera, II Trovatore, Verdi. I was sitting in a box, next to my lover. Someone spotted us. Next day I was fired. So, I decided to do something about it. Came out here to San Francisco, I bought *The Advocate*. I use my money and my influence in very subtle and quiet ways to do what I can. (00:24:04-29)

As the quote shows, Goodstein has made the experience of being outed, which had severe consequences for his career. For this reason, he decided to take a coveted role in gay liberation and thus, from inside the closet.

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Milk's radical views and his openness about his sexuality, in contrast, discomfort Goodstein and Stokes. They fear that entering politics as an open homosexual would be going too far and that, thereby, they might lose their influence entirely. Thus, they advise Milk to scale down his expectations:

> *Milk:* We need one of our own in office.
> *Stokes:* Harvey, you can't demand acceptance overnight!
> *Milk:* Why not?
> *Goodstein:* The more 'out' you make us, the more you incite them. Harvey, step back and quiet down. (00:25:14-26)

This, however, infuriates Milk: "You're suggesting we should go back in the closet? Is that what you're saying? I spent more years in the closet than I care to remember. [...] And I'm not asking for anyone's acceptance. I don't have time" (00:25:26-39). The film communicates their different approaches to their own sexuality through the statements they make and emphasises their ideological alienation through the costume design in this scene. Goodstein and Stokes are both wearing suits and ties, accentuating their bourgeois attitudes. As Dustin Lance Black points out, "[t]hese two characters are a compression of most of the leadership of the gay movement and liberal establishment of the time" (Black and van Sant 106). In the portrayal of Milk, on the contrary, Black wanted "a modern audience to understand how radical [his] ideas were at the time" (Black and van Sant 106). Thus, he is shown in tight jeans and wearing a ponytail, illustrating his affiliation with the hippie movement. Moreover, Milk's young boyfriend Smith swims nakedly in the pool before joining them at the table. He sits there still stark naked, which seemingly unsettles Stokes who tries hard not to look at him. Goodstein's and Stokes' inhibitions and the nonchalance both Milk and Smith evince regarding their sexuality are thereby juxtaposed. For them, assimilation is the only viable tactic to forge gay rights, while Milk sees the self-empowering potential in being out and proud. Their assimilative attitude becomes even more obvious later in the film, when the threat posed by Proposition 6 makes Milk form an alliance with them and the democratic party establishment. Stokes and Goodstein have organised a meeting with the democratic congressman Phil Burton (Robert Chimento), whose party has designed a flyer against the Briggs Initiative reading "Proposition 6 is an affront to human rights. An invasion of the state into the private lives of California citizens" (01:08:33-39). Milk is bewildered that they try to oppose the threat of Proposition 6, "without a single mention of the word 'gay' on the entire flyer" (01:08:40-43). Reveal-

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ing his restrained strategy once again, Goodstein emphasises: “By design, Harvey” (01:08:43-44) and Burton adds: “With the heat bearing down on your movement right now, we feel it's best to dodge the gay bullet. Go for the human rights angle” (01:08:46-52). Despite the formality of a political meeting such as this, Milk gives vent to his anger about this strategy, which results in using explicit slang: “maybe we should just roll over and make it easier for Briggs to fuck us in the ass” (01:08:24-27). Making his opinion of the flyer very clear, he adds: “People need to know who it is that's being affected. You need at least one old queer on this flyer. [...] This is shit. This is shit and masturbation. It's just a coward's response to a dangerous threat” (01:08:52-01:09:06), while ostentatiously putting the flyer into the chimney fire. By giving a negative portrayal of the more moderate opinion that coming out could harm more than help, the film follows Milk in taking an unequivocal stand on this issue.

To emphasise this impression, the scene is visually juxtaposed to the subsequent one, showing Milk, his friends and other young activists gathering at Cleve Jones' place to discuss their strategy against the Briggs Initiative. In contrast to Goodstein and his peers who “don't want to change, they want to stay in the past” (01:09:35-37), as Jones complains, the young gays are, according to Milk, “organizers and fighters, not politicians” (01:09:23-27). This view suggests that the young activists really want to get out and actively fight for their rights, while members of the older generation, who are involved in politics, wish to remain in the closet. Surprised to find Smith at the gathering after their breakup, Milk says: “I thought you got out of politics” (01:12:32-35) to which Smith simply replies: “Politics. Not the movement” (01:12:35-38). Thereby, the film draws a line between politics and activism. The mise-en-scène in these two consecutive scenes emphasises this contrast in their approach. While the place where the politicians meet looks chic and bourgeois and they are all wearing suits and ties sitting in front of a fireplace, Jones' house is very crowded with people sitting on the floor, not wearing suits, but jeans and sweatshirts. Moreover, the shots are taken in low key lighting, underlining the subversive atmosphere. In this surrounding, Milk works up his courage to suggest a new idea for fighting Proposition 6:

> We have to let them know who we are. Everybody has to come out. Across the entire state, no matter where they live [...] If we're going to beat Prop 6, we tell all of them to come out. Every gay lawyer, teacher, doctor, dog catcher. We have to leave the ghetto. We have to let all those

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> people out there know that they know one of us. And if somebody doesn't want to step out of the closet, we open the door for them. (01:10:16-47)

Even amongst the young activists, this idea comes across as rather radical and they express their concerns. Jim Rivaldo (Brandon Boyce), for instance, points out the dangers of Milk's plan: "Harvey, that could be really, really dangerous. I mean, there's such a thing as a right to privacy" (01:10:52-56), while Smith interposes that they will not be able to convince all of California since "[t]he whole state isn't San Francisco" (01:10:48-51). Milk, however, sticks to his argument:

> I'm not saying this as a Supervisor, but privacy is the enemy. And if you want real political power, if that's what you want, try telling the truth for a change. All right? Starting here. If there's anyone in this room, right now, who hasn't told their families, their friends, their employers, do it now. [...] They vote for us two to one. If they know, they know one of us. (01:11:01-43)

When Dick Pabich (Joseph Cross), one of the young activists, admits that his "dad doesn't know yet" (01:11:32-34), Milk urges him to come out and holds out a telephone to him. Even though he doesn't "think that's such a good idea," Dick agrees to call his dad. This leads Smith to think that Milk is going a step too far. On their way out after the meeting, he takes him aside asking him "What the hell was that in there? [...] Those are kids in there. You're asking them to lose their families. [...] That's fucking insane." (01:12:39-56). Moreover, he accuses him of being a hypocrite: "You were the biggest closet case in New York. You asked me and all your boyfriends to keep our traps shut. [...] How many times did I have to listen to calls to Mom, where you denied my existence? And you want to be normal like anybody. More than anybody" (01:12:56-01:13:17). However, Milk has a different opinion: "If their families don't love them for who they are, who they really are, then they should lose them" (01:12:49-54). Seen from this perspective, it seems that Smith misconceives the fact that Milk does not want to adapt anymore to *pass as* normal, but to really *be* normal, which means to make the heteronormative society accept him the way he is, even if that means that he is losing beloved people. Furthermore, he wants to raise awareness for the circumstances that homosexuals are indeed already part of society despite being marginalised and "if straight people understood how many gays they already knew and accepted on a personal level, their abstract bigotry would be significantly undermined" (O'Hehir

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n. pag.). Thus, in the campaign against the Briggs Initiative coming out becomes a powerful political strategy, which is why Milk insists: "What we need is exposure!" (01:20:39-41). Through this depiction, the film emphasises Milk's view that the social practice of coming out helps to make homosexuals visible and becomes a tool to transgress heteronormative structures. By this act of self-naming and, hence, self-empowerment LGBTQIAN+ individuals no longer accept the shaming heteronormative society is eager to impose on them because of their sexual and gendered identities. Since "[p]owerlessness is seen as part of the mechanism of invisibility" (Russo 129), visibility becomes a mechanism to "challenge the status quo" (Russo 129). Thus, the film seeks to paint a positive picture of homosexuals who "no longer sit quietly in the closet" (00:42:58-00:43:02). Following this perspective, Milk prompts gays to embrace the possibility to make their homosexuality publicly visible throughout the film.

Moreover, the film excludes the part of Milk's life in which he is still closeted. The plot sets in at the most important turning point in his life, when he, "[f]orty years old and [hasn't] done a thing [he's] proud of" (00:07:34-39), realised that he "need[s] a change" (00:07:25-27). Thus, the film suggests that his 'real life' begins once having decided to come out of the closet and embrace his homosexuality. This change is additionally emphasised by showing Milk's and Smith's move to San Francisco. Driving in their car, Milk seems to leave his old life behind entirely and is moving towards something new. Once settled in San Francisco, Milk develops a "burning desire to lead all gay Americans out of the closet" (Burns 318), realising that queer visibility is a powerful social weapon and will eventually help them to make a change. He explains to Smith, "[p]olitics is theatre. It doesn't matter so much about winning. You make a statement. You say, 'I'm here!' You get their attention" (00:17:14-22). Not only does the film suggest that gays who are out and proud get more attention, but it also shows the empowering and thus liberating effect this practice can have. The film portrays different levels of gay visibility, ranging from the exchanges of affection in public, the inclusion of authentic footage of celebrating gay men flogging the streets of the Castro during gay rights parades (00:12:55-00:13:16), to sex scenes between Milk and his partners Smith and Lira.

Besides visibility, the social practice of coming out evokes the notion of shamelessness. Since gay shame is a tool of social control employed by heteronormative structures within society (cf. Hotz-Davies 169), homosexuals who refuse to feel ashamed for what they are and make their homosexuality

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visible actively defy to conform to the heteronorm and thus this form of social control. This is especially emphasised in the film when depicting the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade. The scenes are a mix of restaged and archival footage (cf. 01:29:15-01:30:02). A crowd of around “375.000 – the largest assemblage of people that would meet in one place in San Francisco during the entire 1970s” (Shilts 263), is shown marching the city centre and waving banners with slogans like “Dade County means fight back”, “Why Wichita?”, or “I teach Spanish not sex” on them. Milk, who had recently been elected to the board of city supervisors, is shown amongst them. Based on an authentic photograph of him, he is depicted sitting on top of an open convertible car, waving a bouquet of flowers. He is wearing an equally expressive slogan on his T-shirt: “I’ll never go back”. Even though he has received an anonymous death threat right before the parade, reading: “You get the first bullet the minute you stand at the microphone” (01:30:06-09), he is not discouraged from taking an active part in the celebrations. Despite the efforts of his worried friends, he is not to be stopped from entering the stage to address the cheering crowd. The film quotes parts of a speech in which he “made a powerful appeal to closeted gays to come out to their families, friends and co-workers, so the straight world might stop demonizing an abstract idea” (Ebert n. pag.) at the Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1978:

> My name is Harvey Milk and I'm here to recruit you! I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve your democracy! Brothers and sisters, you must come out! Come out to your parents, come out to your friends, if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, come out to your fellow workers. Once and for all, let's break down the myths and destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake, for their sake. For the sake of all the youngsters who've been scared by the votes from Dade to Eugene. (01:30:35-00:31:23).

Hence, coming out becomes a mechanism to transgress the heteronormative structures and ultimately also to fight for their rights. Milk

> wants to recruit them into the politics of democracy, to persuade them that the stigma and discrimination they are used to enduring quietly and even guiltily can be addressed by voting, by demonstrating, by claiming the share of power that is every citizen’s birthright and responsibility. (Scott *Freedom Fighter* n. pag.)

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As the film shows, this open display of their sexual liberation clearly offends the moral sensibilities of more conservative citizens of San Francisco. Pointing at the extent of nudity, and thus, at the shamelessness amongst the demonstrators, Supervisor White comments the parade in an interview as follows:

> Well, I see naked men walking around, naked women walking around, which doesn't bother me as far as my personal standards of nudity, but it's not proper. It wouldn't be allowed for any other parade in San Francisco, and it should not be allowed for the Gay Parade. (01:32:53-01:33:09)

While he is speaking, the crowd can still be heard in the background, cheering "Harvey, Harvey, Harvey!" (01:32:53-01:33:09), conveying the impression that White is the one in the marginalised position this time. The scene reveals that the opponents of gay equality are no longer liable to decide for the homosexuals what is 'proper' and what is not, since their shaming loses its power of social control. Through visibility and shamelessness, the failure to conform to the norm is turned into the conscious decision to "[n]ever blend in" (00:59:05-06). The film depicts the parade as the most obvious demonstration of gay pride, "a confident show of strength" (Shilts 263) and, hence, an achievement to transgress the heteronormative structures. Interestingly, White especially takes offense at the unfairness he claims to perceive between the treatment of the gay liberation parade and other parades in the city, instead of referring to the indecency of gays displaying their homosexuality openly in public. This portrayal reveals the difference between the representation of oppressive heteronormative structures and homophobia, and the portrayal of Milk's assassin White. Instead of presenting him as the clear-cut homophobic villain, the film seeks to scrutinise his motives for killing Milk by tracing his development from a rather sympathetic albeit unconfident character in the beginning to the murderer he becomes in the end. Thereby, the film unravels the complicated power structures working within the system of hegemonic masculinity. White's development becomes symbolic for the deep anxiety many men sense due to the evolvement of alternative forms of masculinity. Emancipation in this sense, is defined by a constant negotiation process between heterosexual and other forms masculinity, which try to shift power structures. Accordingly, Milk's emancipation is narrated along the line of the emancipation of the gay liberation movement and their empowerment. By insisting on the strategy of coming out of the closet, he appeals to

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members of the gay community who might already be able to refuse to feel ashamed for what they are and make their homosexual identity publicly visible as a mechanism to eventually transgress the heteronormative structures and fight for their rights.

3.3 Between Authentication and Intimacy: Queer or Homonormative Gaze?

Exclusion in *Howl*

The formal-aesthetic composition of *Howl*, as Bruhn and Gjelsvik argue, "fits the transgressive political and sexual content of the poem" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349). As an experimental film that circulates between the genres of biopic and literary adaption, "an exploration of the relationship and transmutation between visual and verbal images" (Marcus 47) seems productive when analysing the gaze that the film establishes. In order to do so, I will focus on the narrative strand of Ginsberg's life presented in flashbacks marked as past events by their black-and-white colour scheme. Nonetheless, some examples from other narrative strands will also play an important role here, for instance when the animation is used to enhance certain aspects of Ginsberg's experiences. Therefore, I draw special attention to the symbolical use of eyes, glasses, cameras, photographs, windows, and mirrors which are typical stylistic devices for distortion the film makes use of. When examining the selected scenes, I presume that the characters' gazes within the film as well as the governance of the audiences' gazes has three effects which are closely connected to the question whether it is a queer, gay, or homonormative gaze and thus in how far homonormative structures might be enforced. First of all, the viewer is invited to identify with Ginsberg and perceives the events shown from his perspective. Secondly, Ginsberg's gaze in the film serves as a marker for his exclusion from heteronormative society, which is made very clear in the representation of (hetero)sexual intercourse. And thirdly, the gaze might also lead to the exclusion of women from the narrative.

The viewer is put alternately in the position of an observer or participant of the scenes (later the viewer is also taking on Ginsberg's perspective). Often reverse angle shots are used, resulting in the first effect of the gaze, namely a high degree of identification offered. The film begins with staging Ginsberg's first reading of the poem 'Howl' in San Francisco in 1956 and

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the camera already establishes a close proximity between the poet, his audience on screen and the viewer watching the film (00:00:15-42). This effect is achieved by switching from a close up of Ginsberg's face to the faces in the audience to a medium long shot from within the audience, suggesting the viewer is sitting with the other members in the fictive audience listening to Ginsberg's reading. The intimacy the film thereby establishes matches the intimate revelation that the film grants the poem and thus introduces Ginsberg as the central character of the narrative. This is further enhanced by the first scene after the title sequence showing Ginsberg supposedly in his own home being asked questions by an interviewer off-screen. The viewer is at the same time observer but also part of the scene, again switching from an observing position next to the interviewer to a position that (almost) takes the perspective of the interviewer (00:02:53-00:04:04). The film suggests that the viewer is learning the whole truth by becoming one with the interviewer as Ginsberg recounts the story of his life. Furthermore, by the use of authenticity devices such as authentic newspaper articles (e.g. 00:01:43-00:02:29, 00:07:34-50), photographs (e.g. 00:25:17; 00:32:54-57) letters (e.g. 00:31:22-00:32:25) and video footage (e.g. 00:25:41-48, 00:21:59-00:22:19) of that time,[36] the film connotes historical accuracy – alluring the viewer into believing that this is how the 'real' Ginsberg perceived the events happening in his 'real' life. This effect is foregrounded in later interview sequences, when Ginsberg is lying on his couch (e.g. 00:17:45, 01:06:47). Again, the film creates a special intimacy with the viewer, "one that allows Ginsberg, on the brink of turning 30, to speak for himself – out of the past, directly to us" (B. R. Rich "Howl" n. pag.). These scenes are highly evocative of a psychoanalytical session, except that the analyst, who is supposed to sit behind the patient's head in classical psychoanalysis, is not to be seen. The reason for this seems to be that the viewer is still in the position of the interviewer/analyst who cannot be seen. At the same time this setup suggests an even closer scrutiny of Ginsberg's inner life, his thoughts, and feelings, as he would presumably tell his therapist the unadorned truth. Even more so, his narration is open to the analysis and interpretation of the viewer/analyst, who seeks to unearth hidden truths. This depiction is adding to the impression that the film seeks to build intimacy with the viewer to whom Ginsberg opens up for scrutiny.

36 Moreover, as Bruhn and Gjelsvik argue, this layering of different media indicates the superimposition of different levels of interpretation the film offers making it a palimpsest of meaning (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349).

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As has been argued in the preceding chapters on *Howl*, the revelation of the artist's feelings and his coming out as homosexual is the film's idea of what Ginsberg tried to convey through his poetry.

In this sense, windows as presented in the film gain special symbolical importance as a narrative device: they illustrate a liminal space between inside and outside which can be read as a metaphor for the inside world of Ginsberg, his feelings or soul, and the outside world of reality (cf. Noll Brinkmann 10). One of the first shots that includes a window is the introduction of the animation. Ginsberg is shown sitting at his desk – typewriter in front of him – contemplatively turning his head towards the window which comes into view and shows the animated world of the poem outside (00:18:16-19). Through this depiction the film issues an invitation to participate in Ginsberg's writing process and breaks down the distinction between the illusionary world of literature and 'reality.' At the end of *Howl*, cut in with scenes showing the judge pronounce the sentence for the trial about the poem, the viewer is presented with several shots that show Ginsberg looking out of the window, excluding what he might see outside (1:07:07, 01:08:09, 01:08:13, 01:09:02, 1:09:06). As Christine Noll Brinkmann assumes, showing a character behind the window glass is an aesthetic method to emphasise the character's individual perception and suggests subjectivity (cf. Noll Brinkmann 11). Moreover, she interprets window shots as prompting the viewer to look behind the curtain and share the character's experience (cf. Noll Brinkmann 11). Consequently, the scene showing Ginsberg behind the window stirs the viewer's empathy for him while he awaits the outcome of the trial. This effect is reinforced by the last black-and-white shot that depicts Ginsberg's past and the process of coming out. After having finished writing the poem, he is looking into the mirror, gazing right into his own eyes, recognising himself (01:11:50-01:12:02). For Noll Brinkmann, the look into the mirror implies a very private moment for the character, who is duplicated for the viewer and split into a real and a surreal persona (cf. Noll Brinkmann 18). She concludes that the reflection in the mirror reveals the 'true' self of the character (cf. Noll Brinkmann 18). Having finished writing the poem, Ginsberg has not only revealed his 'true' identity to the viewer, which is emphasised by this final black-and-white mirror shot, but also opened a gay man's perspective on the world. He explains in one of the final interview scenes: "Homosexuality is a condition, and because it alienated me or set me apart from the beginning, it served as a catalyst for self-examination, or a detailed realization of my environment and the reasons why everyone

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else is different and why I am different" (01:13:37-01:14:04). The alienation provided him with a perception of the world that seems to match the 'gay sensibility,' "coloured, shaped, directed and defined by gayness" (Babuscio 40).

