

# 1. Queer Cinema

## 1.1 *From the Celluloid Closet to New Queer Cinema*

As in the famous Oscar Wilde quote from *The Decay of Lying* “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life,” films, like all other works of art, take an active part in shaping the perception of the world. Not only do films reflect social and cultural circumstances, but also help to determine the construction, maintenance, challenge, and subversion of normative structures in society (Dyer 1; McKinnon 4; Seidman *Closet* 13). As Richard Dyer points out:

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken [...] these all have to do with how members of a group see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally, re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. (Dyer 1)

How LGBTQIAN+ are represented in works of art such as films therefore influences the ways they are perceived in society and vice versa. Likewise, Vito Russo, one of the first scholars who investigated the depiction of homosexuality in films, argues that “[i]mages found on our television and motion picture screens cannot be viewed in isolation from the political climate of the nation that produces them” (Russo 248). In his critically acclaimed book *The Celluloid Closet – Homosexuality in the Movies* (1987), he tries to unveil the social mechanisms undercurrent to the representation of LGBTQIAN+ individuals in Hollywood throughout its history. He shows that from the beginning of filmmaking until the 1980s, the mainstream depiction of homosexuals perpetuated a negative image of the LGBTQIAN+ community and thereby might even have taken part in fostering “rampant homophobia” (Russo 248). With the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code or Hays Code in 1934 “gay representation in cinema became heavily censored. Images of homosexuality and bisexuality were banned; [...] Homosexuality was either restricted to avant-garde filmmak-

ing or it was heavily coded within the mainstream” (Etherington-Wright and Doughty185). Even though the Code was not enforced as strictly from the beginning of the 1960s and allowed the depiction of homosexuality (Russo 92), it was not revised before 1968 and replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating system (cf. Benschhoff 131). However, Russo reveals that even though the Hays Code prohibited the depiction of gay characters (cf. Russo 92), LGBTQIAN+ characters have always been present in Hollywood films but were usually strongly stigmatised “as subtextual phantoms representing the very fear of homosexuality” (Russo 63). After the deregulation of the Hays Code and with the beginning of the sexual revolution in the 1960s Hollywood had to branch out to keep up with a diversifying audience (cf. Benschhoff 131). Nevertheless, the portrayal of homosexuals in mainstream films of the 1970s and 80s remained mostly denouncing. Due to the perceived potential threat they pose to traditional perceptions of masculinity, gays had to be either ridiculed or marginalised. In contrast to the earlier image of the sissy, homosexuals were later depicted as overtly sexualised, “pathological, predatory and dangerous villains and fools, but never heroes” (Russo 122). Especially with the AIDS crisis looming up, a backlash of hatred of and discrimination against homosexuals was resumed in the film industry (Russo 123), leading Russo to conclude that

anti-gay prejudice may be more prevalent now [i.e. 1987] than at any other time in our history. Never have Hollywood screenwriters felt so secure in their belief that it is acceptable to insult homosexuals, and nowhere has fear and hatred of gay people been more evident than in commercial, mainstream motion pictures, which reflect and encourage the prejudices of their intended audience. (Russo 123)

However, the AIDS epidemic ultimately ushered in a new uprising in the gay movement, despising society’s indifference towards the massive number of deaths within the LGBTQIAN+ community. In response to the growing repression the group ACT UP “formed in 1986 to fight the government, rescue LGBT pride and dignity, and take on the pharmaceutical establishment; it demonstrated for the creation and release of new AIDS drugs as well as to stop ‘war profiteering’ on the backs of the dying” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* xvi).

Moreover, the renewed movement fighting for the visibility of LGBTQIAN+ characters gave way to a subculture producing homophile films that challenged the social patterns that defamed LGBTQIAN+ individuals and were so vigorously reproduced by mainstream Hollywood cinema. B. Ruby

Rich is the first to identify an increase in queer-themed films during the late 1980s and 1990s as a form of social movement seeking to transgress heteronormativity. She famously proclaimed the beginning of what she calls 'New Queer Cinema' in an article published in 1991 (cf. B. R. Rich *Cinema* xix). In her compelling study *New Queer Cinema – The Director's Cut* (2013), she further elaborates on the development of New Queer Cinema (nqc). According to Rich, this new wave of queer films

was a fiercely serious cinema, intent on rewriting both past and future, providing inspiration for whatever and whoever was going to come next. As urgency and rage began to collapse into despair and frustration for the ACT UP generation, the New Queer Cinema created a space of reflection, nourishment, and renewed engagement. The nqc quickly grew – embryonically at first, with its first steps in the years 1985 – 91, then bursting into full view in 1992 – 97 with formidable force. (B. R. Rich *Cinema* xix)

The films were “unified by a common style: “call it ‘Homo Pomo.’”<sup>6</sup> In all of them, there are traces of appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 18) – in short, they all challenged heteronormative power structures. Accordingly, New Queer Cinema films were able to critique the social and political conditions in which influence they were made. They focused on the perspective of the oppressed and marginalised, which is not primarily congruent with a heteronormative mainstream audience (cf. B. R. Rich *Cinema* 18). A queer subjectivity was shown as something taken for granted, thus rejecting any essentialism regarding sexual identities. The best-known representatives of the movement include Jennie Livingstone's *Paris is Burning* (1990), Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991), Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991), Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), and Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).<sup>7</sup> In addition, nqc was able “to reach a critical mass and tip over into visibility. An invention. A brand. A niche market” (B. R.

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6 'Homosexual Post-modernism.'

7 Certainly, already before New Queer Cinema, there were films representing a queer subjectivity and/or culture. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from 1975 might be a famous example. Moreover, the films of New Queer Cinema were not free of criticism. *Boys Don't Cry* was accused of factual inaccuracy by real-life people involved in the murder of Brandon Teena (cf. History vs. Hollywood n. pag.), while bell hooks criticised the representation of ВІРОС in *Paris is Burning* (hooks 151-152). Nevertheless, I

Rich *Cinema* xix). However, the possibility to reach the heteronormative mainstream and even create a niche market for queer cinema within the capitalist structures of the film industry already presages the demise of New Queer Cinema. According to B. R. Rich, the rebellious potential of nqc film ended with its increasing popularity beyond the scope of independent filmmaking. Rich argues that the nqc underwent “a relatively rapid transformation from the fringe to the centre at the level of subjects and themes” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 262).

### 1.2 *More Visibility, More Normality?*

In comparison to the negative and discriminating representation of LGBTQIAN+ characters in mainstream cinema until the 1990s, when “the image of the polluted homosexual dominated the screen” (Seidman *Closet* 13-14), the increase in visibility and positive depiction by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is of course an outstanding achievement. However, the praise of mainstream media for their inclusion of LGBTQIAN+ characters, themes, and issues has been challenged. The question about “the social costs of this new visibility” (Eng et al. 76) arises:

If invisibility was the defining attribute of gay people in the past, we have in the last fifty years or so moved to a position of relative visibility for a group that encompasses fewer than 10 percent of society. But as we’re learning, visibility, like truth, is rarely pure and never simple. (Gross 252-253)

This shows that the inclusion of LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters into the heteronormative mainstream, despite forging an increase in tolerance, can also lead to normative restrictions within the group of LGBTQIAN+. Steven Seidman regards the proliferation of LGBTQIAN+ themes in mainstream Hollywood as “the rise of the ‘normal gay’” (Seidman *Closet* 14): “Gays are today not only routinely on the screen, and sometimes in blockbuster hits, but they are often portrayed as normal, good citizens” (Seidman *Closet* 23). Not only does this normality infer that homosexuals are just as any other human being and thus deserve the same rights, but that

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agree with B. R. Rich that these films seem to have opened new possibilities for queer representation.

the normal gay is expected to exhibit specific kinds of traits and behaviors. He is supposed to be gender conventional, well adjusted, and integrated into mainstream society [...]. The claim to normality justifies social integration but only for normal-looking and acting gays and lesbians. (Seidman *Closet* 14)