Figure 1: Looking into the mirror (01:11:56)

Moreover, a gay sensibility is created by a cinematography that presents Ginsberg as an autodiegetic narrator. The viewer is invited to follow Ginsberg's gaze and what he sees from his individual gay perspective by use of point-of-view-shots. This method is applied in the black-and-white flashbacks to make the viewer receive the impression that he or she gets to know Ginsberg's story from his point of view and simultaneously provides another layer of possible identification with the protagonist. This is reinforced by scenes that show his unrequited love interest in (often heterosexual) men. As has already been pointed out, the first man he falls in love with is his friend Jack Kerouac, who is also the first person he comes out to as homosexual. Not only is this made visible on the content level, but also through the aesthetic composition of the film. Kerouac is introduced in a scene that shows both men dancing with women, presumably during a double date in their university dorm (00:10:14-17). While Kerouac seems happy and relaxed dancing with a blond woman, Ginsberg is rather stiff and nervous. Never once looking at the woman he is dancing with, he continuously glances at Kerouac who starts kissing his date after a while. One shot positions a close-up of Ginsberg and his dance partner in the front right corner of the frame and in focus, while Kerouac and his dance partner are in the back left corner and slightly blurred. Ginsberg turns away from his dance partner and looks over his shoulder at his friend, who does not

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take notice of him at first (00:10:54). In the next shot, however, Ginsberg is not on-screen anymore and Kerouac, with his dance partner, takes centre presence in the frame. He in turn is now gazing right at Ginsberg, but then smiles and continues kissing the woman, whereas Ginsberg who reappears in the frame avoids kissing his dance partner, wriggling out of her embrace (00:11:02-11). The final shot of the scene shows all four asleep on a couch; Ginsberg takes little notice of his date, who lies at the left end of the couch on her own, while he is cuddled up with Kerouac, his head tenderly leaning on Kerouac's shoulder, who is at the same time holding the blond woman tightly in his arm on the other side (00:11:13-17). Even though there seems to be some affection that Kerouac holds for Ginsberg, he never requites Ginsberg's romantic feelings for him. In the next black-and-white scene that follows, they are sitting on a park bench and Ginsberg reads his poetry to Kerouac, desperately trying to get his attention and please him. However, Kerouac does not seem to be impressed (00:11:32-55). Since literary expression and sexuality are strongly connected in the film, Kerouac's ignorance of Ginsberg's poetry implies his sexual disinterest in Ginsberg. Parallel to the latter shot on the couch, the final shot of the park scenes shows Ginsberg looking enamoured at him, while Kerouac looks away (00:12:17).

The message that Ginsberg falls in love with the wrong men and his feelings are not requited is conveyed even stronger in the scenes with the second man he falls in love with: Neal Cassady. On his road trip with Cassady and his girlfriend, Ginsberg is shown taking a picture of the couple and asks them to kiss to get a good shot of them. Instead of making use of a point-of-view shot or eyeline match, the film here generates the viewer's identification with Ginsberg through mirroring. This means that the frame is composed in a way that the viewer is positioned directly opposite to the character he or she is supposed to identify with. First, the viewer is offered an extreme closeup of Cassady's and the woman's faces slightly blurred in the front and Ginsberg in the background but in focus, holding up the camera in between them (00:28:59). Then the camera zooms out until the viewer sees a long shot with Ginsberg standing in the middle of the frame, holding the camera ready to take a picture, while Cassady lifts his girlfriend to passionately kiss her. Watching his friends, Ginsberg lets the camera sink slowly, suddenly showing him gazing into the distance (00:28:59-00:29:32). This scene is symmetric to one of the following scenes depicting Ginsberg's and Cassady's first sexual contact (cf. 00:30:22-53). After having spent the night together, they meet in the kitchen. Looking deeply into each other's eyes, they seem to be on the verge of kissing when, instead, Cassady

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pushes Ginsberg down on his knees for oral sex (00:30:34-55). Imitating Ginsberg's perspective, the camera tilts up to Cassady's face in a close-up, his eyes are closed, and he seems to enjoy what the viewer is not able to see. Suddenly, Cassady's girlfriend enters the room with a bag of shopping items and looks at them in shock (00:30:58). This impression is visually supported by an eyeline match cut, first on Cassady's face and then to the woman and finally to a close-up on Ginsberg's face, who looks evenly shocked, but also guilty (00:30:59). The scene is put in stark contrast to the scene before when Ginsberg was watching the heterosexual couple kiss. The film visually connects the two scenes, marking the difference between 'normal' heterosexual romance and 'abnormal' homosexual lasciviousness. The first is socially acceptable by showing Cassady romantically lift up his girlfriend. Instead of being kissed, Ginsberg is pushed down for an unromantic lust-centred act of sexual relief which is condemned as socially inacceptable by Cassady's girlfriend. Moreover, the viewer is not mirrored as in the latter scene, but again takes Ginsberg's point-of-view. Thus, while the film invites the viewer to identify with Ginsberg, this scene foreshadows that a woman, or women in general, will sooner or later disturb their affair since Cassady does not unconditionally commit to their sexual relationship. For him, it is simply a time of exploring his sexuality in various ways, of playfully rebelling against the existing structures whereas Ginsberg seriously struggles to accept his homosexual identity within the surrounding

Figure 2: Hetero- vs. homosexual love (f.l.t.r.: 00:28:59, 00:29:32, 00:30:58, 00:30:59)

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heteronormative structures. Similar to the scenes with Kerouac, intimacy and identification is created by putting the viewer's gaze into Ginsberg's perspective through point-of-view-shots or mirroring.

Furthermore, the metaphorical use of eyes and glasses becomes particularly important. In the animation, the eye is used as a symbol for control through norms. This becomes noticeable in the representation of the 'Eye of Providence,' a symbol of Christian iconography that is situated above an unfinished pyramid of thirteen steps, part of the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States, and depicted, for instance, on the one-dollar bill. In the animation, the Eye of Providence, which usually signifies the eye of God, is enthroned on a pyramid filled with skulls and turns into a vulva, "the one-eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar" (00:18:35-42). The all-seeing eye of God controls the individual, while the state and thus laws ensure their confinement until death, which emphasises the homosexual's oppression by capitalism and heteronormativity. Other depictions of eyes in the animated sequences seem to highlight this impression, for instance when showing a mixture of the Eye of God and a khamsa (00:41:35), or Solomon's electroshock therapy when the lights above the operation table turn into the menacing eyes of Moloch (00:54:14-16).

Glasses, on the other hand, are used as a symbol of Ginsberg's subjective perspective. Everything he perceives in the film is perceived through his glasses. Of course, this is also historically accurate, since the 'real' Allen Ginsberg wore glasses as well. It is, hence, most interesting to look for instances in the film when he is not wearing his glasses. Most obviously this happens when he loses his glasses after a car accident, which is followed by his institutionalisation (00:23:18-42). Without his glasses, he is no longer able to perceive and interpret the world from his individual perspective. Thus, the loss of his glasses signifies the loss of his gay sensibility. As he explains, during this time he "was questioning [his] sense of reality versus the social sense that was being imposed on" him (00:28:04-09). He describes this as a problem for many homosexuals who developed "total self-rejection, a rejection of their own universe – lip service, actually, to supposedly acceptable social patterns" (00:28:18-31). Without his gay sensibility, however, his homosexual subjectivity and hence his identity is compromised. Whenever he is struggling most with his sexual identity, the film depicts him without his glasses. Thereby, the film enhances Ginsberg's feeling of being excluded from heteronormativity and thus from a 'normal' romantic life. When Cassady breaks up with him in a letter that is read out in a voice-over, the shots switch between Cassady driving in his car and Ginsberg

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reading the letter at home while sitting in an armchair, eventually taking off his glasses (00:31:32-00:32:23). In contrast to Cassady's literally suggested progress by showing him in motion, Ginsberg's immobility suggests the intractability of his situation as a gay man. Similarly, when working in marketing and arranging the poster for a *Pepsodent* advertisement, Ginsberg takes off his glasses, stressed and constrained by the heteronormative ideal the picture of the family in combination with the words "Bright!", "White!", "Wholesome!" and "Alluring!" connotes (00:43:57-00:44:00) – an ideal that he will never achieve even in his romantic relationship with Orlovsky. Thus, taking off his glasses marks his subjective disintegration. Emphasising the meaning of Ginsberg's glasses even further, they become a medium to enable a critical gaze at heteronormativity, thus turning his gay sensibility into something productive rather than impeding.

Not only do the aforementioned kissing scenes between his friends or lovers and their girlfriends suggest a level of identification with Ginsberg's gay perspective, but they also depict the negative impact of heteronormativity through his eyes by showing its exclusive mechanisms. The way the film composes Ginsberg's gaze in explicit sex-scenes suggests a deconstruction of heterosexual lovemaking. Thereby, the gaze "intentionally challenges normative viewing and hegemonic representation" (Tobin 64) and might, hence, be described as queer. Moreover, most of the heterosexual intercourse is depicted in the animation which in turn illustrates his poem and thus his subjective perception. One of the first sex-scenes in the animation shows a heterosexual couple pinwheeling through the sky. As the camera zooms out of this scene, the viewer sees that an unspecified figure is sitting inside a cinema and watches the sex-scene on the screen (00:19:10-17), thus interpreting it. The sense of being excluded from any form of 'normal' life is further emphasised by the animation sequence that sets in right after Cassady's breakup letter has been read out. It shows a heterosexual couple, probably Cassady and one of his many women, having sex in a car. The scene is shown from outside of the car and the frame of the front window emphasises the insuperability of sexual norms and the exclusion of homosexuality. Moreover, the couple is being watched from afar by the animated Ginsberg/the lyrical I of the poem with the sex scene being mirrored in his glasses (00:33:04-06). The gaze that is established in these two sequences, looking through the eyes of the homosexual, however, does not elevate the heterosexual lovemaking, but underscores the feeling of exclusion that the homosexual poet experiences. Thus, questioning heteronormative sexuality,

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these scenes receive a subversive efficacy, which is why the gaze established in these scenes can be described as queer.

Figure 3: Heterosex in cinema (00:19:16)

However, in a film about homosexual liberation, it is striking to find the depiction of explicit heterosexual intercourse to such an extent, while at the same time homosexual lovemaking is mostly precluded. As Bruhn and Gjelsvik point out "the film has its shortcomings: in particular, it could be said to weaken the poem's transgressive power, for instance through its rather safe depiction of drugs and sex" (Bruhn und Gjelsvik 351). Besides the aforementioned scene showing Ginsberg and Cassady on the brink of oral sex, there are two more scenes indicating homosexual intercourse that I would like to discuss here. Like the oral sex scene, which is not explicitly shown (and interrupted by Cassady's girlfriend), a sex scene between Ginsberg and Orlovsky is only hinted at. In a scene of perfect romance, Ginsberg is shown in a checked dressing gown, taking photos of the sleeping and bare-chested Orlovsky. The shots are again marked as Ginsberg's perspective by eyeline match cuts and the camera he uses, alternately depicting Ginsberg with his camera and the sleeping Orlovsky. After having taken some photos, Ginsberg crawls into bed with his lover, tenderly waking him and eventually they share a passionate kiss. This scene is repeatedly intercut on the one hand with a scene showing the couple out in the city, leaning on each other's backs and enjoying a happy relationship moment, holding hands and looking at each other romantically. On the other hand, the scene is intercut with the scene depicting Ginsberg working on the *Pepsodent* advertisement, suggesting that, even though "[t]he first time, [he] felt accepted in [his] life, completely" (00:45:03-11) by Orlovsky,

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he still felt repressed by the omnipresent structures of heteronormativity: "I was still trying to act normal. I was afraid I was crazy. I was sure that I was supposed to be heterosexual and that something was wrong with me" (00:45:25-38). The editing emphasises this triad of sex, love, and social norms that structure and complicate Ginsberg's life. Nonetheless, the sexual component is not explicitly shown by the film, even though it is hinted at by depicting Ginsberg's and Orlovsky's kiss in bed and concluding the scene with Ginsberg smoking a cigarette while the bare-chested Orlovsky is huddled up against him (00:55:56), implying the casual 'cigarette after sex.'

Despite the exclusion of explicit gay sex scenes, another scene insinuates homosexual intercourse by highly aestheticizing the act. The following lines of the poem are read out in the voiceover: "Who let themselves by fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists. Who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love" (00:14:57-00:15:19), while the animation shows the lyrical I of the poem first in a closeup on his face with another face right behind him, suggesting that an explicit illustration of the simultaneously recited lines is about to unfold. As the camera zooms out to reveal the whole scenery, however, the viewer sees two persons on a motorcycle, sitting closely behind each other. When the two motorcyclists are driving through a Caribbean woodland, the trees transform into erect penises ejaculating into the sky, which turns into fireworks, a classical Hollywood symbol for male orgasms. Even though the film might caricature Hollywood symbolism, this depiction seems oddly obfuscating, especially when considering that Ginsberg describes the recited lines of the poem as "the crucial moment of breakthrough" (01:09:18-23) while writing the poem. He emphasises that "[it] was an acknowledgement of the basic reality of homosexual joy" (01:10:02-07), which is attenuated by the depiction of the scene in the animation compared to the manifold explicit representations of heterosexual intercourse. Cassady, for example, is explicitly shown having sex with women in several parts of the animation. One instance is particularly striking as it depicts Cassady, "cocksmith and Adonis of Denver" (00:33:25-27) as he is called in the poem, driving in his car, which enters a tunnel. The tunnel leads through hills which turn into female thighs in between which a male body thrusts back and forth and eventually the heterosexual couple shoots through the sky like a firework disappearing behind hills (00:33:29-46). Again, the film makes use of the fireworks as a symbol for ejaculation but shows the sexual intercourse far more explicitly than in the example above. Moreover, the female body is sexualised to such a degree, that the gaze

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can only be described as a typical male gaze. Thus, these depictions of sexual intercourse in the film enforce rather than question heteronormative structures, eventually creating a homonormative aesthetic.

Figure 4: Homosexual intercourse (f.l.t.r.: 00:14:57, 00:15:08, 00:15:18, 00:15:19)

Ensuing from this, the final effect of the gaze is the exclusionary or negative representation of women in the film. Not only are women shown as nameless sex partners, but also as intruders of male homoeroticism. Except for Ginsberg's mother, who is only talked about, but not depicted, female characters in the film are largely characterised in a negative light. Ginsberg's, Kerouac's, and Cassady's dates or girlfriends do not even have names in the film, even though especially Cassady's girlfriend appears more than once and plays an influential part for the plot by intruding on their homosexual affair. The female characters are mostly not subjected to the male gaze, however, they are excluded by the narrative of the film. They become an interchangeable impersonalised mass that negatively influences Ginsberg's sexual and artistic development. On the one hand, this representation could allude to the universal and impalpable structures of heteronormativity, as they symbolise women *as such* hindering Ginsberg's identity formation as a gay man. On the other hand, however, the depiction of women as nameless bodies that serve only for the sexual gratification of men is a ubiquitous trope in heterosexist filmmaking. In a film with a homosexual protagonist, this derogatory representation of women might imply gay male

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misogyny. The depiction of the female as the abject other for the gay male has become a cliché in cultural representations addressed at a possibly male homosexual audience. Since this form of representation does not question the oppression of women, but instead fosters misogyny, I would argue that the gaze cannot be considered queer and must be described as a (gay) male gaze. In conclusion, the film does not present a consistent gaze that is either queer or gay, but rather shows certain ambiguities. While the film successfully invites the viewer to take on a queer perspective at times, it cannot cohesively maintain a queer gaze, especially when it comes to the depiction of women.

Straightwashing in *Stonewall*

By centralising a character like Danny, *Stonewall* promotes the most assimilated individual while marginalising queers who do not conform to normative standards of (white) homosexuality – especially men who do not adjust to the masculine gender role, but also lesbians, trans* persons, and queers of colour. In the analysis of the gaze that is established, I will focus on how the film makes use of the camera angle, axis, and focus as well as perspective to enhances the dichotomous relation between gender-appropriate and effeminate queers. When examining the selected scenes, I presume that the characters' gazes within the film as well as the governance of the audiences' gaze has three main effects. Firstly, the viewer is invited to identify with Danny, since the film mainly offers his perspective on top of narrating only his story, bridging the gap to the more unconventional characters like Ray. Secondly, Danny's gaze serves as a lens through which heteronormative viewers may safely perceive homosexual life, instead of confronting the viewers with a queer gaze. And thirdly, effeminate, trans*, and drag characters gaze back at Danny, making him the object of their desires. Instead of favouring the anti-assimilationist approach towards gender norms, the film strengthens these tendencies by othering effeminate homosexuals, trans* characters, and drag queens. The supposed 'other' (e.g. trans* individuals) is reduced to a few, stereotypical character traits which are demarcated as non-normative and, hence, disapproved of, or even rejected, thus, offering only monocausal explanations for their behaviour.

Danny, by contrast, is a round character whose views and actions are made comprehensible to the viewers. Jung describes him as an "audience surrogate: the white guy who can properly tell the story of 'the other'" (Jung

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n. pag.). Thereby, Danny serves as a figure of identification for white and heterosexual American audiences while at the same time incorporating the queer agenda into mainstream politics. The presumption that heterosexual acceptance would be at stake if the representation does not reflect dominant perspectives (cf. Shugart 68) leads to an aesthetic asset of the film that avoids marginalised positions and centralises a white, gender-conforming protagonist instead. Frequently, Danny takes on a heterosexual, at times even homo- or trans*phobic, perspective. During his first days in New York, for instance, he is often startled by an open display of homosexuality. When he walks down Christopher Street for the first time, he sees a couple leaning against a car, flirting with each other, holding hands and eventually even kissing (00:01:49-00:02:04). While being shocked by the sight of indiscriminate sex and sex work, Danny seems amazed by the sight of homosexual love in public. His (hetero)normative moral values can be ascribed to having been briefed by oppressive and stigmatizing educational material, for instance by the documentary shown in his school. As depicted in a backflash, Danny and his classmates are watching the documentary with amusement but also fear, while the voice over explains:

> Public restrooms can often be a hangout for the homosexual. Bobby and his friends hadn't noticed the man who had been in the restroom when they changed, and as it was late, he suggested they take the shortcut under the pier but the others preferred to take the more travelled way home. […] Bobby had made a wise decision. It may have saved his life. (00:12:10-14)

The town's sheriff, who had been invited to show the documentary, concludes the lesson with the following statement: "Okay, kids, these are the things we have to be aware of. You know there are sick people out there, and they are waiting" (00:12:10-19). Even more so, one of Danny's classmates explains while they walk down the school's corridor: "A guy wears a dress. The other guy takes that dress off, and then they do it up the butt" (00:12:30-33). Not only is homosexuality thereby associated with effeminacy and cross-dressing, but, as the quote from the documentary shows, also with paedophilia and above all it is criminalised by evoking the threat of abuse or even murder. Even though the film tries to cast these associations in a negative light, the contrast between Danny's gaze at more 'normal-looking' gays and effeminate or trans* characters fosters homo- and especially trans*phobia. His gaze discloses his moral understanding of sexuality and relationships, since he is usually (positively) amazed by

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any sight of openly enjoyed gay love but embarrassed by effeminacy and even shocked by the display of trans*sexuality, gay sex, prostitution, and non-monogamous relationships. Like the couple he sees in Christopher Street on his first day, he is enchanted by the relationship model the street youths' friend Bob leads. On a visit to Bob's home, his partner Terry (Yan England) enters with a bag of shopping items and asks politely: "Staying for dinner? I'm making spaghetti and meatballs" (01:15:07-09). Surprised by this imprint of bourgeois domesticity, Danny asks: "Wait. Sorry. You – You guys live together?" (01:15:11-13) and they tell him that they have been together for four years. They seem to represent what Danny could never have dreamed of: a totally 'normal,' domestic relationship of two men. As Danny hopes to lead a relationship like theirs, he leaves Ray and the others for a life with Trevor. Danny's desire for a similar model puts Bob's relationship in a positive light and elevates the heteronormative principles of love, monogamy, and domesticity.