Thus, “mainstream cinema has [...] excluded everything that is shameful to their perception of gay pride” (Halperin and Traub 17). This also affects the representation of sexual intercourse on-screen, since the normalisation “is accompanied by a sexual ethic that legitimates sex – for both heterosexuals and homosexuals – exclusively in intimate, preferably love-based, monogamous, preferably marital-type relationships” (Seidman *Closet* 155), which for Seidman ultimately “also narrow[s] the range of legitimate sexual-intimate choices, for gays and for straights” (Seidman *Closet* 157). Moreover, the mainstreaming of LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters has further marginalised LGBTQIAN+ individuals other than (male) homosexuals, while at the same time feigning to raise tolerance and speaking in the interest of all LGBTQIAN+ subjects (cf. Sender 7). As Katherine Sender points out, the “ongoing invisibility of bisexuals and the comic or pitiable presence of transgender people in mainstream media does not permit a ‘we are everywhere’ optimism beyond images of gender-normative gays and lesbians” (Sender 7).

Peter Knegt points out that the period between the emergence of the New Queer Cinema and the establishment of LGBTQIAN+ themes in mainstream productions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

represented a ‘hegemonic negotiation’ of the American film industry, which resulted in an acceptance of certain privileged gay themes within the mainstream, particularly those featuring white gays and lesbians played by attractive and ‘gender-appropriate’ actors and actresses. (Knegt 6)

The reason for this normalisation lies in the marketing strategies within neoliberalism since the queer subculture has been incorporated once a LGBTQIAN+ consumer niche was discovered (cf. Knegt 33). The ‘normal’ gay is

‘respectable,’ and therefore marketable. In most cases, the actors playing them are not only masculine, but also very attractive. [...] As these films are marketed to general audiences, masculine, good-looking gay male characters create a more accessible diegesis for audiences. (Knegt 80-81)

Knegt interlinks the incorporation of LGBTQIAN+ independent film into mainstream Hollywood cinema with the division of the production and the distribution of the films. The films are usually produced by independent studios and then bought and redistributed by the speciality divisions of Hollywood studios, which is why he groups them under the label “Gay Indiewood” (Knegt 4), since “the films of this trend seem to generally represent a compromise between more progressive gay independent film-making of the early 1990s [...] and their heavily incorporated Hollywood counterparts” (Knegt 9). As he explains,

'new independent cinema' suggested that there was a 'gay market' for film. This situation introduced considerably more progressive images of gays into the 'Hollywood hegemonic project' as a result. It also placed the control of the films in the hands of the 'hegemons.' They were now marketed and distributed in the corporate interest of Hollywood studios. [...] Progressive gay images were being pushed into the mainstream, but only to provide financial gain for the Hollywood institution that had initially shunned them. (Knegt 55–56)

Therefore, he concludes that “‘Gay Indiewood’ is not a ‘gay market’ at all” (Knegt 81). Even more so, it also minimises the subversive potential of films with LGBTQIAN+ content, because it allows for the hegemons to keep their power structures upheld by denying the oppressed the agency to speak for themselves. Praising Hollywood for ‘allowing’ queer films, hence, “erodes the decades of gay independent film that came before it” (Knegt 101). Consequently, also Rich assumes that the current LGBTQIAN+ discourse seems to be homonormatively shaped, as she writes in the final chapter of her book: “the new generation complained that the LGBT universe was homonormative” (B.R. Rich *Cinema* 271-272).

Other scholars, however, depart from the assumption that the subversive impact of nqc ended with its absorption into mainstream culture. Accordingly, JoAnne Juett and David Jones argue in their introduction to the collected volume *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2010), that films depicting LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters still possess the ability to challenge and hence renegotiate heteronormative culture. nqc did not simply evaporate with entering the mainstream, but advected into “a second wave of nqc that holds potential for influence beyond the original limits of an independent film audience, critics, and the academy” (Juett and Jones ix). Instead of perceiving mainstream culture as having “lodged queerity within the hegemonic logic of compulsory het-

erosexuality and global capitalism” (Juett and Jones x), Juett and Jones suggest that “in its revised, expanded form in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the movement has found much greater appeal to a broader, mainstream audience” (Juett and Jones xi). Likewise, Bob Nowlan points out that the incorporation of queer films into mainstream cinema has affected both sides. Therefore, any changes in the perception of queer films “may result not only from the ability of ‘the straight’ to absorb, contain, co-opt, and tame ‘the queer,’ but also from the ability of the queer in turn to de-sorb, break open, free up, and render wild the straight” (Nowlan 16). As Juett and Jones submit,

nqc no longer sits as the homosexual opposite pole of the binary opposition of hetero/homo or on either side of the gay/lesbian dichotomy; its new position is truly transgender, challenging the mainstream to look beyond traditional identification of character, director, and audience. 21<sup>st</sup> century political, cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical changes in gender perceptions and definitions have opened the way for queer cinema to move beyond binary challenges to promote a new wave of openness and inclusion. (Juett and Jones xii-xiii)

Thus, they argue that the films' entry into the heteronormative mainstream by no means heralds the end of their subversive potential but expands their reach and thus even strengthens their influence on society as a whole. Accordingly, films depicting LGBTQIAN+ individuals would still be able to challenge, subvert, and transgress heteronormativity. Nevertheless, Seidman usefully questions how these representations “make possible a life beyond the closet while leaving heterosexual dominance in place” (Seidman *Closet* 126), since, in his opinion, “[w]ithout challenging a culture of advertising, television, film, music, literature, and news that makes heterosexuality the norm and the ideal, there cannot be social equality” (Seidman *Closet* 16).

These two positions outlined above relate to questions of heteronormative subversion, i.e. the ability to take a critical stance towards oppressive structures in society versus heteronormative assimilation, i.e. the reproduction of parameters that can limit the possibilities of portraying LGBTQIAN+ characters and contributes to the consolidation of stereotypes. Thus, these positions provide the frame of reference for the analysis of the films in *Queer Enough?* and give rise to the question of *how* LGBTQIAN+ themes are presented in them. Since the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) was one of the first major motion pictures to feature a love story with two leading homosexual roles, it is regarded by many scholars as a benchmark in queer

cinema history (e.g. Davies 173; Etherington-Wright und Doughty 196; Juett und Jones xi;103; Knegt 8; McKinnon 171). Rich even goes so far as to claim that it initiated “a shift in scope and tenor so profound as to signal a new era” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 185):

For never before has there been a film by a brand-name director, packed with A-list actors at the top of their careers, with the scope and cinematography of an epic, that has taken an established genre by the horns and wrestled it into a tale of homosexual love with such a monumental scope. (Rich *Cinema* 185)

Hence, I consider it a trailblazer for the films in my analysis, which is why the following subchapter will briefly summarise the discussion on *Brokeback Mountain*. The film is an excellent example illustrating the effects of mainstreaming films with LGBTQIAN+ themes. Moreover, next to engaging the debate on assimilation versus subversion, the criticism of *Brokeback Mountains* already carves out the main issues of the discussions on the films that followed its lead such as *Howl*, *Stonewall*, and *Milk*.

### 1.3 *After Brokeback Mountain: New Paradigms in LGBTQIAN+ Cinema*

Adapted from Anne Proulx eponymous short story, *Brokeback Mountain* recounts the love story of Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) who meet shepherding in the mountains of Wyoming during the summer of 1963 and, despite marrying and having children, continue their forbidden on-off relationship for almost 20 years. Their relationship comes to a tragic end when Jack dies in an accident (or was killed by homophobes as the film insinuates through Ennis’ imagination), leaving Ennis behind grieving and lonely. At the 2006 Oscar Nominations, the film won three Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Original Score. Some fans pity that it failed to get the Award for Best Picture by a hair’s breadth, while some members of the LGBTQIAN+ community even accuse the Oscar Academy of being homophobic for this decision. Overall, the film received much praise from critics and reviewers, but also provoked controversial discussions.