In contrast, when Ray and the others take Danny to the Stonewall Inn for the first time, he is astonished by the other patrons dancing around half naked and gazes at them nervously while walking through the bar. Moreover, he is embarrassed by his friends' effeminate behaviour and refuses to dance with Ray. Playing "Venus" by *Shocking Blue* on the jukebox, Ray dances around in a dress and tries everything to get Danny's attention, but Danny cannot be persuaded. Since Ray gave him an ecstasy pill when they entered the bar, Danny begins to feel dizzy. He watches a light changing colours, everything gets blurry around him, the song sounds hollow and overlapping. The others do not seem to notice that Danny is not feeling well and continue dancing around him. Moreover, giving Danny an ecstasy pill without his consent (Danny did not know what it was) underscores Ray's encroaching behaviour. Right in this moment of confusion, Trevor, who has been watching them, decides to enter the scene. Like Ray, Trevor puts on music on the jukebox and "A Whiter Shade of Pale" by *Procol Harum* starts playing while Trevor walks slowly towards Danny. The juxtaposition of Ray and Trevor is emphasised by the different music styles. In contrast to Ray, Trevor approaches Danny more casually and not at all in an effeminate manner. When he starts talking to Danny, the latter smiles nervously (cf. 00:45:35-00:46:11). He rescues Danny out of this uncomfortable situation and immediately seems to know all about him: "You know, you look like you need a little rescuing. [...] So, this particular shithole does not look like Danny's natural habitat" (00:46:17-29). To Ray's indignation, Danny

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accepts to dance with Trevor, foreshadowing that Danny will leave the gang of street youths for finding more conventionally 'true' love with Trevor.

Figure 5: Danny vs. Ray (00:06:34 & 00:05:53)

Not only is Ray juxtaposed to Trevor, but also to Danny: while Danny is white, cis, from a middle-class background, seeking a monogamous relationship with true love, conforming to a masculine gender role, even passing as heterosexual, Ray is a Latino (Puerto Rican), possibly trans*, drag queen from a lower-class background, homeless, earning his living with sex work, not conforming to the masculine gender role, and flaunting his homosexuality in an effeminate manner. This stereotypical attribution of identity features makes Ray into a foil to project Danny against to make him more conventionally likeable and elevate his perspective. Danny's centralisation in contrast to Ray and the other street youths is also visually enhanced. He usually is either central to the screen or the focaliser of the scene. To substantiate this thesis further, other characters like Ray, are often filmed in an over the shoulder shot, in which Danny is still visible, slightly blurry in the front. Thus, all other characters are always set in relation to Danny, which has the effect of keeping their characters flat and crude and thereby marginalising non-white and effeminate gay masculinity. Stressing the hierarchical order implied by these identity features, the Stonewall's corrupted manager Ed Murphy (Ron Perlman) remarks to Ray about Danny: "You see, now this is what we need more of around here – all-American kids, clean-cut kids, not gutter trash like you, Ramona" (00:41:57-00:42:04). Similarly, the members of the Mattachine Society equally want "to blend in" (01:06:27-30) and despise of homosexuals "wearing a dress and prancing up and down Christopher Street" (01:06:33-36), as Trevor puts it. Danny defends his friends' lifestyle by answering that "it takes a lot more balls to wear a dress than it does a suit and tie" (01:06:37-40). Hence, having Danny argue against "the openly

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transphobic Trevor" (Ginelle n. pag.) could be interpreted as a critical stance towards trans*phobia and homonormativity; the stereotypes the film enforces, however, impede these advances. Right after having defended his friends' effeminate behaviour, Danny expresses his discontent upon learning that usual 'male' job opportunities are not available to him: "What would you have me do, huh? Be a fucking florist, or a decorator? […] What, are these the options open to me?" (01:06:41-50). Disdaining jobs that are associated with a female gender role and dreaming of becoming an astronomer and working with NASA, he not only dissociates himself from effeminate homosexuality but reinforces gender and sexual stereotypes. This representation seems almost cynical considering that his friends' only option to make money is prostitution. The scene follows directly after Ray is shown having been beaten up by a trick. In contrast to the violent attack on Danny by the police officers, the abuse of Ray is not explicitly shown. Danny finds him in the hostel room, bleeding from his swollen face and crying. When he bids him to "Stop tricking, Ray!" (01:00:55-56), the latter loses his temper:

> And then what? What? Tell me! You want to know where home is for me, Danny? Nowhere. There is no home. There is no family, Danny. All there is – is some guy in fucking Sing Sing who might be my dad. And I don't know where my mom is. My sister, she's in foster care. And I got a dead grandma in Ponce. Happy fucking family. What the fuck am I supposed to do, Danny? Nobody wants me! Nobody, not even you! I don't have anything! So what? So what if I fucking get beat up every now and then? Who the fuck doesn't? A faggot is always gonna get beat up, Danny, even you. Either from another faggot, or from a cop, or from a trick who's got something to prove. No big deal. (01:01: 14-01:02:42)

Ray's situation emphasises that sex work was a dangerous occupation and that – in marked contrast to Danny – he and the other homeless street youths do not have any other choices. Hence, the content of the film suggests a critical reading of Danny's privileged position in comparison to the others. This critical stance, however, is vigorously undermined by the formal-aesthetic composition of the film. Although trans* individuals, queers of colour, and sex workers were probably much more severely exposed to institutionalised homophobia and hate crimes, the film strengthens the identification with Danny. As Emmerich points out: "Danny is a very straight-acting kid, […] The audience can relate more strongly to him and through Danny's eyes they'll experience the more extreme situations

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depicted in the film" (Emmerich quoted in Jung n. pag.). Guiding the perspective even when Ray gets abused, the audience is invited to feel with Danny, finding him sympathetic, because he acts empathically. After Ray's outburst of emotion, Danny comforts him and proposes to "find [...] something better" (00:02:30-32) for him. When Ray asks, "Why do you care?" (00:02:33-35), Danny simply answers, "Because you are my friend" (00:02:37-39) and puts his arm around Ray who apologises to him under tears. Danny is thereby depicted as pure and kind. However, as his and Ray's suffering is equated, Danny's moral attitude is ideologically elevated.

The next morning, he leaves Ray and the other street youths to see Trevor and decides to move in with him the same day. While this betrayal of his friends could be seen as morally wrong, Ray is the one who is depicted as overreacting and not appreciating Danny's kindness. When he finds out that Danny might be meeting Trevor and the Mattachine Society, he yells at Danny "you're learning to be a real New York cocksucker. Learning how to lie before you even get dressed" (01:03:44-53) and storms out, slamming the door behind him. His anger seems to be led by jealousy and therefore irrationality, even though Danny is in fact lying and about to leave him behind for a better life. Thereby, the film connects effeminacy with negative character traits such as jealousy and irrationality. Moreover, Ray is depicted as unloveable, since "it's taken as a given, an implicit fact, that Danny could never, ever fall in love with, or have sex with, someone like swishy, gender-fluid Ray" (Lawson n. pag.). As Keegan points out, however,

> Stonewall rather accurately represents the exclusion of trans people and people of colour from the gay imaginary, but it blames this exclusion as 'unlovable' on those ostracised populations themselves, rather than on the white, middle-class gentrifiers who have been willing to abandon them in exchange for nominal inclusion in straight culture. (Keegan 54)

These stereotypical representations alongside the visual subtext contradict the endeavour to convey an anti-assimilationist message on the content level. Visually centralising the most assimilated character in such a way and thereby marginalising less heteronormatively conforming characters aesthetically reinforces the subliminal assimilationist tendency and thus homonormativity of the film.

Furthermore, the film misrepresents and even criminalises effeminate, trans*, and transvestite sexual desire. As has been pointed out, Danny is usually the bearer of the look and thereby the focaliser of the story. At the same time, however, he is also gazed at, and even objectified, especially by

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effeminate and trans* characters. After Danny has been beaten up by the police, Ray offers him a place to sleep in their hostel room. Even though he accepts the offer, Danny does not seem to feel safe in the filthy room full of street youths. In contrast to the scene showing Ray after having been attacked, Danny is not shown as weak and in need for comfort by Ray. Because of his aching body, Danny undresses slowly, which is shown through a mirror, a detail that will become more important in my later analysis of transsexual desire. The camera switches back and forth from Danny getting undressed to Ray's face who looks voluptuously at him, letting his gaze wander down Danny's body. Before Danny turns around, Ray quickly rearranges his hair to look good for Danny, putting on a sexy facial expression and lasciviously biting his lip. When Danny takes of his shirt and exposes his bare, muscular chest, Ray says: "You're handsome" (00:27:15-16). Danny lies down with his back to Ray and pretends to be sleeping while Ray still talks to him, imagining a life together in California. In contrast to Danny's innocent quest for true monogamous love, Ray is shown as sex-driven and slobbering over Danny's normatively good-looking body, perpetuating the violence that Danny has experienced before. Presenting Ray in this way, the film feeds the "hackneyed convention of the gay, male character as flamboyant, hyper-emotional, or single-mindedly sexual" (Keith 232). Making Danny the object of Ray's "hypersexual" (Keith 233) queer desires the film connects the scene to sexual assault. Moreover, the film emphasises the impression that Danny's homonormative appearances appeal to the other characters. When they meet at the Stonewall Inn, Marsha P. Johnson (Otoja Abit) acknowledges: "You're lucky, people in New York like a straight-looking boy like you. You can do very well down here" (00:42:29-35). As in other instances, this remark shows that the film seems to be aware of the homonormative implication of Danny's looks and behaviour. However, it impedes the possibility of taking a critical stance. The way the other characters look at him further elevates Danny's appearance at the expense of queer characters. Despite highlighting that he is more sex-driven than Danny, Ray's effeminacy is mostly displayed in a sympathetic if marginalised way. Yet, most other trans* or non-binary characters are depicted in a derogatory way.

On his first day in New York Danny is approached by a person in drag called Queen Tooey, while he is having lunch in a diner on Christopher Street. In spite of Danny's attempt to avoid her by looking the other way, Tooey comes closer to him, even molesting him: "Aw, poor little thing. Long way from home, starving and dragging a suitcase like a little baby

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chicken" (00:02:41-52). When he answers dismissively "I'm not starving, sir, I just had two hot dogs," Tooey answers provocatively "You want a third?" (00:02:53-58). After making this cheeky remark, Tooey offers Danny a place to stay. Seemingly uncomfortable in this situation, Danny declines, but Queen Tooey starts singing along the song playing on the radio and touches Danny's shoulder. Danny begins to feel increasingly unceasy, just as Ray enters the diner and comes to his rescue: "Queen Tooey, leave him alone, Jesus! You never stop, and you sound terrible" (00:03:42-59). Tooey answers: "Ray, darling, I sound just fine for someone who's had a dick in his mouth all night" (00:04:11-17). Ray warns Danny: "Listen up, kid. Don't follow this one unless you want to end up tied to a chair and smothered in pancake batter, or whatever that shit is" (00:04:34-41). The film emphasises Tooey's sex-centredness and mocks her seemingly weird sexual preferences as a trans* character and probably sex worker. Furthermore, unaware of the concept of trans*, Danny refers to Tooey by the male pronoun while they talk about her, whereas Ray markedly pronounces the female pronoun (Tooey herself uses the male pronoun, though). Their different use of pronouns could be interpreted as another attempt by the film to criticise Danny's trans*phobia, but the stereotypical representation of trans* characters in later scenes advocates the opposite. After Tooey has left the diner, Danny shows no approval of Tooey's sexual preferences: "I know I don't want to be tied to a chair and covered in pancake batter" (00:05:19-22), to which Ray adds "I don't know. It could be fun. Sticky, but fun" (00:05:24-30) and they laugh, providing comic relief for a rather suspenseful scene. However, both suspense and comic relief have been established at the expense of a trans* character. This adds another layer of juxtaposition in the film, which serves as a strategy of othering. By stultifying Tooey and contrasting her to Ray, the film creates a hierarchy of tolerability of trans* characters, in which Ray's sexuality sets the limit of tolerable effeminate behaviour while Tooey is already bordering the stereotypical representation of trans* as potentially dangerous, but he still resides in the realm of ridicule. Moreover, since the film stages Ray as Danny's cheerful helper, he serves homonormative and assimilative purposes.

Later in the film, another scene depicts trans* desire and is paralleled by the scene introducing Tooey. After Danny is kidnapped, Murphy forces him to prostitute himself. They enter an expensive-looking hotel together and, having knocked at the door of a large suite, Murphy hands Danny

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over to a man who looks like a butler or servant. In sharp contrast to the street prostitution happening at the piers, Danny is politely asked to take a seat, offered a drink, and waits for his suitor. A door nearby is opened and a hand and a pink high heel come into sight in the dark corner of the room, then a man "in grotesque drag" (Lawson n. pag.), wearing a dress opulently decorated with rhinestones and a red wig, gazes at Danny across the room like a preying animal. The film does not offer any explanation of the person's gendered identity. However, staying close to Danny's perspective, the viewer is prompted to identify with Danny and read the person as a male character in drag. The camera cuts back and forth from the man and Danny's terrified facial expression (cf. 01:23:05-01:24:54). Fixing himself a drink, the man starts talking: "Danny, right? [...] A nice American name – like Scott, or Justin" (01:24:55-01:25:06), pronouncing the name Justin sharply and watches Danny's reaction in the mirror in front of him, connecting the scene to Ray, who also looked voluptuously at Danny through a mirror, while the latter was getting undressed. The mirror is a cinematic device to indicate the revelation of the characters' true self (cf. Noll Brinckmann 18). In the two scenes, the mirror distorts the gaze, which might create a queer gaze, since it is used to represent a reflection of the male gaze that is directed at another men. However, instead of embracing the opportunity to break with the visual conventions of the male gaze, the film uses the distortion to reveal the true intentions of trans* characters which categorises their gaze of as unpleasant if not dangerous. Moreover, the reference to Justin draws on two earlier scenes, in which this name was mentioned by characters in the film. The first is right after Danny has met Ray and his gang. One of them, Orphan Annie (Caleb Landry Jones), compares Danny's appearance to a guy named Justin, which enrages Ray who attacks Annie with a broken bottle. Later in the plot, Ray is interrogated by special agent Seymor Pine, who shows him photographs of Justin's dead body and bids him to help solve the crime of Justin's murder. The fact that Danny's suitor pointedly talks about Justin and seems to find pleasure in nice American boys like him, hints at the possibility of him being Justin's murderer and hence provides suspense for the scene. When the man walks towards Danny, appearing ungainly in his heels and breathing heavily in the tight dress, the suspense is highlighted auditorily by ominous opera music and visually by a statue of a lion and a tiger fighting set on the mantelpiece in the background. Moreover, the man in drag is shot mostly from a low angle, alternately in an over the shoulder shot from

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Danny's perspective, or from behind, towering threateningly over Danny, who seems terrified. The established gaze emphasises his menacing power over Danny. Pressing Danny further and opening his belt, he keeps talking: "Do you know the Bible, Danny? Anything from the New Testament? […] The Book of John. […] 'You are my friends if you do what I command of you.' – John 15:14. And I am a good friend, Danny. I am a very good friend to nice young boys" (01:26:03-34). While he utters the last words, the opera singer's voice coming from the record player reaches her climax and a close-up shot shows the man in drag violently pulling down Danny's trousers and grabbing his legs. Right in this moment, Ray comes to Danny's rescue,[37] setting off the hotel's fire alarm. Being saved by Ray again, on the one hand, determines Ray as an ally to hegemonic gay masculinity instead of trans* characters and, on the other hand, marks the connection to the opening scene with Queen Tooey. Relating the two scenes in this way, the film reinforces the derogatory stereotype of older, effeminate gays, drag queens, or trans* persons molesting young boys and thus exactly what Danny had been warned of in school. The way Danny is gazed at ranges from lusciously and voluptuously to predatory and menacing, creating a hierarchy of gender-conforming und gender-nonconforming characters, with Danny as the 'normal' gay at the top, followed by effeminate allies and the sex-driven, dangerous, villainous trans* characters at the very bottom of respectability. Not only is this a strategy of scapegoating trans* characters for deficiencies such as paedophilia, molestation, and rape within the LGBTQIAN+ community, but it perpetuates trans*phobic views rather than challenging them. This "aesthetic gentrification of queer and trans cinematic worlds" (Keegan 50), as Keegan puts it, is made apparent by a gaze that consolidates trans*phobia, racism, and classism. White- and straightwashing the historical Stonewall Riots, the film further marginalises the narratives of trans* people and queers of colour. As Jung condenses, this is the most crucial flaws of the film:

> The historical record only contains fragments of the lives of poor people and queer people of color; since their lives are precarious, so, too, are

37 Ray had found out where Danny was brought by threatening one of Murphy's assistants to reveal his homosexuality: "Oh, but I know all about you and little Georgina Vee. I mean, George Vasquez. Maybe I should spread the news. See what happens. A faggot club owner, and the driver for the mob. I give it a day" (01:24:10-25), which can be seen as another strike against trans* characters in the film, as he mocks his feminine identity by calling him Gorgina.

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> their memories. And yet isn't this the beauty of narrative? That it allows us to access worlds beyond our reckoning and uncover hard-to-see truths? In this way, *Stonewall* is a deeply cynical film, because it suggests we're so lacking in empathy that we can't experience the joy, sadness, and longing of another person simply because they don't 'look' like a movie star. (Jung n. pag.)

Thus, the film misses its chance to explore narrative and formal-aesthetic conventions more openly. A queer gaze changes "the very act of experiencing a film – the psychological process of looking at and identifying with characters" (Benshoff and Griffin 11). In *Stonewall*, however, the single mediator that filters all other characters' experiences is Danny; hence, the gaze never varies, it stays white, male, and trans*phobic during the whole plot. Thereby, the film generates a homonormative aesthetic that enables heteronormative identification, serves the assimilation to heteronormativity, and sustains heteronormative structures instead of criticising them.

Collectivisation in *Milk*

As the narrative structure of the biopic tradition suggests, the viewer is constantly invited to identify with Milk's perspective. This is made clear from the beginning, as the film embeds audio tapes that the historic Milk recorded before his death. These recordings recur throughout the film, usually serving as captions anticipating the events that are about to be shown in the subsequent scenes and, hence, structuring the entire plot. The gaze that is thereby established on screen, first of all, creates a mood of authenticity by intertwining authentic material with staged scenes, especially in the frame narrative. This is closely connected with the second function of the gaze, which is the establishment of intimacy between the viewers and the characters on screen, thereby issuing an invitation to identify with Milk. This is emphasised by a clear differentiation of the gay and homophile characters from the bigots Anita Bryant and Josh Briggs. Even more so, I suggest that the third function of the gaze is to generate a collective identity by recounting the story of gay liberation from the perspective of the 'glass-ceiling breaker.' Milk pathed the way for others to follow, but also serves as a mediator between the gay perspective and the heteronormative majority. In this endeavour to connect gay and straight Americans through collective commemoration of a national hero, however, the film disregards the hierarchisation that goes along with the assumption that Milk can speak

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for all homosexuals. Especially the appeal to visibility obscures the hazard for many queers to come out of the closet and reduces the experience to the perspective of rather privileged gays.