Film reviewers applauded the film for being

a great love story, pure and simple. And the story of a great love that’s broken and warped in the torture chamber of a society’s intolerance and threats, an individual’s fear and repression. It’s a great romantic tragedy,



in the end, with no possibility of a happy ending. (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 186)

Moreover, it was celebrated by many members of the LGBTQIAN+ community for finally rendering visible LGBTQIAN+ individuals and thereby questioning heteronormativity. Christine Etherington-Wright and Ruth Doughty relate the film's subversive potential back to its disruption of cinematic conventions: "Whereas classic Westerns featured rugged displays of heterosexual manliness, *Brokeback Mountain* dared to break with this convention by inserting a same-sex love story" (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 195) and "invites the viewer to subconsciously reevaluate the history of the Western" (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 196). Queering "the most sacred of all American genres" (Rich *Cinema* 186), *Brokeback Mountain*, according to Rich, "has blown it all wide open, collapsing the borders and creating something entirely new in the process" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 186). Questions of masculinity and sexuality almost impose themselves in *Brokeback Mountain*. Due to "society's extraordinary discomfort with male-to-male affection" (Ibson 189), John Ibson infers that it "raises disturbing issues about how all American men must navigate appropriate ways to express their fondness for each other, whether or not that fondness is accompanied by sexual desire" (Ibson 189). Thereby, the film shows the impact of oppressive structures the characters experience "by their fathers and by toxic masculinity, exaggerated masculinity, Marlboro-man masculinity. A masculinity that denies tenderness and defines itself in terms of doing harm" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 191). Setting the film in a classical Western surrounding and making use of the archetype of the cowboy combines these questions relating to the characters' masculinity with an American national identity, since the cowboy manifests an "American emblem par excellence" (Kitses 24) but is also subjected to overwhelmingly traditional perceptions of masculinity. As Jim Kitses points out, "Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are nothing if not prototypical cowboys" (Kitses 24). However, they also defy the typical features of the cowboy usually depicted in classical Hollywood Westerns. "Cowboys had long been a gay fantasy" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 187), making them susceptible to be used either as stereotypical representations of gay men, serving "to enforce standards of masculinity" (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 187), or strengthening the endeavour to queer the Western. Their herding of sheep rather than cattle makes the negotiation of questions of masculinity especially obvious. Despite their similar distribution in the American West, other than cattle, sheep have

long “been seen as interlopers, the property of a lower class of immigrants and minorities. Coloring such conflicts have also been hints of a gender motif in the suggestion of caring for sheep as a less manly pursuit” (Kitses 26). In this ambiguity, “Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist were more challenging to convention, powerfully confronting assumptions common within the gay community itself as well as outside it” (Ibson 196).

However, the film’s transgression of boundaries is not limited to conventional understandings of both genre and masculinity, but also extends to the audience. Being “the highest grossing gay themed film” (Knecht 8) until then, *Brokeback Mountain* ushered in “a new trend in the theatrical distribution of such films” (Knecht 8). Addressing and being marketed to heterosexual, mostly female viewers, it managed to reconcile the “boundary-crossing among audiences” with “the willingness of many mainstream audiences not only to tolerate, but also to embrace queer cinema by voting with their dollars at the cineplex” (Juett und Jones xi). As has been pointed out above, Juett and Jones appraise this as a great “success in forging greater mainstream acceptance of queer perspectives in cinema” (xii), while other critics “feared the loss of transgressive and defiant queer cultures” (McKinnon 240). As Scott McKinnon usefully condenses, *Brokeback Mountain*

wasn't the first Hollywood movie about gay men, even if it has at times been described as such. But it was a movie with an extraordinary cultural impact, which made gay male love and sex seem more visible than any movie had before. Homosexuality, via *Brokeback Mountain*, was seen as mainstream and accepted and yet continued to be heavily monitored and debated. Its reception lay at the heart of the paradox of gay life in the first decade of the 2000s: that gay culture and identity are so accepted as to be on the brink of extinction, and yet that homophobia and heterosexism remained within the accepted boundaries of public and political discourses. (McKinnon 171)

Thus, this “paradox of gay life” is related to the question “as to whether assimilation into the mainstream represented equality for or the death of gay culture” (McKinnon 240). Most abundantly, critics from within the LGBTQIAN+ community reproach the film for exhibiting a queer veneer while actually being heteronormative: “On one hand they applaud the lack of camp, effeminate stereotypes but on the other they feel that the characters of Ennis and Jack are 'too' straight” (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 196). Knecht takes particular objection to the idea that “Hollywood

was applauded for allowing Brokeback to exist” (Knegt 100). In his opinion, this

praise erodes the decades of gay independent film that came before it, and facilitated it, in the sense that Brokeback belongs to a new economic arrangement in Hollywood that is banishing truly independent films to \$100,000 budgets and DVD bargain bins. (Knegt 101)

He explains this phenomenon with an “obvious marketability of this trend” (Knegt 82) that serves the dominant heteronormative ideology. Thus, he assumes that “had Jack and Ennis been effeminate characters, Brokeback would not have gone over as well as it did in the mainstream” (Knegt 81).

Other critics agree that by its “reliance on familiar form and mainstream affects” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 190-191), the film is buying into hegemonic structures. Harry M. Benshoff regards popular reviews of *Brokeback Mountain* as contributing to the reception of the film as heteronormative. Especially calling the film a “‘gay cowboy movie’ works to reduce the film’s depiction of complex queer sexualities (both Ennis and Jack marry and have children) into (yet once again) the simplistic essentialist binary of gay versus straight” (Benshoff 261). Moreover, he criticizes the choice of subject matter for foregrounding white homosexual men: “Not only do such characters hide or elide other types of queer experience, but their generic moorings [...] allow for the easy replication of pre-existing stereotypes” (Benshoff 261-262). Focusing on the aspect of universal rather than specifically queer love as well, William Conley Harris establishes the idea that “inclusion is, in this case, is not really inclusion; the universal category (‘any ... love’) trumps and subsumes the specific (gay love). Refusing to see difference, politically correct as the intent may be, can be a more benign form of closeting” (Harris 119). In a similar vein, Lisa Arellano reproaches the film for its “thoroughgoing commitment to heteronormative kinship” (Arellano 61). In her essay “The ‘Gay Film’ That Wasn’t: The Heterosexual Supplement in *Brokeback Mountain*” she compares the short story by Annie Proulx with the screenplay for the film, which in her opinion expands the original story by a narrative that make the characters “intelligible through their reintegration into a heterosexual economy” (Arellano 59). Hence, she argues that

*Brokeback Mountain* constructs gay characters as powerless and tragic victims of forces beyond their control; simultaneously, the film preserves heterosexual privilege by obscuring the ways that heteronormativity pro-

duces an abjected other through social erasure and exclusion. (Arellano 59)

In Proulx's short story, the marriage and childbearing of Ennis and his wife Alma "is marked by discordance or unfulfilled expectation" (Arellano 63). Arellano argues that "[t]his noticeable grim characterization is replaced in the screenplay by a series of scenes that portray an infinitely more pleasing picture of heterosexual couplehood" (Arellano 63). Thereby, heterosexual "viewers are invited to recognize and identify with Ennis and Alma; they are, in effect, encouraged to understand Ennis as familiar. This invitation produces a second, corollary effect – a necessary aversion to Ennis's persistent desire for Jack" (Arellano 64). Harris goes even further in reproaching the film for (unintentionally) exhibiting a homophobic tone:

From one angle, it reads as an antihomophobic polemic against the deforming and stunting impact of homophobia, which the film subtly implies may be endemic to heterosexuality rather than sadly anomalous. Yet it takes minimal effort to see *Brokeback's* potential to serve also as an *antigay* polemic, a cautionary tale about homosexuality not homophobia. (Harris 120-121)

Both Harris and Arellano agree that the screenwriters and director of *Brokeback Mountain* did not consider the political impact of the film thoroughly enough. This results in their rather harsh criticism that the film perpetuates normative perceptions of LGBTQIAN+ characters and themes.