In the beginning of the film, authentic black-and-white footage shows men being arrested by police officers, presumably homosexuals who were meeting in bars, which was rigorously controlled during the late 1960s and early 70s. Even though homosexuals were allowed to go to bars and drink by the end of the 1960s, same-sex physical contact, dancing, or kissing was still forbidden. The footage is intercut with authentic newspaper articles with headlines such as "Police and Gay clash" (00:00:41), or "Tavern charges Police brutality" dated Jan 19, 1967 (00:01:03), that indicate the timeframe of the scenes. In the article with the headline "Police start crackdown on homosexual bars; arrest 6" (00:01:36), the names and addresses of the arrested are published. This was a common practice to expose homosexuals, which had severe consequences for their public lives, since they could be fired from their jobs, an issue which takes centre stage later in the film. Foreshadowing the plot in this way, the film authenticates the scene. Then the screen fades to black and the year 1978 – the year Milk was assassinated –in white typewriter digits blends in (00:02:21). Thereafter the staged scenes set in and Milk appears on screen, beginning with the following statement: "This is Harvey Milk speaking on Friday, November 18th. This is only to be played in the event of my death by assassination" (00:02:32-44). These statements Milk makes in the staged feature are mostly taken from an authentic tape recording the 'real' Milk recorded as his will before his death. Thus, the film connotes historical accuracy, which is emphasised by implementing authentic footage yet again. While Milk is still heard in a voice over, news video material from the day of his and Moscone's assassination are woven into the staged scenes. Wailing sirens can be heard in the background, press and police are running into city hall, a police walkie-talkie squawks – the chaos of the situation suggests that something terrible must have happened. Then a stretcher with a body bag is wheeled out of the city hall. The authentic footage shows shell shocked Diane Feinstein, President of the Board of Supervisors, stepping up in front of a throng of news reporters and announcing that Milk and Moscone have been shot and killed. Feinstein's grief is emphasised very vividly by slowly zooming into her face, showing the tears form in her eyes, and people in an unseen audience gasp in fright when they hear the news (00:03:44-55). Then the scene jumps back to Milk who says: "I wish I had time to explain all the things that I did" (00:04:07-11), upon which the title

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Milk is displayed (00:04:12) and the scene changes to New York in 1970, as the caption tells the viewers that now the plot starts.

This format is repeated at the end of the film. Again, Milk is sitting at his table, recording his will, which is used as a voice over while staged scenes are merged with authentic footage of a candlelight vigil to commemorate his death (01:54:33-01:55:09). Then, for one last time, a jump cut invites the viewers to take a seat at Milk's kitchen table. Having finished his narrative, he presses the button of the tape recorder, puts down the microphone and the screen fades to black. Before the end credits, historic facts, such as "Over 30,000 people marched from the Castro to City Hall to honor slain Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone" (01:55:26-33) or "Just past the Golden Gate Bridge, amidst a shower of grape Kool-Aid, Doonesbury cartoons and bubble bath, Harvey's closest friends scattered his ashes out at sea" (01:57:07-19), are displayed on screen. Moreover, Dan White's fate as well as Milk's most important supporters and their achievements in the aftermath of his death are presented by juxtaposing staged material from the film with authentic photographs of their historic models, culminating in authentic footage of Harvey Milk himself (01:55:35-01:57:34). The specific setup and the editing of the scenes at the beginning and the end of the film serve as bookends to the narrative. By intertwining authentic newspaper articles, video footage, photographs, and Milk's recorded will with the frame narrative, the film claims authenticity. This means that the plot that unfolds in between the frame narrative is set in the light of real historic events. Thereby, the camera takes on a gaze that claims to be telling the truth about Harvey Milk and his assassination. However, the effect of authentication is closely linked to the intimacy the gaze creates with Milk and his peers as well as the identification with the characters on screen.

Hence, merging authentic material with staged scenes emphasises the film's endeavour to allow Milk to "explain all the things" (00:04:09-10) he did, thus making him the autodiegetic narrator of the film. Thereby, the film highlights Milk's own perspective on the final years of his life and the important social developments he has witnessed. Both at the beginning and the end of the film, every time the scene jumps back from the footage to Milk's kitchen, the camera slightly changes its position around the table. Reverse angle shots convey the impression of sitting at the table with him to the viewers, moving them closer to the scene and thus to Milk, which establishes intimacy between the spectators and the character on screen and enhances the identification with Milk. As screenwriter Dustin Lance

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Black explains in the scene notes to the original screenplay, "quickly establishing this intimacy, [he] hoped to shape a story that, despite mountains of political talk and plot, feels more like the personal story of the man than a political issue film" (Black and van Sant 105). At the same time, the perspective and motives of the homophobes are undermined by the film. In stark contrast to the multifaceted gay and homophile characters, the film offers a rather one-dimensional portrayal of Anita Bryant and Josh Briggs and, hence, creates flat characters, in order to portray them "as the typical villainous homophobic" (Alegre 184) antagonists. Presenting Bryant exclusively through authentic footage of speeches and news reports about her denies her access to the narrative of the film as a proper multi-layered character. Black comments this decision as follows:

> The decision to let Anita play herself through archival footage was an early and important one. I feared it would be hard for folks nowadays to believe that a person actually said and meant the things she preached and believed. I didn't want her to come off as a caricature, and that's tough when you just read her words. So I decided to take myself and my opinions out of it – let her say it for herself. So all of her lines in this script are quotes taken from actual TV and newspaper reports. (Black and van Sant 107)

Thereby, the negative perception the viewer gets of Bryant is only implied by the film. It is the archival footage in which the 'real' person comes across as unsympathetic. Using an authenticity device in this way denies her the same form of representation the gay rights activists gain in the film. Black's view of completely taking his opinions out and letting Bryant speak for herself, shows that the film wants to convey the impression of impartiality. Moreover, her cameos are filtered through the gaze of the homosexual characters watching her on TV, most often Milk himself. Just after Milk hast lost his third run for office, Bryant is introduced by a compilation of her TV appearances. While she explains: "I believe that more than ever before, that there are evil forces round about us, even perhaps disguised as something good that would want to tear down the very foundation, the family unit, that holds America together" (00:35:21-43), the camera zooms out more and more to reveal a 1970s TV set with her on the screen. At the same time, the background sound of a bell indicates that a door must have been opened in the proximity of the TV set. A jump cut reveals that Milk has just entered the room and watches the show on Anita Bryant with concern. As her appearances are usually interpreted from a homosexual

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Figure 6: Bryant on TV (00:35:26 & 00:35:30)

perspective, they are set into the context of the life-threatening struggle the LGBTQIAN+ characters lead for their equality. Not only does this enhance a gay sensibility that the film seeks to convey, but also marks another offer to identify with Milk by suggesting his motives for fighting back Bryant's and Brigg's political campaign against homosexuals. Interestingly, despite following a clear good-versus-evil scheme that is innate to Hollywood films, directing the gaze towards the vindicators of the heteronormative system reverses the long tradition of the gay villain trope in cinema (cf. Russo 122). Questioning homophobic viewing habits, this gaze can hence be described as queer.

Moreover, in the depiction of the love story between Milk and Scott Smith, the film facilitates an intimate gaze, allowing the viewers to get closer to the private Milk instead of the public persona. Scenes of their romantic feelings for each other are interspersed at the beginning and the end of the plot, which serve as another layer of frame narrative, this time on the diegetic level. As has already been pointed out in the chapter on Milk's emancipation, the plot begins with his 40th birthday, more specifically the night before his birthday, when he picks up Smith at a subway station. From the moment they meet, intimacy is created, suggesting their special bond. After their short encounter at the subway station, Milk takes Smith to his place where they have sex. The camera highly aestheticizes their sexual encounter by extreme close-ups that show only parts of their faces, such as their eyes or lips. In classical Hollywood cinema, this form of fetishization is usually applied to female bodies on screen, making women the objects of representation to "impose masculinity as 'point-of-view'" (Mulvey Afterthoughts 125). Here, however, the two characters on screen are both male and look at each other in turn, challenging the heteronormative viewing patterns. Thereby, the camera takes on a queer gaze that changes "the psychological process of looking at and identifying with characters"

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(Benshoff and Griffin 11) and offers the viewers "a queer viewing position" (Benshoff and Griffin 10). After they had sex, another close-up on their faces almost gives the viewers the impression of being in bed with them. Parts of this scene are repeated at the end of the film, right after Milk has been assassinated. Accentuating the intradiegetic frame, this sets a queer tone for most of the film.

Furthermore, at the end of the plot, another very intimate scene between the two is interwoven with scenes showing Dan White getting up and breaking into city hall to kill Milk and Moscone, emphasising the dramatic ending. On the day of his assassination, Milk calls Smith in the early morning hours, just before dawn, to let him know that he went to see *Tosca* at the opera the night before. To show that they are engaging with each other again, Smith asks him if he can let him know next time, then he would come to the theatre with him. Then the scene switches to White on his way to Moscone's office, to create suspense and connect their intimacy with the tragic fate that awaits Milk on the same day. Another jump cut later Smith avows to Milk: "Harvey, I want you to know that I am proud of you" (01:52:15-18). This remark brings Milk to the verge of tears, which form in his eyes while he contorts his face in emotionality and says: "I don't wanna miss this" (01:53:00-02). When Smith asks "Miss what?" (01:53:03-04), he simply answers "This" (01:53:07-08), indicating that he misses Smith and the intimacy they once shared. Smith still seems to be one of his closest confidants, although they have not been a couple for some time. Thereby, the film emphasises the affection they still have for each other "and the possibility of rekindling the relationship were it not for Milk's untimely death" (Lenon 47). Moreover, their intimacy seems to point to Milk's vulnerability, making his experiences even more relatable to the audience. To visually enhance this impression, the camera perspective allows the viewers an intimate gaze by making use of close-up shots on their faces or medium long shots. The frames are juxtaposed, as they are both depicted in their dimly lit homes, holding the phone to their ears the same way. The gaze that is established through their intimacy highlights their romantic love story. "One way to interpret this is that, in contrast to his relationship with the troubled and volatile Lira, Milk's relationship with Scott Smith is offered as true love" (Lenon 47). Thereby, however, the film frames Milk's love life within heteronarrative expectations.

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Figure 7: Last phone call (f.l.t.r.: 01:52:12 & 01:53:08)

In contrast to the relationship with Smith, a bond with a special quality, in the scenes with Lira, the sexual attraction is usually emphasised instead of the love they felt for each other. The film suggests that while Smith is Milk's true love, the effeminate Lira is just an affair and "portrayed as needy, jealous, emotionally unstable, and a problem to Milk's political aspirations; little or no validity is given to their relationship" (Lenon 47). Even though the sex scene between them is equally intimate as with Smith, it is still more playful and less conventionally romantic. On their first encounter, Lira is very drunk and seems quite lost, which is why Milk feels the urge of taking care of him. After they had sex, Lira immediately avows his love to Milk upon which the latter asks: "Do you even remember my name?" (00:53:41-43). When Lira denies, Milk introduces himself again: "I'm Harvey" (00:53:52-53) and Lira answers: "Harvey, I love you" (00:53:55-58). Having Lira utter these highly charged three words at their first encounter and without even remembering his lover's name, the film mocks heterosexual ideas of relationships and thus provides comic relief in a sexually charged scene. However, the heteronarrative convention of monogamy is upheld, since Milk starts a relationship with the men he takes home for sex and does not pick up them up just for one-night-stands. Thus, the film smooths Milk's more unorthodox sex life by including "not a single mention of the baths where those boys were spending all their time (just one coy mention of a night at the sauna for Scott), no running out to discos every night (only for Harvey's election celebration), and a decidedly chaste version of Harvey's own bedding practices" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 251). Furthermore, having Lira confess his love to Milk does not seem serious. Thereby, the film suggests that their love affair is going to be more superficial than the relationship Milk had with Smith. This is also highlighted by Lira's jealousy of Smith, for instance, when he is nagging him with questions when he comes home late from work: "Who were you

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with? Scott? Or with a new boy you were trying to save?" (01:07:41-45). Moreover, Milk's friends are very sceptical of, if not hostile towards, Lira. Shortly after Milk has met Lira, Cleve Jones tells Anne Kronenberg: "The new Mrs. Milk. I give it a week" (00:55:50-54), while Smith tells Milk straight out with a disapproving glance towards Lira: "you can do better" (01:26:15-16). Milk's explanation for dating Lira emphasises their sexual rather than intellectual bond: "When I come home to Jack, I don't have to talk politics, I don't have to talk intelligently. I don't have to talk at all" (01:26:16-22). However, the disparaging attitude amongst Milk's friends towards him does not escape Lira and he constantly complains to Milk that his friends do not like him: "You know, your friends aren't very nice to me, Harvey" (01:01:10-12) or "Cleve and Anne, they tried to cut me out of your table, baby. I'm so sick of them. You should fire them" (01:25:27-35). When Milk and some other politicians meet to discuss their strategy against Proposition 6, this goes even so far as that Lira hides in the closet, because Milk is late and he does not feel welcomed by the others. Upon arriving, Milk is greeted with "Hello, Harvey, running late? Your boyfriend is in the closet" (01:07:16-20), which is clarified when Milk reacts with indignation: "The Latino has locked himself in the closet upstairs" (01:07:22-25). This situation could be read as a symbol for the enclosing result Milk anticipates when following the rather conservative strategy in fighting Proposition 6. However, Lira staying in the closet while everybody else is out offers yet another layer of interpretation. Not only does this emphasise his instable psyche and his immature behaviour, but it also shows that it is not possible for every LGBTQIAN+ individual to come out of the closet. While lampshading this issue, the film misses an opportunity for a more diverse perspective on the question of coming out and an inclusion of non-white and non-male perspective.

The intimate portrayal of a very private Harvey Milk strengthens his message that a gay-straight alliance will be formed when more heterosexual people get to know just one homosexual more closely: "We're going to convince the 90% to give a shit about us 10%. [...] We have to let all those people out there know that they know one of us" (01:10:12-43). Thereby, the film creates a gaze that offers the identification with a collective homophile identity. Milk becomes the great connector of both worlds, as director Gus van Sant explains in a conversation with screenwriter Dustin Lance Black and actor Cleve Jones: "I always thought of Castro Street itself and City Hall as being two separate and not connectable places in San Francisco, and here was the connection: the man from Castro Street who

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glued Castro Street into City Hall, along with the lifestyle of the denizens of Castro Street" (Black 118). Even though this could be described as an attempt at applying a queer gaze, the enactment of Milk's memorial that seeks to generate a collective identity not only amongst members of the LGBTQIAN+ community but also amongst the heterosexual majority could be seen as fostering the gay/straight dichotomy. Empowering one individual of a marginalised group as the 'glass-ceiling-breaker' does not necessarily mean that the glass ceiling is broken for other individuals, too. As the case of Lira shows, the oppressed can be the oppressor as well. This becomes particularly clear in the film's suggestion that everyone should come out. As a "rallying cry, a symbol of the political aims of the period, and a fully depersonalized theme with consequences for only minor characters" (Erhart 273) in the film, coming out always proceeds in demarcation to the heteronorm. Since this is the precondition for the closet, the heteronorm might thereby also determine which queer practices are seen as worthy of heterosexual acceptance. Heteronormativity thereby "continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once 'outness' is claimed" (Butler 'Imitation' 308–309). Coming out of the closet becomes a regulatory tool of the oppressive system of heteronormativity, while the appeal to come out might foster homonormative structures within the LGBTQIAN+ community.

Moreover, the obstacles and dangers of leaving the closet are not evenly distributed especially comparing white gay men with non-white, more effeminate homosexuals and trans* individuals. As Lira tells Milk during their first night spent together, his "father beat [him] when he found out" (00:53:12-13), which is why he fled from Mexico to San Francisco. As actor Diego Luna points out in an interview, Lira "had a lot of loneliness, and just the fact of not being accepted in your family sounds like enough to get lost" (Luna quoted in Lamble n. pag.). However, the film seems to overlook that Lira's loneliness due to Milk's tight political schedule were not the sole reasons that lead him to commit suicide but his social marginalisation and a deeply seated feeling of shame due to his homosexuality. As Seidman points out, "simply coming out does not rid us of feelings of shame and guilt, and [...] visibility alone does not threaten heterosexual privilege" (Seidman *Closet* 7). This shows that not only was coming out not as safe for Lira as for the other characters, but he was also not accepted with open arms in the gay community, increasing his loneliness even more as he neither belongs to the hetero- nor to the homosexuals. Since the film leaves out his depression, alcoholism, and the irrational fights that strongly burdened their relationship (cf. Shilts 269), his effeminacy and clinginess to Milk are

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highlighted and come to be the only visible reason for his marginalisation within the LGBTQIAN+ community. Thus, the homonormative gaze directed at Lira for being more effeminate than the other characters hampers the overall endeavour of the film to establish a queer gaze. Even more so, the film thereby misrepresents queers of colour and, hence, reflects "the hegemonic whiteness of mainstream queer activism" (Lenon 49). Recalling the roots of gay liberation and emphasising the "great extent to which Milk sought to establish alliances and coalitions with a wide variety of communities, including communities of colour" (Lenon 48), Suzanne Lenon criticises the absence of queers of colour and women in the film: "This is a significant misrepresentation as well as misremembering of genealogies of the birth(s) of the gay liberation movement, given that drag queens and people of colour led the 1969 Stonewall revolt and riots and ultimately *made* a figure like Harvey Milk possible" (Lenon 47). Furthermore, as Rich points out, "[i]t may not be a deliberate message, but understated evidence of women's absence from Castro goings-on is everywhere apparent" (Rich 245). There is only one woman who plays a significant role for the plot of the film: Milk's campaign manager Anne Kronenberg (Alison Pill). She is hired after Smith and Milk have ended their relationship and thus only becomes relevant in the second half of the film. When she enters the camera shop for the first time, she immediately notices that the other activists are skeptical of her and asks provocatively: "My girlfriends say you guys don't like women. I'm just asking. Is there a place for us in all this or are you all scared of girls?" (00:48:32-37). This scene fulfils two functions. On the one hand, it provides comic relief and on the other it serves to highlight the fact that the gay liberation movement during the 1970s was in fact widely misogynist (cf. B. R. Rich *Cinema* 245). However, the film does not take this idea any further and rests on having drawn attention to the issue and including a woman to some parts of the plot. Furthermore, when one of the activists stands up for her and tells the others that "she's got bigger balls than anybody else in here" (00:48:53-55), the film perpetuates the stereotypical divide between lesbians and gays and thus offers only a very cliché representation of lesbian women.

By creating a collective gaze from a white and male perspective that equally invites straight viewers and offers its audience a means for collective identity formation, the film at the same time stratifies the LGBTQIAN+ community. Even though this might be seen as a valuable recognition of "the significance of gay historical figures" (Erhart 264), it subsumes a variety of LGBTQIAN+ individuals under what is conceived as "normal, good citizens"

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(Seidman *Closet* 23), thus making a certain type of LGBTQIAN+ "ready for public consumption" (Shachar 13). Consequently, the gaze *Milk* establishes can also be interpreted as a means to assimilate homosexuality into American national identity. Making Milk a national hero commemorated by both homo- and heterosexual Americans can be oppressive to queer citizens who do not conform to the standards of gay normality. As Benshoff stresses, the "generic moorings" (Benshoff 261) of white, middle-class cis-male homosexuals might "allow for the easy replication of pre-existing stereotypes" (Benshoff 262) and foster homonormative structures.