As this short excursus on *Brokeback Mountain* shows, the controversy the film stirred emphasises the question of ambivalence when it comes to the visibility of LGBTQIAN+ lives. Hence, Rich rightly asks: "But visibility on what terms? Here, finally, is the heart of the *Brokeback Mountain* dilemma: [...] Is *Brokeback* merely the kind of gay-themed film that the marketplace can support?" (B.R Rich *Cinema* 198). The dilemma about visibility, however, is not unique to discussions on the film *Brokeback Mountain*, but rather, already points to the central motifs that emerge in the mainstreaming of LGBTQIAN+ films in general. Those seem to be the transgression of thematic, formal, and genre-specific boundaries, negotiations of (homo)sexuality with masculinity and American national identity, as well as the debate on assimilation versus subversion. Looking at the current state of research on the films *Howl*, *Stonewall*, and *Milk* reveals the relevance of these motifs for the analysis in *Queer Enough?*. Moreover, also authenticity

plays an important role in the films, since all three depict historic characters and events and claim a certain validity in telling the 'real' story.

Of the three films, Epstein's and Friedman's *Howl* can be described as the most transgressive regarding its form. In their essay "Ginsberg's Animating Typewriter: Mixing Senses and Media in *Howl* (2010)", Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik focus especially on the mixing of genres and media the film offers. They claim that the film's "experiment of form, clearly inspired by the bebop improvisations, fits the transgressive political and sexual content of the poem" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349) and thereby "propagates a poetics of lived experience and the crossing of boundaries between forms, conventions, and sexual experiences" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 358). They locate it somewhere between a "romantic *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350) and the "ut pictura tradition" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 356). Mixing authentic, staged, and animated scenes in "a blurring of the difference between fiction and documentary" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350), *Howl* has been received as encapsulating current affairs. As Rich explains in her film review for *The Guardian*: "As *Howl* makes its debut, another trial is transfixing San Francisco. In a federal courtroom, with a conservative judge presiding, the trial over Proposition 8, banning gay marriage in California, is unfolding" (B. R. Rich "Howl" n. pag.). She refers to the 2010 trial that eventually overturned Proposition 8, a 2008 referendum in California with the aim to remove homosexual marriages from their status of state recognition. Moreover, Rich identifies the style of the film, which "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.) as one of the main reasons for its brisance remembering that when she watched the film, she "couldn't believe how relevant this still was" (B. R. Rich "Howl" n. pag.). Hila Shachar argues that the film "deliberately utilises and confuses the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and the present" (Shachar 151) to directly appeal to contemporary audiences (cf. Shachar 129). Not only does this enhance the film's "authentic touch of time and setting" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349), but it serves to appropriate or even radicalise the biopic genre conventions to use them for their own political agenda (cf. Shachar 129). The transgression of generic boundaries is upon the most-discussed topics for film reviews and research alike. Shachar describes *Howl* as "a hybrid-genre film that ultimately appropriates literary biopic conventions above most other generic categories, thereby situating it as both a literary biopic and a critique and deconstruction of one" (Shachar 151). Therefore, the film's genre can be described in multiple ways: it is a biopic of Allen Ginsberg's life, an adapta-

tion of a poetic text, as well as a semi-documentary about the circumstances of the poem's publication (cf. Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349-350). Even though it broaches the rather traditional genre of the biopic and "it could be said to weaken the poem's transgressive power, for instance through its rather safe depiction of drugs and sex" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 351), Bruhn and Gjelsvik highlight "the way *Howl* differs from the mainstream 'biopic' through the complex layering of different media" (Bruhn und Gjelsvik 351). Consequently, they find that "by combining the genres of film adaptation and 'biopic' it allows itself to discuss questions of interpretation, literary value, and censorship" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 360-361) in a celebration of the author's geniality. Presenting "the epiphanic visions expressed by the quasi-divine poet and his voice" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 349) the film creates a tone that seeks "to match the vital artistic genius of Ginsberg" (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350), thus, following "a narrative tradition that highlights the making of an already 'great author'" (Shachar 131).