3.4 Genius, Rebel, Martyr: Archetypes of Hegemonic (Gay) Masculinity

The Misunderstood Genius

Howl is an experimental assemblage that is reminiscent of New Queer Cinema in its mixture of genre, use of pastiche, and the eclectic way it is dealing with the historical subject matter of Ginsberg's literary creativity, which foregrounds the perspective of the marginalised and thereby exposes the heteronormative institutions and authorities as oppressive. However, as a biopic, the film belongs to a very traditional cinematic genre (cf. Vidal 4). By following the biopic tradition in the representation of the author as genius, the film perpetuates a certain narrative of masculinity. The following chapter analyses in how far the film produces a form of hegemonic (gay) masculinity by focusing on the representation of Allen Ginsberg as the misunderstood genius which is an exclusively male figure. Moreover, I will introduce the archetype of the male genius and the problematic implications for issues of gender to then elaborate on the representation of the male genius in the film.

Etymologically, the word genius derives from "the Latin word 'genius'", which referred to a deity or "spirit of procreativity" (Chibici-Revneanu 89). Based on this ancient origin, "the eighteenth century and the Romantic movement promoted a particularly powerful role for genius and fostered the cult of the individual man of exceptional capacities" (Korsmeyer 29). Since then, archetypical geniality is defined by a number of features: a genius is a "breed of free spirit, a nonconformist unbound by social convention or pedestrian rules" (Korsmeyer 10), a "romantically isolated and lonely figure [...]" (Korsmeyer 10) who is "strong and capable of independence from tradition and social norms" (Korsmeyer 29). Moreover, "geniuses

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overcome all obstacles, lead their lives exclusively dedicated to their art and have their works of inherent, universal value proven right in the end" (Chibici-Revneanu 99), which might imply that "the originality of genius is often misunderstood until the passage of time delivers a verdict" (Korsmeyer 10). By "creating from his unique imagination through an act of 'expression'" (Korsmeyer 31) a true genius is not only able to create "superior artworks, but [his] vision has altered the direction of the field altogether" (Korsmeyer 29). Moreover, "many contended that true artistic imagination stems from an inborn spark that is antithetical to the plodding rules of reason, a position that represents a brand of resistance to the dominion of rationality so prevalent in philosophy" (Korsmeyer 31). Thus, "Renaissance notions of genius pictured a great artist as one who can create by a controlled kind of madness" (Korsmeyer 29).

However, as Rob Pope points out "the concept of 'genius' is deeply gendered. It is the ultimate embodiment of 'the great man as creator' – or 'destroyer.' Either way, the emphasis falls equally upon 'great' and 'man'" (Pope 105). Already in 1928, Virginia Woolf proclaimed the gendered nature of geniality in her well-known lecture that was later published as *A Room of One's Own*. Famously contradicting common perceptions of artistic freedom, she states that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births" (Woolf 72) and that "intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends on intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time" (Woolf 116). Therefore, "it is men who are assigned the role of artistic creativity free from biological destiny" (Korsmeyer 14). Yet, in this sense, associating geniality with irrationality seems rather illogical, since rationality is widely considered a male quality, while irrationality and madness (hysteria) are stereotypically feminine qualities (cf. Korsmeyer 12). Even more so,

> [m]etaphors of labor and birth popularly describe artistic inspiration and creation, for example. Both masculine traits (toughness, courage) and feminine ones (emotional sensitivity) are interpreted as having special creative powers and are assigned to the best minds of an age, minds with virtually exclusively male exemplars. (Korsmeyer 30-31)

Therefore, the genius is a contradictory figure who acquires a special position within the hierarchy of masculinities. Transgressing normative boundaries, he is often misunderstood and seen as mad especially when bearing traditionally feminine traits such as being (or seeming) irrational and having a recourse to feelings. Nonetheless, after overcoming social obstacles

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and being acknowledged, thereafter being described as a heroic figure belonging to the best minds of mankind, the genius assumes a hegemonic position. This effect is reinforced by the oppression and marginalisation of women.

In *Howl*, I submit that Allen Ginsberg is presented as the typical male genius and thus claims a hegemonic social position. As Bruhn and Gjelsvik argue, the film is "leaning heavily on a romantic Gesamtkunstwerk vision of artists and artistic creation" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350). Accordingly, it establishes Ginsberg as the misunderstood but brilliant genius figure who transgresses social, formal, and even sexual boundaries. This shows "the directors' ambition in creating a semi-documentary 'biopic' concerning a politically charged question of censorship, and a psychedelic animated universe to match the vital artistic genius of Ginsberg" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350). At the same time, this representation marginalises women and feminine influence on his artistic development. This aspect is especially interesting when considering that research on the Beat Generation from the 1990s on has continuously criticised the male-centredness and at times even misogyny of the movement and its aftermath (cf. Forsgren and Prince, Knight, Waldman, Watson). Thus, in this sub-chapter, I will address the following questions: In how far dos the narrative structure portray Ginsberg as a genius? How does this establish him as a representative of hegemonic (gay) masculinity? And why might this representation perpetuate the marginalisation of female authorship within the Beat Generation?

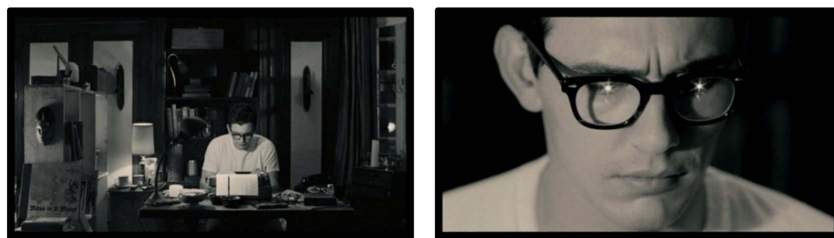

Figure 8: Ginsberg at his desk (00:04:05; 00:04:13)

As the whole plot of *Howl* centres around and is structured by the eponymous poem. The process of writing and publishing the poem is enacted as Ginsberg's coming out. Yet, combining creativity and sexuality again, the poem as well as his sexual orientation is used to mark Ginsberg as a genius which is why his character is occupying a special position within the

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hierarchy of masculinity. The title sequence already introduces Ginsberg as an ingenious figure in close connection with his poetry: "In 1955, an unpublished 29-year-old poet presented his vision of the world as a poem in four parts. He called it ... – HOWL." (00:02:29-00:02:35). While the title of the film is shown onscreen, Ginsberg is depicted walking slowly through a narrow passage in between the walls of two houses, emerging out of the shadow into the light (00:02:35-00:02:43). This depiction foreshadows his development in becoming a celebrated ingenious poet (cf. Bruhn and Gjelsvik 348) and his struggle to accept his sexual identity. Moreover, the introduction of the title already alludes to the concept of geniality by using the phrasing "his vision of the world" (00:02:29-00:02:35). To have a vision is one key characteristic of the genius that is constantly invoked by the film, and hence "the main structuring principle is [...] the epiphanic visions expressed by the quasi-divine poet and his voice" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349). Ginsberg is introduced as an author, shown sitting at his desk in "clichéd scenes of cigarette smoke and a typewriter" (Shachar 131). The "typical literary biopic tropes and symbolism" (Shachar 132), support the image of the intellectual. The mise-en-scène in this frame is based on an authentic photograph of Ginsberg the film uses to emphasise Ginsberg's geniality. The objects seem to be randomly arranged in his studio – a record of Bach's 'Mass in B minor", tribal masks, candles, books – and are, next to his glasses, symbols for a high amount of cultural capital due to an intellectual occupation. Thus, Ginsberg is depicted as a 'man of letters.' While he is typing, the film indicates that he is having a vision by reflections on his glasses that take on the shape of little stars, symbolising the "inborn spark" (Korsmeyer 31) of his geniality and his "unique imagination" (Korsmeyer 31). By suggesting subjective processes taking place in his mind, this depiction, which is recalled several times in the course of the film, can be interpreted as a filmic hint to the ingenious vision Ginsberg has while writing 'Howl' (cf. Noll Brinkmann 17). The scene follows right after the first interview sequence in which Ginsberg describes the process of his writing:

> Sometimes I feel in command when I'm writing. When I'm in the heat of some truthful tears, yes. Other times, most of the time, not. You know, just diddling around, woodcarving, you know, finding a pretty shape, like most of my poetry. There's only been a few times when I've reached a state of complete control. Probably a piece of 'Howl,' and one or two moments in other poems. (00:03:44-00:04:05)

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As the quote shows, his writing oscillates between control and emotionality and thus between rationality and irrationality. Rationality and control, for Ginsberg, do not constitute what more traditional definitions of the terms would suggest, since he links control to the affect of being "in the heat of some truthful tears" and thereby blurs the boundary between the two very reverse concepts of affect and reason.

By making recourse to the art of Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, two famous post-impressionist visual artists (cf. Brodskaïa 281), the film enhances Ginsberg's modernist sense of art and poetry. The focus on emotions and real-life experiences, as well as to attain "truth in art" (Brodskaïa 31) is also central to the (post-)impressionist artistic method (cf. Brodskaïa 12; 256). Moreover, the affiliation with Cézanne and van Gogh stages Ginsberg as a genius coming from a well-established line of geniuses. While the reference to van Gogh is more subtle, with a small part of the animation being reminiscent of the famous painting *The Starry Night* (1889; 00:19:10-17), the film quotes Cézanne prominently by implementing one of his most famous pictures of the serial *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, a motif he often painted near his hometown Aix-en-Provence (cf. Brodskaïa 321). The viewer follows Ginsberg in one of his flashbacks to see the picture in a museum (probably the Museum of Modern Art in New York (cf. Ginsberg in Taransky 8)). While the frame, like all flashbacks, is shot in black-and-white, the picture is singled out by showing it in colour which underlines the impressionist principle that colours play an important role for the conveyance of emotions (cf. Brodskaïa 256). In front of the picture is an elderly woman looking at it, while Ginsberg is in the back. Then the frame changes from a long shot to a medium long shot, showing him looking at the picture in deep thought (00:40:24-45). While the sequence is shown, Ginsberg's off-screen voice explicates his opinion on artists and their intertextual influence on each other:

> In the moment of composition, I don't necessarily know what it means. It comes to mean something later, after a year or two, I come to realize it meant something clear, unconsciously. Which takes on meaning in time, you know like a photograph developing slowly. If it's at all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes. And other times, I do know, it makes complete sense, I start crying. 'Cause I realize that I'm – I'm hitting on an area that's absolutely true. In that sense, able to be read by someone and wept to, maybe, centuries later. In that sense, prophecy, because it touches a common key. I mean, what prophecy ac-

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tually is, is not knowing whether the bomb will fall in 1942. It's knowing and feeling something which someone knows and feels in a hundred years. Hmm? And maybe articulating it in a hint that they will pick up on in a 100 years. (00:40:53-00:42:13)

By evoking the concept of art as prophecy the film once again alludes to the artist as genius. Thereby, it conveys Ginsberg's own recourse to Cézanne, since the 'real-life' Ginsberg had immersed himself in the study of the post-impressionist painter to rework the impressionist style in his poetry (Ginsberg in Taransky 8-9).[38] The film stages the link between the artists by cutting back and forth between Ginsberg's face and the painting, moving from close-ups on details of the painting to close-ups on his face, suggesting that he loses himself in the contemplation of the painting and eventually letting the animated lyrical I of the poem enter the world of the painting (00:41:01-21). In later scenes, the film entangles the content of the poem and the painting again when the destruction of Rockland and Moloch is shown. As the walls of the asylum collapse in front of the two patients (the lyrical I and Solomon), Cézanne's landscape is shown outside (00:55:15), indicating that an appeal to (impressionist) art might yield their liberation.

The influence of Cézanne present in Ginsberg's poetry is taken up by the film when Ginsberg describes the process of writing. Taking one line of 'Howl' as an example, he explains how he incorporated the impressionist method into his poetry. He states that he had "this word [Moloch]" (00:48:35-38) and he "also had the feeling" (00:48:40-42), but "what about it?" (00:49:02-03). Looking around himself, he adds objects that he perceives around him (like windows). "And then I had to finish it somehow" (00:49:14-17). Thereby, his writing becomes a mixture of his personal impressions: rational parts like the words and perceptions blur with irrational parts like the feeling and a certain urge to finish off. The sexual connotation that this quote alludes to is made very explicit in another scene when

38 Ginsberg explains in the interview with the Paris Review: "The last part of 'Howl' was really an homage to art but also in specific terms an homage to Cézanne's method, in a sense I adapted what I could to writing; but that's a very complicated matter to explain. Except, putting it very simply, that just as Cézanne doesn't use perspective lines to create space, but it's a juxtaposition of one color against another color (that's one element of his space), so, I had the idea, perhaps overrefined, that by the unexplainable, unexplained nonperspective line, that is, juxtaposition of one word against another, a gap between the two words – like the space gap in the canvas – there'd be a gap between the two words that the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence" (*Ginsberg in Taransky 9*).

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Ginsberg talks about his poetry almost as if he talked about an orgasm. I have already analysed the scene in much detail when describing the connection between sexuality and artistic expression.[39] But I wish to highlight again here that Ginsberg sees his writing as "a rhythmic articulation of feeling" which is "an impulse that begins inside, like a sexual impulse" (00:38:28-00:39:11). He describes this experience as being overwhelmed by feeling. The impulse "begins in your stomach and rises up through the breast and out of the mouth and ears" (00:38:28-00:39:11), on the one hand, the film emphasises his perception of art as "an act of 'expression'" (Korsmeyer 31). On the other hand, the connection between the artistic impulse and the sexual impulse also alludes to the procreative aspect of geniality (cf. Chibici-Revneanu 89). Moreover, the perception of a work coming from within the ingenious artist is evoked by the Beat Generation's approach to writing which "has centred on spontaneous prose and poetry, aleatory composition methods such as 'cut-ups,' to enable thoughts and emotions to be channelled directly to the reader" (Forsgren und Prince 14). Hence, they see literary expression as a very personal and affective act, which is why Ginsberg claims "that writing is personal. [...] it comes from the writer's own person. His body, his breathing rhythm, his actual talk" (00:10:15-25). For him, the path to good writing is "to approach your Muse as frankly as you would talk to yourself or to your friends. It's the ability to commit to writing – to write the same way that you are" (00:16:48-00:17:45). Thereby, his work becomes central to the artist's life and his identity, which is another characteristic of the genius.

Not only are the aspects of irrationality, procreation, and a personal approach to art enhanced by the film, but also the notion of madness as a trait of the genius and hence being misunderstood, isolated, and excluded by society. Considering this aspect, the reference to van Gogh becomes significant, as he is the epitome of the mad, misunderstood genius (cf. Brodskaïa 374). The painting *The Starry Night* which the film references was made during van Gogh's stay in an asylum when he suffered from hallucination (Brodskaïa 379). The film incorporates the painting by showing heterosexual couples pinwheeling in a vortex through a van-Gogh-like starry sky above the skyline of New York (cf. Fig. 8). Nathalia Brodskaïa's description of the *The Starry Night* in her chapter on van Gogh comes actually very close to the scenery with which the viewer is presented in the film:

39 See chapter 3.3.

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> Dark blue, stretched above tiny houses, the sky in this painting is filled with that mysterious life beyond human perception. The stars and the moon are brightly wreathed, while celestial bodies move among one another in entangled spirals. And man appears small and helpless in the vortex of life in the universe. (Brodskaïa 385)

In the film, the celestial bodies become actual bodies of copulating couples. In transforming the famous painting on screen, the film visually conflates artistry, sexuality, and madness. It points to the fact that Ginsberg also stayed in an asylum for several months due to his homosexuality, which was still defined as a mental illness during this time. As he recounts, his homosexuality "alienated [him], or set [him] apart from the beginning" (01:11:28-31). Even though he suffered from the repugnancy of his sexual identity and heteronormativity, his otherness "served as a catalyst for self-examination or a detailed realization of [his] environment and the reasons why everyone else is different and why [he is] different" (01:11:31-48). His homosexuality eventually became a strength for him as a poet and a means to criticise heteronormative structures employing literary expression. Staging Ginsberg's rebellion through his literature, the film characterises him as the "free spirit" or "nonconformist" (Krsmeyer 10) who "can create by a controlled kind of madness" (Korsmeyer 29) which is essential to the mad genius. Furthermore, the film stresses that he is misunderstood only by conservative people like the vindicators of the heteronorm in court, who do not seem to be able to grasp his significance of possibly altering the perception of literature by creating something absolutely new (cf. Korsmeyer 29). Their lack of intellect renders them incapable of seeing the geniality in Ginsberg's poetry. Even more so, their aggression towards Ginsberg and their intolerance of his poetry correlate with their impression that he causes instabilities in the system of the hegemonic discourse which threatens their definitions of masculinity. This, however, subordinates them and thus puts him into a hegemonic position. Even though he is homosexual, he claims a hegemonic position within the heteronormative gender order and not merely within the LGBTQIAN+ culture. This depiction can be read as a mechanism of empowerment, since the 'ordinary' man, usually gaining from hegemonic masculinity, is thereby subordinated to Ginsberg as a genius, which turns around the social stratification of gay men who are oppressed by a hegemonic masculinity. Presenting Ginsberg as a genius hence unhinges the system of hegemonic masculinity: by claiming a place within hegemonic masculinity, Ginsberg creates hegemonic *gay* masculinity.

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However, to place the gay author in the position of hegemonic masculinity does not only come at the expense of 'ordinary' men like Kirk and McIntosh ('the average man,' who is not able to grasp the poem, as McIntosh stresses), but in a large part marginalises and oppresses women, which is another key aspect of hegemonic masculinity. None of the other Beat characters gets a voice in the film. William S. Burroughs, for example, is left out completely; but at least other male Beat personalities like Kerouac, Solomon, Ferlinghetti, and Cassady figure in the film and are shown in their influential interaction with Ginsberg. Moreover, their personal development as Beat artists is referred to in the end credits of the film while authentic photographs of them are shown. In contrast, women and especially female Beat writers and their influences on Ginsberg's life and writing are completely left out. This is curious since the marginalisation of female authorship within the Beat Generation has been a controversial issue amongst authors as well as scholars. In her memoir, Beat author Joyce Johnson remembers:

> The real communication was going on between the men, and the women were there as onlookers. You kept you mouth shut, and if you were intelligent and interested in things you might pick up what you could. It was a very *masculine aesthetic*. (Gifford and Lee 235-236; italics added for emphasis).

It was not before the 1990s that the issue became relevant amongst scholars involved in research on the Beat movement and remained a hot topic in the academic discourse during the receding years. With *The Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), Brenda Knight has published the seminal work on the misrepresentation and marginalisation of female Beat artists. In the book, she emphasises her intention to "finally understand these women as important figures in our literature, our history, and our culture and as some of the best minds of the Beat Generation" (Knight 6). Anne Waldman, who is often referred to as a Beat writer as well, agrees that the male Beats "have gotten most of the credits as the movers and shakers of the 'Beat' literary movement" (Waldman in Knight xi) in her foreword to Knight's book. Moreover, Frida Forsgren and Michael J. Prince emphasise that women did indeed influence the Beat movement. By analysing "the role women have played as key junctures of literary change and innovation, as catalysts, as providers of material, emotional, and intellectual support, as editors, and as muses" (11), they cast a light on the canonisation of Beat literature which "continues to be read and interpreted as a masculine

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construction" (Forsgren und Prince 11). Considering the film by Epstein and Freidman, they argue that "the evocative social critique in Ginsberg's *Howl* seem[s] to have an enduring effect as [a] masculine cultural trope [...] despite more than forty years of feminist discourse" (Forsgren und Prince 11). Thus, they criticise the

> persistent and enduring focus on the literary triumvirate Ginsberg-Kerouac-Burroughs, their contribution, and their aesthetics. Recent films such as *HOWL* (2010), *On the Road* (2012), *Big Sur* (2014) and *Kill Your Darlings* (2014) produced in the last decade continue to fuel the creation of the myths surrounding their canonical works, and stamp their continued output on university curriculums and the general public. (Forsgren und Prince 14)

As argued before in this thesis, the cultural representation of a person or group severely affects how they are perceived in society (cf. Dyer 1). Not only does the presentation of Ginsberg as the misunderstood genius in the film mark him as a representative of hegemonic masculinity, but the oppression of female characters at the same time further marginalises female agency in the Beat movement.

Except for expert witness Gail Potter, neither are the female characters in the film allowed to speak nor do they have names. As has been pointed out before, they are marked as intruders into male homoeroticism. Considering that the film aesthetically connects sexuality and art, the female characters hence also inhibit Ginsberg's development as an ingenious artist. This becomes apparent in a scene showing Ginsberg and Cassady at the verge of having oral sex when interrupted by Cassady's partner. This scene is followed by Cassady breaking up with Ginsberg to "become truly straight" (00:32:17-18). For Cassidy, this means having numerous sexual affairs with different women, which, on the one hand of course, enhances Ginsberg's exclusion from heteronormative society, but on the other hand objectifies women on the screen. Especially in the animation, women are highly sexualised and reduced to their sexual allure for the male members of the Beat Generation, with Cassady, "cocksmith and Adonis of Denver" (00:33:25-27), leading the way. Furthermore, showing the female characters only as Ginsberg's, Kerouac's, and Cassady's nameless and speechless sex partners emphasises the tendency to relate Beat women to the famous men they were surrounded with instead of acknowledging their works of art. Instead of being individual artists or even geniuses themselves, women can only assume two roles: they are either muses for or subjects of works of

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art or they inhibit the artist's true geniality. Gail Potter, the only female character with a name and a voice in the film, is another example of a woman standing in Ginsberg's way to become a genius. On account of this, she is stultified by the film for her narrow-minded view on literature. Even though it is very clear that the film thereby tries to expose the traditional and heteronormative perspective on art as preposterous and obsolete, showing the only speaking female character in this way must be critically scrutinised.

As has been pointed out before, Potter seems not very reliable as an expert on literature since she contradicts herself in her testimony when insisting on 'objective' facts while at the same time relying heavily on her own subjective reaction. However, considering her degrees from numerous prestigious universities like for instance Stanford University and her own practice in writing (cf. Ehrlich 92), which the film does not mention, makes her less inexpedient than the film wants her to appear and rather reinforces the sexist 1950s view that a woman's opinion was not considered relevant. The film advocates complete freedom of all forms and ways of living, especially regarding sexuality. Potter does not share this view and thus must be stultified by the film. Even though the film thereby criticises conformist views, it recurs to the fact that due to the social role designated to women in the 1950s, female expertise was not regarded with the same respect as was given to their male contemporaries. This becomes obvious in a scene that depicts Potter being literally laughed at by the audience in the court room when she explains that she rewrote *Faust* (cf. 00:07:55-00:09:35). This is an accurate depiction in accordance with to the original court transcript, but, as before, the film leaves out the part that makes Potter less ridiculous. Potter explains that she rewrote *Faust* from its forty original manuscripts (cf. Ehrlich 92), which is a serious academic pursuit and nothing to be laughed about. Including this piece of information, might thus have reduced the scene's comic relief and let Potter appear more reliable as a literary expert. Moreover, the film undermines the practice of re-writing, which is a feminist strategy of empowerment. Through an act of re-vision, rewriting becomes a technique for feminist appropriation of the field of literature and thus to rebel against the dominance of male authors (cf. A. Rich "Re-Vision" 18).[40] The way the film presents Potter reinforces the

40 In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972), Adrienne Rich refers to Henrik Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* and compares the situation for women in the 1950s with Ibsen's protagonist, a woman who realises that she is being

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impression that women are not taken seriously by men. Making very clear that her expertise as a teacher for English literature is in question, the film emphasises the fact that Ehrlich does not even cross-examine her and asks her to step down from the witness stand. With this depiction of Potter combined with the absence of any other female characters, the film finally connives the gender bias of the 1950s that was also prevalent within the otherwise so progressive Beat Generation and hence perpetuates the male-centredness of the movement. Moreover, the film imbeds Ginsberg into the American literary tradition "that highlights the making of an already 'great author,' feeding off and into the celebrity figure of the authorial body" (Shachar 131) and thereby strengthens the myth of a male canon of Beat geniuses.

The All-American Rebel

As has already been pointed out, *Stonewall* does not comply with all the features of the biopic genre, since its protagonist Danny is not modelled after a historic character. However, the coming-of-age story follows a biopic-like cinematic style and traces its protagonist's development from his final high school year to the liberating act of rebellion that turns everything around for him. With Danny, the film moreover implements a character who fully complies with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. He is presented as the 'normal' everyday white American high school boy, except that he is gay. Telling his story against the backdrop of the Stonewall Riots – a movement that was initiated by trans* persons and queers of colour – centralises white gay masculinity while marginalising non-white and queer masculinities. Thereby, Danny is not only the key player of his own life but also in an important moment in history. The film makes use of two interconnected master narratives or myths in Barthes' sense: on

objectified by a male artists. She uses the protagonist's awakening as a metaphor for women's awakening awareness of their discrimination (cf. A. Rich "Re-Vision" 18). However, female authors lack role models of their own sex (cf. A. Rich "Re-Vision" 19) which is why Rich argues that re-writing is a means to see the literary canon from a different angle, namely the female: "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (A. Rich "Re-Vision" 18).

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the one hand, it stages the Stonewall Riots as the beginning of the gay liberation movement and, on the other hand, it narrates the story of how Danny becomes the rebel figure central to this movement. In my opinion, this filmic strategy embeds homosexuality into American national identity, thereby creating the myth of a collective queer identity that is assimilated to heteronormative American society. William H. Epstein sees "Hollywood as a political player in the ideological superstructure, as an instrument of hegemonic power and American national identity" (Epstein 16). Not only is the rebel archetype closely linked to American nationalism, but also to masculinity and thereby to a hegemonic position which is able to determine the perspective on historic events and thereby grant the prerogative of interpreting these events – a debate that has already been touched upon in the historical background to the film. Therefore, the rebel archetype as well as the features of the cinematic rebel figure will be introduced to then examine their representations in the film and carve out how the Stonewall myth is white- and straightwashed. As Marc Stein emphasises, the Stonewall Riots were made into the symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement, even though there had been a variety of developments leading to the nationwide revolt of the LGBTQIAN+ community. Thus, the myths that were created around the Stonewall Riots promote the assumption of a homogeneous LGBTQIAN+ community and their collective identity. Thereby, trans* people, people of colour and sex workers within the movement are marginalised and misrepresented – a problem that Stonewall veteran Sylvia Rivera had been stressing since the beginning of the gay liberation movement (cf. Tedjasukmana 64). Since "film exerts a profoundly mythological function, contributing to the symbolic order of images of the values and behaviours endorsed through hegemony" (McKelly 210), the cinematic appropriations of historic moments such as the Stonewall Riots, "commonly become part of how we remember the subject, converting what is already usually legend into codified, reconceived pseudo-myth" (Atkinson n. pag.). Analysing the narrative that rests upon the Stonewall myths is, hence, a valuable approach to examine how the film *Stonewall* perpetuates homonormative structures. In the film, this myth is produced mainly by the implementation of the rebel archetype and thus connected to hegemonic gay masculinity as well as American nationalism. Focusing on the way the film engages with historical material, I will address the following questions: in how far is Danny depicted as the rebel archetype? And how does this representation perpetuate the mythmaking of the Stonewall Riots as white and male?

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The evolution of the rebel is a pervasive cinematic theme especially in American feature films since "it has all the elements of drama, with powerful themes of justice and injustice, conflict and reconciliation; it represents a universal dilemma in so far as most societies and institutions have an authority structure which not unusually provokes rebellion or revolt" (Nitsun 2014, S. 215). The rebel as a distinctive masculine archetype has its cinematic prototype in Jim Stark played by James Dean in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). James McKelly identifies the diegetic structure of *Rebel Without a Cause* as centring on a "precariously situated protagonist trying to Do The Right Thing in facing the twofold moral challenge issued to him in the idiom of a twofold self-destructive threat – physical and social" (McKelly 211). The rebel is never completely bad-natured, but a likeable character and morally good at the core. This impression is conveyed by presenting his struggles and offering background knowledge about what he is going through to understand his motives better. These motives are driven by the complicated negotiation of the rebel's urge to behave correctly and a social background that restrains him. Thereby, he is bound to become "a victim of hegemony, driven by self-destructive frustration, sent hurtling toward the literal edge of culture" (McKelly 211). In the archetypical representation of the rebel, "hegemony visits upon youth through the agency of parents" (McKelly 211) or other authority figures which are usually represented as "flawed, oppressive and generally problematic and the relationship to authority as complex and ambivalent" (Nitsun 216). The rebel has to revolt against these authority figures to emancipate himself from the hegemonic structures that suppress him. Thereby, violence plays an important role and is depicted as an accountable reaction to hegemonic structures.

Analysing different psychological models to explain violence in his book *Why Men Rebel* (2016), Ted Robert Gurr argues that "the primary source of the human capacity for violence appears to be the frustration-aggression mechanism" (Gurr 36). According to his 'relative deprivation' hypothesis, frustration appears and might lead to violence when individuals perceive a "discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled" (Gurr 24). Hence, their sense of entitlement determines what they think they deserve, while they get frustrated when this does not occur, which increases the probability for aggression and rebellion (cf. Gurr 24-35). Since violence is seen as a typically male trait (cf. Connell *Masculinities* 83) that "can open possibilities for progress in gender relations" (Connell *Masculinities* 84), rebellion can be connec-

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ted to masculinity. At the same time, as Connell point out, "[h]egemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason, and thus represent the interests of the whole society" (Connell *Masculinities* 164). Thus, the violent act of male rebellion is seen as a mechanism to relocate the social norms on behalf of everybody else. This is reminiscent of another common cinematic trope: the white saviour, forming a "genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, non-white character from a sad fate" (Hughey 1). In fact, the

> trope is so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, while whites can emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the non-white pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities. (Hughey 2)

The concept of white saviourism goes back to, among others, two notions of white American national identity: manifest destiny, which "carried with it the implicit assumption that white Americanness was exceptionally virtuous and was divinely inspired to spread that virtue to others" (Hughey 9) and the 'white man's burden,' relying on Rudyard Kipling's 1899 eponymous poem, which "came to symbolize an increasingly taken-for-granted weltanschauung: a world populated by dysfunctional people of color thought unredeemable without righteous white paternalism" (Hughey 10). Still today, "[t]he white savior film perpetuates, in subtle and friendly terms, the archaic paradigm of manifest destiny, the white man's burden" (Hughey 15). Seen from this perspective, the rebel archetype becomes the white and male saviour of people of colour, queers, or women, who would not have been able to enforce their demands for equal rights without the help of white men. Nevertheless, the narrative of the rebel usually includes a "return to the conventional order, but on his own terms" and thus a "reconciliation of hegemony" (McKelly 211) in the end. This means that eventually some form of status quo has to be re-established, possibly with amendments to the normative order that the rebel has enforced, but still within its structural confinements.

There are very similar narrative structures in *Stonewall*, which is why I describe Danny as an archetypical rebel character who uses violence as a

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viable form of revolt and becomes the white/male saviour at the end. The film introduces Danny as a likeable character and the rebel yet to be. His background story is narrated via flashbacks, highlighting his motives for rebellion. Throughout the whole plot, he wants to adhere to the norms of heterosexual society, he does not like unlawfulness, is always polite, never swears, steals, or gets arrested. In short, he is portrayed as innocent. Danny is the naive hero, who believes in the good in people, but gets disappointed by it; he perceives himself as good and feels entitled to a 'normal' life, if not a position amongst hegemonic masculinity, which is why he cannot understand why he is constantly humiliated and treated unfairly. This deprivation explains his frustration which at some point erupts in anger. Thus, the following paragraphs serve to define Danny's story as an archetypical narration of the evolution of the rebel in relation to two of the most pervasive Stonewall myths: that the riots were led by white gays at the fore of a homogeneous group and that it ushered in a new era for all LGBTQIAN+ people. Thereby, the film links these myths with the character's American national identity: Danny becomes a rebel for the good cause and a national hero. I will take a close look on how the narrative structure of the film emphasises Danny's perspective and depicts him as a decent, likeable, and innocent character especially in comparison to the members of the gang of street youth. His adherence to moral virtues, his integrity, and his pursuit of love and friendship are presented as descent and desirable. Thereupon, an analysis of the scenes portraying the beginning of the riot will serve to carve out how Danny becomes the rebel and white/male saviour in the film, while other characters such as Ray and Marsha are marginalised and ridiculed. Finally, I will show how this depiction of Danny eventually reincorporates gay/queer rebellion into heteronormative structures, revealing the film's subliminal assimilationist agenda.

Throughout the plot, Danny is portrayed as the innocent white country youth, who does not "know what is what" (00:05:54-57), as Ray puts it. Danny's innocence, highlighted by depicting him in a white T-Shirt most of the time, is usually depicted in contrast to the other street youths to mark his morals as superior. "Danny's whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormative affect [...] allow him a social mobility denied to his new acquaintances" (Ginelle n. pag.). He is thereby put into a better light at the expense of the other characters. While they are stealing, hustling, and taking drugs, he is trying to lead a 'normal' life with a decent job, promising educational training, and a monogamous relationship. The first instances in the film that show the street youth stealing, Danny refrains from commenting. He

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even shares their stolen food with them, probably because stealing food is more acceptable to him since they need to eat. But when Conga steals the curtain from their hostel room to mend herself a dress from it for the weekend, he accuses her of not adhering to the moral standards he considers to be right. While Conga holds the curtain up to her body like a dress, Danny gives her a critical judgemental glance, to which Conga reacts annoyed and asks him provocatively: "What? College boy has a problem?" (00:36:38-41). Camping it up in her underwear, she adds: "This weekend I go dancing at the Stonewall and I want to look just right when I'm dancing. I wanna shine bitches" (00:36:42-49). Danny confronts Conga: "So, you just take whatever you want?" (00:36:52-53) and she answers boldly:

> Yeah. That's right, farm boy. I take whatever I want, and can, because if I didn't, I'd have nothing at all. That might be a lesson you want to learn before you go to college, okay? 'Cause the truth is, you ain't going nowhere other than the street, just like the rest of us. Everyone in this room think they're on the way to somewhere better. But I have not seen one dream come true on Christopher Street, baby. Not one. (00:37:32-00:38:11)

As a white middle-class cis male, Danny does not experience the intersectional discrimination Conga has to endure as a Black, homeless, and trans* sex worker. This depiction equalises Danny's and Conga's experiences as members of sexual minorities and thereby relativises Black and trans* struggles. This depiciton reveals the film's racist, classist, and sexist undercurrent. Ironically, since he will make it to Columbia University despite having gotten expelled from high school, it is Danny's dream that will eventually "come true on Christopher Street" (00:38:04-07), while the others will not be able to fully escape poverty, homelessness, and discrimination.

Danny's aversion to the street youths' behaviour is even more explicit when it comes to the film's representation of prostitution. Seeking a loving and monogamous relationship for himself, hustling does not fit Danny's conception of gay love. On one of his first days in New York, he ends up at Christopher Street Pier, not knowing that it is an infamous cruising spot in Greenwich Village (00:16:36-46). Looking for Ray between trucks and cargo containers, he does not seem to be aware of what is happening around him. When someone lights a cigarette in the back of an alley between two trucks, he realises that the whole alley is full of copulating couples. The film shows a close-up of his face: he is shocked and mumbles "Oh shit!" (00:16:46) while he turns away in disgust. A few days later,

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however, financial difficulties force him to accept an offer for prostitution he receives from Lee, one of the street youths (00:56:28-00:57:36). The offer seems to catch Danny off-guard at first, since he would never have thought of soliciting. Consequently, he initially declines: "Oh, no, man, no! Come on, that's not my – I don't do that man – " (00:57:16-18). His voice falters in the end, showing that he cannot even talk about prostitution. But Lee reassures him:

> Look, his name is Jack. He's an accountant with a wife and a bunch of kids, all right? Now, I told him that you're new and that it's going to be $25, but he's going to try to get you to settle for less. Just don't let that happen, okay? [...] He's just going to suck you off. That's it. Look, it's nothing, okay, just go! Have fun, man. (00:57:20-36)

The description of the man fits the stereotypical assumptions about closeted, older homosexuals who pay young hustlers for oral sex. In need for the money, Danny decides to follow Jack to an area of debris nearby, even though Danny seems very nervous. After the money has been exchanged, Jack puts a newspaper on the ground to kneel on, then pulls down Danny's trousers. While dramatic music sets in, the camera zooms in from a wider, almost voyeuristic angle slightly from above, to Danny's face contorted with shame and discomfort (cf. 00:58:13-33). Contrary to Lee's recommendation to have fun, Danny is depicted as very uncomfortable with the situation. Thereby the film highlights that, in contrast to the others, Danny despises of prostitution and is just doing it because he desperately needs the money. This emphasises his experience of hardship, while the other characters' perspectives are omitted, hence, elevating Danny's white experiences above those of characters who are affected by multiple forms of discrimination. Hence, "Danny's role in the film is to transfer political imagination upward, away from poor people, trans people, and people of colour and toward middle-class white gay men – who have indeed become the historical beneficiaries of gay liberation" (Keegan 54). This aspect becomes even more obvious in the way the depiction of the Stonewall Riots.

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Figure 9: Danny throwing the 'first brick' (01:35:48)

Before the main plot sets in, the film presents seemingly original black-and-white shots foreshadowing the riots, which are in fact restaged scenes. These scenes are constantly intercut with a historical contextualisation that sets the stage for the plot to unfold. Thus, the film uses authenticity devices to convey the impression that it narrates the story of the Stonewall Riots in a documentary fashion. In stark contrast to this impression, the film freely mixes events and characters based on real events and persons with a completely fictitious narrative. Presenting Danny as the white saviour emphasises his role as the rebel while feeding into the myth about the Stonewall Riots being mostly a white and male rebellion. The visual centralisation of Danny is especially obvious in the scenes depicting the riot. Danny in his white T-Shirt is always framed in the centre and shown in action. Most strikingly, he is the one to throw the first brick. The Christian symbolism in this scene, making a biblical reference to an utterance by Jesus "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7), further emphasises Danny's innocence. At the same time, he is depicted as the rebel and white saviour, symbolically beginning the gay liberation movement. He literally takes the riot away from the trans* and queer people of colour when he takes the brick from Conga (cf. 01:35:36-56). Having incited the crowd in front of the Stonewall Inn to riot and shout "Gay Power!,"

> Danny becomes the fictionalised agent of a gay liberation politics that was strongly inspired by Black Power and largely invented by queer and trans people of colour. The implication is that, before Danny arrived as a gentrifier, the oppressed queer and trans population of the Village had no political imagination at all, only a juvenile criminality they directed laterally among themselves. Danny's 'gay power' is a paternalistic substi-

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> tution of white, cissexist supremacy for actual gay liberation politics, an innovation that produces a far inferior product for a much wider (i.e. straight) consumer audience. (Keegan 54)

When Ray approves of Danny's rebellious behaviour: "Welcome to the fucking club, man!" (01:36:31-34), Danny is, ironically, welcomed to a club that will eventually push out Ray and other trans* and queer people of colour.

As has been brought forward by many film critics, the 'real' agents of the Stonewall Riots only get minor roles in the film, if at all. One of the most prominent examples is the cameo appearance of Marsha P. Johnson. As has been pointed out in the historical background to the films, Johnson was probably on the vanguard of the revolt (cf. Carter 261). In the film, however, "she is played unconvincingly by a cisgender male actor (Otoja Abit) and given only marginal, short scenes" (Keegan 53). Moreover, she is presented as rather inactive, being in handcuffs during most of the rioting we get to see on-screen. This depiction contradicts the narratives of eyewitnesses, who describe her as fiercely fighting the police during the revolt (cf. Carter 261). Since she does not matter for the plot, it seems that the film exploits her character, on the one hand to elevate hegemonic gay masculinity, and on the other, for comic relief. Whenever Johnson appears on screen, she usually behaves overtly effeminate, dropping some funny lines. She is introduced as a campy drag queen who would always stay in character, even when she is threatened by the police. During the first raid of the Stonewall, she proudly walks up to a police officer and says: "If any of you lily law girls want to dance, well, here I am! Ten cents a dance! But for our men in uniform […] Tonight is free. Tonight is free!" (00:49:34-50). While the crowd gathering around is cheering, she is arrested, which she comments with: "What else is there but to enjoy the parade, right?" (00:50:56-59). Her campy way of dealing with the police is highlighted again during the riot scenes. When she is arrested and handcuffed together with Ed Murphy, the villain who had kidnapped Danny, she whispers to him: "Mr. Murphy! Some girls look good in Chanel, but you look perfect in a pair of nice and shiny handcuffs" (00:21:07-13). Later, when Murphy escapes and is forced to take Johnson with him, since they are still cuffed together, Johnson keeps up her comic spirit: "Are you taking me on a date, Mr. Murphy?" (01:34:12-15). After one of Johnson's friends in a S/M and leather club has removed their handcuffs, she gets more serious though:

Marsha: You know what, Mr. Murphy? You're done.

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Murphy: You think? One night of faggy temper tantrums in the Village changes anything?
Marsha: I can't wait to watch you figure it all out, honey.
Murphy: Just don't call me 'honey,' you freak. (01:42:15-32)

Murphy threateningly plants himself in front of her, but Johnson is faster and punches him in the face without hesitation. When he prepares to strike back and holds his fist up to her face, her friends in the S/M-club gather around her with baseball bats and put him to flight. The fierce character who fearlessly fights back, as Johnson was described by her contemporaries, glimmers through here. However, this is overridden by the way she is presented in the subsequent riot scenes. When she comes back to Christopher Street, campily waving her purse while she runs, the film shows her taking off her earrings and pumps first before jumping up and down shouting "We got our civil rights" and then attacking a police officer with one of her shoes (01:43:51-01:44:17). In the middle of the rebellion, with rioters ravaging the streets, burning cars, and police violently fighting back, this representation serves as comic relief. Yet again, Johnson is thereby made into a buffoon character, who playfully interacts with her gender role and the oppressive heteronormative system.

Like Johnson, Sylvia (Ray) Rivera, another key figure of the Stonewall Riots and their aftermath, is marginalised by the film. In a famous speech she gave in front of white demonstrators on Pride Day in 1973, Rivera criticised the queer community for not being inclusive towards transgender, transvestites, drag queens, sex workers, homeless gays, street kids, and queers of colour. More than 40 years later, the film seems astonishingly unaware of this issue and thereby perpetuates their exclusion. Even though the Latina character Ray might be modelled loosely after Rivera, whose assigned name was Ray, she is not explicitly referenced and not even mentioned in the closing credits, when other, mostly white agents of the Stonewall Riots and their achievements are described (cf. 1:57:55-02:00:07). Moreover, Ray's rebellion is not taken seriously by the film. This aspect is made explicit when connecting his mourning for Judy Garland with the riots. In the morning before the riot, the actresses' death is announced on the radio while a newspaper article from the *New Nork Times* is shown saying "Judy Garland, 47, found dead. Her great talent will be missed, Judy's rainbow has faded" (01:15:18-49). These authenticity devices serve to set the scene for the myth that Garland's death affected the scope of the riots. Ray, dressed in a mourning garment consisting of a headscarf

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and sunglasses, visits the shop where Danny works and asks him for a pack of cigarettes. Insisting that it is "an emergency" (01:16:11-12), Ray explains that "Judy just died" (01:16:15-16). Oblivious of any queer subcultural phenomena, Danny asks, "Judy who?," to which Ray indignantly replies: "Garland!" (00:01:16-19). Even though Danny expresses his condolences, he seems annoyed by Ray's attempt to mess up his life again: "Look, Ray, I cannot lose this job, all right? I got rent and stuff to pay now. Okay" (01:16:33-38). Bewildered by Danny's curt refusal, Ray accuses him of being assimilationist:

> You're just gonna walk away from me like that? It's people like you, Danny, who misunderstood Judy. You know, and you misunderstand people like me, but that's okay. That's okay. Don't worry about it. Go, pay your rent. Talk to your boyfriend. Do what you got to do. Forget it. Have a nice one. (00:16:40-58)

Clearly, Ray feels let down by Danny, but as in the other scenes analysed before, he is portrayed as the one being irrational and not understanding of Danny's situation. Eventually, Danny relents and buys him a pack of cigarettes, telling him that he actually misses them. Not only is Ray depicted as irrational and unfair, thus elevating Danny as the reasonable and more likeable character once again, but his mourning for Judy Garland is thereby connected to the imminent riots. Thereby, the myth that Garland's death "contributed to [the riots'] emotional intensity" (Stein 8) trivialises their political scope. As Stonewall veteran Bob Segal emphasises after having watched the film

> [t]he most disturbing historical liberty, one brought up again and again in the film, is that Judy Garland's death had something to do with the riots. That is downright insulting to us as a community, as inaccurate as it gets and trivializes the oppression we were fighting against. (Segal n. pag.)

Even more so, I suggest that it also undermines the potential of the campy approach towards rebellion the queer characters took. By the way it presents this particular Stonewall myth, the film completely overlooks the seriousness of camp (Sontag 282) that is found in its playfulness (Sontag 290). Instead of highlighting the playful interaction of camp and present it as a queer subversive practice, the film trivialises Ray's/Rivera's as well as Johnson's activism in favour of centralising Danny' hegemonic gay masculinity. As in the films of the 1960s and 70s, "[c]omics and buffoons could

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get away with transvestism, double entendre and sexual ambiguity, but the heroes could not" (Russo 67). Against this backdrop, the riot scenes showing Danny throwing the first brick not only make him the white saviour, but also shows a stereotypically masculine reaction to humiliation. Unlike Ray/Rivera and Johnson, Danny is aggressively rearing up against his oppression, and in his cry for "Gay power!", choosing violence as "a way of claiming or asserting masculinity" (Connell *Masculinity* 83). Thereby, the narrative is not one of queer rebellion, which could be reinforced by queer practices of resistance such as effeminacy, camp, and an availing queer subculture, but a very masculine (and straight) form of rebellion, which incorporates the film into heteronarrative practices.

Eventually, being the archetypical rebel, Danny has to "return to the conventional order, but on his own terms" (McKelly 211) to restore the "reconciliation of hegemony" (McKelly 211). After the riot scenes there is a jump cut to one year after. Having finished his first year at Columbia University, Danny visits his hometown. He wants to reconcile with his father and Joe, but both of them reject him once again. Even though Joe is on the verge of tears when he tells him "Danny, whatever we – I'm not like you. If I'd known that you would hold onto it like this, I – I just think you should leave" (01:50:35-56), he will not change his mind about their relationship. He has married, his wife is expecting their child and he seems to have decided to lead a repressed life in the closet. On his way to the bus stop, Danny sees his father approaching him in his car. He stops and Danny walks slowly towards him, but then his father seems to have changed his mind and rushes off without giving Danny the chance to talk to him. On the one hand, these two scenes show the painful predicament in which outed homosexuals were as they often could not have both their old environment/family and being outed. On the other hand, however, Danny's emancipation still seems to rely on heteronormative acceptance, which is why he tries to assimilate to rather than break with his oppressive surroundings. Despite having allegedly chosen rebellion over assimilation as the coming-of-age plotline suggests, he wants to be the great conciliator, who bridges the divides not only within the gay liberation movement, between assimilation and rebellion, the Mattachine Society and street youths, men in suits and drag queens, masculine and effeminate men, and so on, but also between heteronormativity and homosexuality, which is the key effort of homonormative strategies. In the final scenes of the film – thanks to Danny – all the different groups that were represented by the film march together in the first Gay Liberation March in New York

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in 1970. The film seems to suggest that they have finally been received by 'normal' American society making Danny the rebel who fights for (white/ straight) American values and helps queers of colour out of their misery by finally including them into the larger white heteronormative society. Instead of a queer rebel, Danny is depicted as the all-American hero. Thus, the film implies that "the riots deserve recognition not only because of their importance for LGBT Americans; they deserve recognition because of their importance for all Americans" (Stein 19). In his inauguration speech, former US President Barack Obama put the Stonewall Riots in line with Seneca Falls and Selma (cf. Stein 1) and thereby

> staked a national ancestral claim to the history of Stonewall and situated the riots within a broad social justice tradition that included struggles for gender and racial equality. Many LGBT people were deeply moved by this, but it is worth asking what is lost as well as what is gained when a key moment in LGBT history becomes an important moment in U.S. history. (Stein 19)

Rather than dismantling heteronormative oppression, Danny comes to symbolise the assimilative tactics that the film seems to reject on the content level and thus represent hegemonic gay masculinity. Fostering the myth of a collective LGBTQIAN+ identity that is assimilated to heteronormative American society, the film grants the prerogative of interpreting these events to white and heteronormative audiences. In order to "assuage heterosexual and homonormative viewers alike with a feeling of 'safety'" (Keegan 54), *Stonewall* trades a more diverse queer representation for heteronormative amenability. Moreover, as the riots are "now claimed by more than just LGBT people" (Stein 19), the film helps to incorporate them into white US-American history.

The Immortal Martyr

Of the three films analysed in *Queer Enough?, Milk* can most definitively be assigned to the biopic genre, "one of the most conservative genres in cinema, tied to the fabled exceptionalism of the single heroic (or pathological) individual" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 249). Through "his canonization by Focus Features and its legend-making apparatus, materialized through the uncanny embodiment of Sean Penn" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 236), Harvey Milk's story "would finally be raised to the level of heroism and tragedy

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for the big screen" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 242). This incorporates Milk's struggle for gay liberation into mainstream culture and contributes to the mythmaking of his figure. Portraying him 30 years after his assassination, I suggest that *Milk* seeks to raise its eponymous hero to a figure of hope and inspiration for generations of homosexuals to follow in order to recollect an important moment in the history of gay rights. Milk's death is thereby raised to martyrdom, consolidating the gay liberation movement of the 1970s and amplifying the message of hope that Milk was so eager to send out to the whole nation. Following the biopic tradition in the representation of Milk's achievements, the film perpetuates the narrative of the martyr in close connection to hegemonic masculinity. The following chapter will show how Milk's life and death is mythologised by presenting him as a martyr. Dying for the purpose of gay liberation is tied to the negotiation with hegemonic masculinity as well as Milk's (gay) identity. First, I will introduce the archetype of the martyr in order to define the representation of Milk and his death in the film as martyrdom and examine how it is connected to his negotiation of hegemonic masculinity.

The etymology of the word martyr lies in "the Greek *martyrein*, meaning 'to bear witness.' In Christian understanding this has meant witnessing to Christ and to the Christian faith, even under pain of death at the hands of others. Christ himself is the archetypal martyr in the scriptures." (McFarlane 258). This is linked to the belief that "'Jesus Christ, the faithful martyr' inspired many early Christians to endure through martyrdom" (Wallace and Rusk 232). Jesus is seen as a martyr since he "pioneered their way of life, and that way of life involved a willingness to endure suffering" (Wallace and Rusk 233). However, the usage of the term goes back further than Christianity: "The idea of dying in a praiseworthy and honourable manner pervades ancient Greek literature, and Greeks celebrated people who faced death unselfishly and bravely for the sake of helping others [and] felt that such hero gained a kind of 'immortality' in story and memory" (Wallace and Rusk 222). Based on the ancient origin, the contemporary meaning as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* is "a person who suffers very much or is killed because of their religious or political beliefs, and is often admired because of it" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Thus, the term is not limited to a religious understanding of sacrifice but includes a political dimension. Acordingly, there are

> several features of archetypical matyrdoms:1. A hero – A person of some renown who is devoted to a good, just, or admirable cause. 2. Opposition

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> – People who oppose that cause. 3. Foreseeable risk – The hero foresees action by opponents to harm him or her, because of his or her commitment to the cause. 4. Courage and Commitment – The hero continues, despite knowing the risk, out of commitment to the cause. 5. Death – The opponents kill the hero because of his or her commitment to the cause. 6. Audience response – The hero's death is commemorated. People may label the hero explicitly as a martyr. Other people may in turn be inspired to pursue the same cause, even in the face of opposition. (Wallace and Rusk 219)

Moreover, as this list of features shows, not only his opposition, but also the admiration and commemoration of the martyr by other people and the consolidation in narratives plays an important role. Thus, the mythologisation of historic figures connects martyrdom to myths. Despite the strong influence Jesus had on this notion in the Western world, the martyr is not explicitly framed as an exclusively male figure. Especially in the Christian tradition, there are several eminent female martyrs. However, as Beverly McFarlane argues, this circumstance is not a sign of female emancipation or an equal understanding of male and female martyrdom. On the contrary, it should be interpreted as a mechanism to assign women their place in patriarchy (cf. McFarlane 259). Analysing, amongst others, the account of Perpetua, a Christian martyr of the 3rd century, McFarlane shows that female martyrs on the one hand had to be sexualised and on the other 'become male' before they could be commemorated. Thus Perpetua "is prepared for battle by being stripped naked and rubbed with oil and she declares 'facta sum masculus' – 'I have become a man.' [...] Since women were unable to become physically male, male and female became metaphors for moral categories" (McFarlane 259). This means that "'[b]ecoming male' was to show signs of spiritual development. Perpetua's 'male' body indicated that she would be victorious in the contest and in her martyrdom. Martyrdom was male-defined as policy and masculine-defined in its exercise" (McFarlane 260). Hence, gender roles and especially masculinity are inscribed into the concept of martyrdom. In spite of dying, I submit that the martyr assumes a hegemonic position within the system of masculinity in an act of reversal. Having thus established the concept of the martyr in connection with masculinity, I will address the following questions: In how far is Milk portrayed as a martyr and his death as sacrifice? And in what way is this connected to his negotiation of hegemonic masculinity as well as collective gay identity?

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The film sets in with the announcement of Milk's and Moscone's death and unfurls the plot from there in a flashback. Thereby, inversion is the leading stylistic device of the narrative, a trope that structures the whole plot of the film. Starting with the end of Milk's life, the whole plot is inverted, mirroring the reversal of death into something positive and of hegemonic masculinity as inferior on the content level. Anticipating Milk's death in this way centralises the events leading up to this moment and hence characterises the story as one of martyrdom – it is explicitly not a story of mourning but a story of hope. Following the features listed above, the representation of Milk in the film can be defined as a martyr par excellence. He is depicted as a hero not only with an honourable cause, but also with "extraordinary commitment, obedience and faithfulness" (Wallace and Rusk 226), or as Milk himself puts it in an audio recording that forms the frame narration of the film and is mostly rendered from authentic audio tapes Milk recorded before his death: "Almost everything was done with an eye on the gay movement" (00:04:12-15). Thus, the movement was more important to Milk than personal needs. After his first run for office, he decides to assimilate to the looks of a politician. He cuts his long hair short, shaves his beard off and changes from jeans shorts and lumberjack shirts into a suit. Like Perpetua, he gets 'prepared for his battle' and stripped naked of marks which are not normatively intelligible for hegemonic masculinity (as Hippie clothing and long hair). This shows that assuming the masculine role serves to exert power.

His commitment even goes so far as to alienate the people in his life who love him the most. During the campaign for his third candidacy, his long-time partner and campaign manager Scott Smith gets so upset with Milk's obsession to win the election that he leaves him. After having lost the second run for official office, the districts are newly arranged, and Milk feels closer to winning than ever. As Jim Rivaldo, a member of his campaign staff, explains to him,

> the boundary for the new supervisor district is gonna go right down Market Street, right around the Haight like this, and right around the Castro. The Haight and the Castro. That's it. If these are the only people we have to convince, the hippies and the gays, you win, you win. You win by a landslide. You'll be the first openly gay man elected to major office in the U.S. (00:36:36-00:37:22)

Even though he doubts that he, Smith, or their relationship would endure another election campaign, Milk decides to run again. Trying to

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convince Smith, he instigates against his competitor Rick Stokes and begs: “Just one more. We can't let Rick Stokes take this one” (00:45:53-57), but Smith simply answers: “Let Rick Stokes take it. [...] I can't do another one” (00:45:58-00:46:12) while packing up his stuff and leaving their shared apartment. Milk just stays in his armchair, seemingly unable to move or talk. When Smith is gone, he curses: “Oh, God damn it” (00:46:56-00:47:00), but then the scene quickly changes to the shop where he is eager to prepare the new campaign: “Bring out the old, bring in the new. This is over. Done.” (00:47:22-26), and he throws away the campaign flyers for the last election he lost. Even though he is talking about the old and new campaign material, it is also connected to the end of his relationship with Smith in favour of his political engagement. Moreover, he soon finds a new lover, the Mexican Jack Lira. When Milk wins the election to the board of supervisors, Lira grows more and more disillusioned during their relationship, because Milk has to spend a lot of time in his office at city hall. Due to an unstable psyche and feeling abandoned by his lover Milk, Lira commits suicide by hanging himself in the closet of Milk’s apartment where the latter discovers his body upon coming home from work. However, “there is no fallout shown from the aftermath of what ought to be a major narrative event, that is, Jack’s suicide. While we might expect a few scenes showing Milk coping with finding Jack’s body, we hear simply Milk’s voiceover” (Erhart 272). With the upcoming referendum on Proposition 6, Milk has to keep on going for the sake of gay liberation: “Jack was gone. I didn't have any time to mourn. There was no choice. I had to keep on – keep on fighting” (01:41:07-15). His reaction underlines that he puts his political ideals before his and his loved ones’ personal sensitivities in order to face his opponents.

As has already been pointed out at length in the chapter on homophobia and the religious right, his rivals are Anita Bryant and Josh Briggs. Framed as personifications of homophobia, they are depicted as his severest enemies. His real opponent, however, is not homophobia and bigotry, but the sense of entitlement that gives rise to feelings of inadequacy and repression within hegemonic masculinity which will in the end lead to Milk’s assassination. For this reason, the film shows Milk as a representative of (hegemonic) gay masculinity in negotiation with hegemonic masculinity symbolised by Dan White and the concomitant violence ensuing from White’s feeling of marginalisation. In contrast to the clear-cut homophobic villains Bryant and Briggs, Milk’s later assassin White is portrayed way more multi-layered. His reasons for opposing Milk are presented as much

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more complex, even though some scholars have criticised the filmmakers for "giving White an incomplete characterisation" (Alegre 187). Alegre sees the depiction of "White's crime as a clear-cut homophobic act" (Alegre 187) as highly problematic since it might lead to a "stereotyping of Dan White as a homophobic villain, [...] a strategy of representation that rather than undermining homophobia contributes to perpetuating it as an under-analysed, misunderstood problem" (Alegre 183). Moreover, Alegre criticises the film's ostensible "reluctance to see White's backward patriarchal sense of entitlement to power rather than his homophobia as the main reason for his violence" (Alegre 191). I agree with her on the point that White's homophobic tendencies are closely related to his disempowerment and the decline of his masculinity, but I suggest that the film does indeed offer several interpretative approaches as to the reasons for White's murder rather than presenting it, as Alegre suggests, "unanimously as a homophobic crime" (Alegre 179). I submit that the plot traces White's moral decline alongside the decline of his sense of entitlement to a hegemonic position within the system of masculinity. His intense struggle to uphold his masculinity illustrates the instability of the model of hegemonic masculinity, which is exposed as socially constructed. The conflict between Milk and White reveals the constant process of negotiation between hegemonic masculinity and its supposed threat homosexuality. I follow James Burns' interpretation, who concludes that *Milk* "provides a plausible explanation for the killer's motives" (Burns 320) and Andrew O'Hehir's claim that "Josh Brolin does a wonderful job of making Dan White [...] seem like a damaged and confused person rather than a homophobic monster" (O'Hehir n. pag.). The film succeeds in showing the multi-layered causes and effects that turns a relatively likable character into a murderer, including his tendency to homophobia which is intersected with his traditional Catholic belief system, his financial problems, the pressure that is put on him by his peers, the questioning of his own masculinity, and his sense of being disempowered.

The film clearly gives room for the interpretation that White was homophobic. Milk himself expresses the belief that White's homophobia derives from his latent homosexuality: "I think he may be one of us. It's just a theory. [...] I know what it's like to live that life. That lie. I can see it in Dan's eyes. That fear, the pressure" (01:04:39-53). In contrast to Alegre, I would not argue that the film takes White's homophobia as a singular explanation for his crime, but that it is presented as one of many interwoven reasons why he assassinated Milk. Not realising that this is just one possible explanation and even more so a reference to Harvey Milk's point of view

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in reality (cf. Shilts 303), Alegre argues that "screen writer Dustin Lance Black also refuses to analyse White's anger and despair; he makes besides the embarrassing mistake of hinting that White was a closeted homosexual attracted by Milk" (Alegre 187). Alegre seems to be aware that "the real Harvey Milk recorded a tape with his political thoughts and will [...]. Using this excuse, Van Sant's film focuses throughout the narrative on Milk's point of view, which also shapes White's portrayal" (Alegre 188). However, she interprets it as an 'excuse' by the filmmakers in order to stigmatise White as a homophobic villain. I suggest a different reading: the video tape recordings were included to establishes Milk's point of view as a means of representation that reverses the traditional perception of masculinity. As a biopic about Milk's life, it seems unreasonable to omit a position he held in reality. Nonetheless, the film clarifies that the interpretation of White as a latent homosexual is solely Milk's point of view. Being the only one who ever utters this idea, Milk even stresses himself that it is "just a theory" (01:04:41-42). Moreover, his friends and colleagues do not believe him. When he expresses his 'theory,' they groan in disbelief. Michael Wong (Kelvin Yu) shakes his head, snorting "No, no, no" (01:04:43-44), while Jones ridicules Milk by accusing him of fancying White: "You just think he's cute" (01:04:44-46). Their reactions emphasises that the film does not foreground White's struggle with his latent homosexual feelings but rather seeks to trace his development by revealing the interconnection of homophobia with the multi-faceted issues within the structures of hegemonic masculinity.

This aspect is also apparent in the clash of White's Catholic belief system with the liberal politicians he works with on the Board of Supervisors, above all Milk. During the christening of White's son Milk got invited to, he raises the topic of his gay right ordinance on which he wants White's support while they are still in church. In spite of White's conviction that his "constituents would not favour that" (01:02:48-51), they agree to "watch out for each other's interests" (01:03:45-47). When White's wife Mary Ann (Hope Goblirsch) joins them, however, White hastily tries to change the topic, explaining that they have "just slipped into some shop talk" (01:03:53-55). Milk adds: "the Gay Rights Ordinance. My fault" (01:03:55-57), which obviously embarrasses Mary Ann. Making sure no one else could have heard them, she answers in a low voice: "Seems an inappropriate subject, don't you think?" (01:03:58-01:04:00). Trying to break the tension, Milk remarks with a smile: "Oh, don't knock it till you've tried it" (01: 04:00-03), only increasing the embarrassment. The conversation

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highlights the discrepancy between Milk's and White's perspectives which will have become unsurmountable by the end of the film. Furthermore, the scene foreshadows the enormous pressure White will be confronted with due to his belief, his family, his financial situation and above all his former colleagues from the police department. His religious background led him to make campaign promises to his conservative voters that he is now struggling to push through against a very liberal Board of Supervisors. Thus, the first and most severe cut between Milk and White is caused when Milk refuses to vote for White's plan to remove a psychiatric centre from his district, even though White had gotten the impression that Milk had promised it. Fearing to lose his face in front of his constituents White exclaims: "Why? Why are you turning on me like this? At the last minute? What did I do? [...] Harvey, I can't go back to my family, to my folks, to my district without this" (01:14:28-51). White desperately needs to improve his political stand, since he is also in a very precarious financial situation. Therefore, he urges Milk: "Introduce pay raises, 'cause I can't take care of my family on our salaries. You don't have that problem, do you?" (01:23:58-01:24:05). Quite contrary to Alegre's interpretation, the film thereby illustrates that "White's problem was that he could not fulfil the role for which he had been chosen by his peers" (Alegre 188). Particularly his former colleagues at the police department "which at the time remained a bastion of old-school Irish Catholic values and right-wing political views" (O'Hehir n. pag.), put a lot of pressure on him, since he is the last one of the more conservative forces on the board to represent their interests. Just after a brief encounter in which White informs Milk that he had "just resigned" (01:46:51-52), Milk observes White getting summoned by the Police Association and assumes that he might be lobbied by his former colleagues. Only a few days later, White claims that he wants his job back. Milk interprets this as a validation of his conjecture and voices his concerns to mayor Moscone: "He gets dragged into this closed-door meeting at Police Association. Suddenly, he wants his job back. I mean, who knows what they might have said to him in there. Or what they may have promised him. Or worse yet, if they had threatened him" (01:47:33-44). White having actually made the decision to resign shows that he is unable to deal with the pressure put on him. However, the pressure is obviously not becoming less since he wants to be reinstated. Becoming increasingly discontented over the course of the plot, White starts to lean more and more towards the far-right Christian belief system and to sympathise with the religious right movement which seems to promise improvement for his situation. Emphasising his moral disposi-

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tion in an argument with Milk, he stresses: "Unlike you, the way I was raised, we believe in right and wrong. Moral and immoral" (01:38:48-55). Since he has the impression that Milk does not follow the same moral principles, White decides to try and block Milk's political advances as much as he can. Milk attempts to calm down their dispute, but White reacts defiantly:

> *White*: What do you want? Me to support the queers against Prop 6, is that it? […] Harvey, a society can't exist without the family.
> *Milk*: We're not against that.
> *White*: You're not? What, can two men reproduce?
> *Milk*: No. But God knows we keep trying. – This isn't you, Dan. It's like you're channelling Anita and Briggs. (01:23:14 – 01:23:42)

Milk's last remark emphasises that, in stark contrast to Bryant and Briggs, White is not the blatant homophobic villain, but "someone who is insecure, terrified, afraid, and disturbed" (00:03:31-34). However, instead of picking up his courage, White is increasingly drawn into the homophobic belief system of the religious right. The influence of an ideology as proposed by the religious right on White is thereby ascribed to the decline of his masculinity and the sense of his disempowerment. As has been established before, homophobia cannot be explained solely by drawing on repressed homoerotic desires. Rather, it can be seen as the manifestation of a deeply inscribed male anxiety about their own status in society. This inscription works from out- as well as inside of the individual, since he is assigned to the role of hegemonic masculinity from without and at the same time has internalised a sense of entitlement to power that goes along with this assignment (cf. Kimmel 282). Accordingly, they feel threatened by other models of masculinity, while simultaneously confounding their own decentralisation with marginalisation and the depletion of their privileges with discrimination (cf. di Blasi 8; 48-49). Being a white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, cis-male politician with a family, White is assigned to hegemonic masculinity and claims the entitlement to power this implies. Throughout the film, he seems to increasingly struggle with this role, finally becoming obsessed with the idea that he is on the brink of losing his power and his privileges while other, formerly marginalised groups seemingly gain more and more power at his expense. The film already hints at this in White's first appearance on screen:

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> See, I'm not going to be forced out of San Francisco by splinter groups of social radicals, social deviants, and incorrigibles. Now you must realize that there are thousands upon thousands of frustrated, angry people, such as yourselves, just waiting to unleash a fury that will eradicate the malignancies that blight our beautiful city. (00:45:29 – 00:45:50)

Thus, he reveals his own aggression towards groups of people who might take away his power and privileges, even though White backpedals later in the film, reassuring Milk that such statements "referred more to junkies than to his people" (00:57:53-56). Furthermore, White's sense of entitlement to power is made clear when he explains to Milk that his "grandma immigrated here when this was an Irish Catholic city, the City of Saint Francis. But a lot's changed here since then, you know" (01:03:03-10), upon which Milk seems to anticipate White's own repressed anxieties by adding: "You're more like one of us now, an outsider" (01:03:10-13). Thus, the film traces White's constant decline in juxtaposition to Milk's success. While Milk's gay rights ordinance passes, White's project to remove a psychiatric centre from his district does not. Struggling with his political defeats he seems to increasingly believe that people like Milk are a threat to the hegemonic masculinity he seeks and is expected to represent. Convinced that he is the one entitled to power, White seems to think that Milk, belonging to the powerless group, would have to act to his bidding. When he realises that this is not the case, as Milk voted against his proposition, White feels doubly betrayed: on the one hand on a personal level by Milk, with whom he thought he had made a deal, and on the other hand on a structural level by the social circumstances that made it possible for the marginalised masculinity to claim privileges, seemingly at his expense. In an outburst of anger, he even tries to threaten Milk: "I'm gonna vote against your queer law and I'm gonna get Quentin against it, too" (01:14:55-58). However, his intended threat completely fails to have the desired effect, as Milk leans back in his chair and answers nonchalantly: "Oh, it's gonna pass anyway and you can't keep alienating yourself here, Dan" (01:14:58-01:15:01). Milk's impertinent response aggravates him even more. Getting quite aggressive he exclaims: "I gave you a chance, Harvey, okay? I gave you a chance and you blew it! You blew it" (01:15:01-07), banging his fist on Harvey's desks and knocking over a chair when walking away. Since he sees himself in the position to give Milk 'a chance,' this remark emphasises White's perception that he is supposed to be the one in power. Realising that this does not work, however, results in a crisis of White's masculine identity, since he

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cannot even measure up to someone he perceives as powerless. Thus, in the depiction of White behaving like a defiant child, the film points to his own insecurity.

Another key scene exposing White's masculinity in decline is when he appears drunk at Milk's birthday party. Staggering, babbling, and swaying a flask in his hand, he explains to Milk: "I've learned a lot from watching you. […] I've realized you just gotta get out there. You gotta be noticed, 'cause that's how it all works. But you have an issue. See, that's your advantage. That's an advantage" (01:27:45-01:28:01). He seems unable to understand what Milk means when he replies that "it's more than an issue. […] This is not just jobs or issues, this is our lives we're fighting for" (01:28:01-28) and goes on babbling: "I've learned a lot from you, Harvey. […] I'm going to get my picture in the papers, too" (01:28:30-34). Due to his own disempowerment, White gets the impression that the marginalised now get all the privileges. At the same time, he thinks that the 'normal majority' is discriminated against and thus comes to represent "a public that worries that gay equality means the end of heterosexual privilege and the ideal of a heterosexual national identity" (Seidman 233). In an absurd inversion of reality, for him not being 'normal,' having an 'issue,' as he calls it, equalises to be powerful at the expense of people without an 'issue,' that is the 'normal' heterosexual majority. Therefore, he repeatedly stresses "I've got my own issues" (01:28:42-44). When Milk is about to leave him, he raises his voice shouting: "Dan White's got an issue!" (01:28:54-56), which reveals his instability and insecurity due to his disintegrating masculine identity. In their final encounter before Milk's assassination, this impression of being emasculated by Milk is emphasised even more. White forcefully exclaims: "You can't humiliate me, okay? You will not demean me" (01:39:13-20). Feeling thus disparaged, White comes to see that the only way out of this situation is to eliminate the factor that threatens his masculinity. As Connell points out, violence often "points to crisis tendencies [...] in the modern gender order" (Connell *Social Organization* 44), which "may, for instance, provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity" (Connell *Social Organization* 45). The night before his assassination, Milk watches the final scene of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca* that depicts the heroine's death. Foreshadowing Milk's death, the film is "building a connection between the film's tragic hero and the opera's tragic heroine. […] both Tosca and Milk manage to win their respective battles. Tosca by murdering Scarpia and Milk through collective effort of the masses and strength of leadership" (Salazar n. pag.). Moreover, the film connects Milk's political

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activism to theatre. Not only does he describe the San Francisco City Hall as his "new theatre […] You can make such a grand entrance by taking these stairs" (00:58:50-00:59:12) after having been elected, but he also explains to Smith in the beginning of the film: "Politics is theater. It doesn't matter so much about winning. You make a statement. You say, 'I'm here.' You get their attention" (00:17:14-22). Accordingly, parallel to Tosca's death, Milk's assassination is depicted theatrically: After White has pulled his weapon and starts shooting him, Milk goes down in slow motion, falling slowly to his knees, while the audio of the film becomes muffled and the music from the opera sets in. He looks up and out of the window and the last he sees before he dies are the banners for *Tosca* at the San Francisco Opera House across from his office, while the images of the opera house and Milk's face are superimposed. White believes that Milk with the help of his ally Moscone has taken away his power, his privileges and eventually also his masculinity. Milk's assassination thus becomes "a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions" (Connell 44) for White and his sense of entitlement due to belonging to hegemonic masculinity. Significantly, right before shooting mayor Moscone, White exclaims "It's not something that I wanna calm down about. You can't take this away from me" (01:54:01-05), indicating that by supporting Milk, Moscone made his success possible while at the same time degrading White. Consequently, he hereby imbues what Milk's voiceover already foreshadows at the very beginning of the film:

> I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, an activist, a gay activist, makes himself the target for someone who is insecure, terrified, afraid and disturbed themselves. It's a very real possibility you see, because in San Francisco, we have broken a dam of major prejudice in this country. (00:03:18-43)

What agitates White is the feeling of having lost his power to someone who in his view is not entitled to power at all. Even with killing Milk, however, his power cannot be reinstated. It rather exposes White's insecurity, anxiety, and disturbance. Instead of reinstating the hegemony of heterosexual masculinity, White has only strengthened the gay liberation movement and thus the hitherto suppressed and marginalised gay masculinity. As a martyr, Milk succeeds in inverting White's hegemonic position by claiming a position of power within the system of hegemonic masculinity that even transcends death, eventually rendering him and his cause immortal.

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Figure 10: Milk's assassination (f.l.t.r. 01:51:07, 01:51:14, 01:51:20, 01:51:34)

Highlighting Milk's martyrdom, he is able to foresee the risk of death, but his courage and commitment lead him to continue to fight for his cause (cf. Wallace and Rusk 219). Throughout the story, he receives several death threats, which cannot keep him from his commitment and spur him on even further. Even more so, in anticipating a serious threat to his life, Milk appeals to his followers not to be discouraged:

> If a bullet should enter my brain, let it destroy every closet door. I ask for the movement to continue because it's not about personal gain, and it's not about ego and it's not about power. It's about the 'us's' out there. Not just the gays but the Blacks and the Asians and the seniors and the disabled. The 'us's.' Without hope, the 'us's' give up. And I know you can't live on hope alone. But without hope, life is not worth living. So, you, and you, and you, you got to give them hope. You got to give them hope. (01:58:04-02:00:09)

This statement is re-enacted on the basis of the audio tapes Milk recorded before his death and is played as a voiceover while his friends, followers, and allies are shown in a candlelight vigil from the Castro all the way to San Francisco city hall. The film manages to portray the optimism and hopefulness Milk conveyed to the gay community in the U.S.: as a martyr he is able to inspire generations of the LGBTQIAN+ community. The juxtaposition of the initial and the final scenes of the film highlights this aspect.

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The first scenes are a compilation of clips from authentic footage showing the arrest of several homosexuals on the grounds that they attended gay bars, which serves to establish the oppressive heteronormative structures homosexuals had to endure during that time. In contrast, the final scene shows a massive candlelight vigil in remembrance of Milk. Thereby, the narrative of the film has come full circle. Since the first night with Smith, the night Milk decided to come out of the closet and begin his career as a gay activist, a lot has changed for the gay community. Despite his death, or maybe because of his death, "Harvey Milk's dream started casting a shadow far larger than anything he could have fashioned in life; such is the nature of mortals and martyrs, dreams and their shadows" (Shilts xiv). Through Milk's relentless commitment to the gay rights movement and his insistence on visibility and shamelessness, he was able to spread a message of hope, which runs like a golden thread throughout the plot of the film. After Proposition 8 had passed in California in 2008, the film was "edited by history" (B.R. Rich *Cinema* 252) and became "an op-ed commentary on what had just gone wrong" (B.R. Rich *Cinema* 252), that "brought Harvey Milk back to life at a time when he was needed like never before for the example of his inspirational leadership and political tactics" (B.R. Rich *Cinema* 255). This impression also results from the choice of narrative strategy: "Van Sant's decision to mix documentary footage and drama was smart: it facilitated the audience's identification of the story with the stuff of history" (Rich *Cinema* 257). Therefore, I submit that it ties in with the films of the New Queer Cinema that sought to "affirm [the homosexuals'] identity to [them]selves and at the same time to carry a message of strength and tolerance to the wider society" (B.R. Rich *Cinema* 124). Milk's cause was realer to the viewers in 2008 than they would probably have imagined. The "need to keep on fighting through adversity may be Milk's most important legacy" (Charity n. pag.). The film almost seems to call for actions against the ban of gay marriage by having him persuasively exclaim: "I can't say this because I'm a public official, but if this thing passes, fight the hell back" (01:42:38-45). Thus, framing Milk as a martyr becomes a narrative of emancipation, as Milk moves from the marginalised to the hegemonic position. Moreover, he is able to form alliances and win the heterosexual majority for his political goals. When he spoke in front of heterosexual audiences, Milk often "began to open speeches with a line and it became kind of a signature. 'My name is Harvey Milk and I want to recruit you'" (00:02:48-00:03:00). On the one hand, this shows another form of inversion, as it reverses the assimilative practice of

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including the homosexual into heteronormativity by playing with Bryant's fear of homosexuals recruiting children. Instead, he 'recruits' heterosexuals for his political agenda. On the other hand, as he needs to assimilate to the masculine role of the politician to communicate LGBTQIAN+ struggles to heteronormative society, this depiction helps to assimilate his agenda into American national history. Unlike in the 1970s, an alliance with the dominant culture is no longer necessary for survival today. Needing an adaptive character such as Milk for audience identification and connecting it with his ability to claim a hegemonic position within the system of masculinity, rather sends a signal of assimilation. Similar to former "President Obama [who] presented a posthumous award to Harvey Milk" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 257), also the film wants the martyr Milk to be commemorated as an American national hero.

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