Moreover, the formal transgression mirrors the film's implied transgressive content. Especially "the animation sequences enhance the anti-capitalistic, anti-homogeneity, and anti-conformity strain of the poem" (Shachar 155). Similarly, I argue in "An Imitation Never does have the Value of the Original" – Literarische Begegnungen im Film *Howl*" (2018), that the film emphasises the poem's symbolic character for the transgression of formal and textual boundaries. Highlighting the close connection between literature and sexuality, I submit that artistic freedom is symbolic of Ginsberg's sexual liberation (cf. Müller 144). On the one hand, the film questions the hierarchical relationship between original and imitation by showing that the literary adaptation is not to be understood as an attempt to precisely replicate the model text, but rather as a palimpsest<sup>8</sup>-like moment of literary encounter between the different media visualising the multiple interpretative approaches to a work. And on the other, by combining artistic expression with sexual identity, it deconstructs the hegemonic discourse that perpetuates heterosexuality as natural or original and homosexuality as unnatural or copy (Müller 131-132). Even though all of the interpretative approaches discussed above touch upon questions of sexuality, the inter-

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8 Drawing on Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (1982), Linda Hutcheon sees adaptations in terms of intertextuality as palimpsests: „As a creative and interpretative transposition of a recognizable other work or works, adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions“ (Hutcheon 33-34).

connection of sexuality with negotiations of masculinity as well as national identity in the film has not been carved out so far.

In contrast to *Howl*, which was mostly praised, Roland Emmerich's *Stonewall* was panned by (re)viewers for its historical inaccuracies. Especially members of the LGBTQIAN+ community levelled adverse criticism against the film for not showing an accurate picture of the events that are historically marked as the starting of the gay liberation movement: The Stonewall Riots. The criticism of having white- and cis-washed the riots was mainly directed at the role of the film's central character Danny, a white middle-class cis-male and "a fictional character inserted into a historical event of monumental significance to the LGBT community" (Keating, n. pag.). Many critics argue that Danny's fictional story marginalises the agency of transsexuals, lesbians, and queers of colour who were the 'actual' agents of the Stonewall Riots, as for example Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (cf. Keating; Schou). In his defence, Emmerich argued that including Danny's fictional story served as "our entrée into the wild world of Christopher Street" (Jung n. pag.). Emmerich seems to assume that a white heterosexual audience would be able to identify with him and thereby the topic would enter mainstream discourses:

'You have to understand one thing: I didn't make this movie only for gay people, I made it also for straight people,' he said. 'I kind of found out, in the testing process, that actually, for straight people, [Danny] is a very easy in. Danny's very straight-acting. He gets mistreated because of that. [Straight audiences] can feel for him' (Emmerich quoted in Keating, n. pag.)

Since mainstream Hollywood cinema has been marked by rampant homophobia since its early days (cf. Russo 248), raising tolerance for LGBTQIAN+ themes could be seen as a valid argument for this approach. Furthermore, as Kyle Buchanan exerts, "we're coming up on the tenth anniversary of *Brokeback Mountain*, and it's still as difficult as ever to get a gay movie financed, let alone a period piece dealing with a pivotal incident that isn't taught in most high-school history books" (Buchanan n. pag.). Hence, some scenes of Danny's story are relatable for many belonging to the LGBTQIAN+ community, "particularly those set in Indiana, where his family disowns him for being gay" (Ginelle n. pag.). However, the decision to implement Danny's fictional character into a biopic-like film has been criticised to perpetuate dominant discourses despite seeming emancipatory (cf. Shugart 67). Thus, like other mainstream directors, "Emmerich takes

one of the most politically charged periods of the last century and turns it into a bland, facile coming-of-age story” (Lawson n. pag.). Thereby, he seems to presume that heterosexual acceptance would be at stake if the representation does not reflect dominant perspectives: “We simply must redirect as much history as possible through a white, bizarrely heteronormative lens, or else, the thinking goes, no one will care” (Lawson n. pag.). For this and other reasons, the film is accused of historical inaccuracy, which is among the most discussed topics in reviews and the few academic studies on the film.

Furthermore, *Stonewall* has been perceived as reflecting, but also influencing current discourses. For many LGBTQIAN+ activists, the criticism of the film is only the peak of a longer discussion on the structural exclusion of lesbians, queers of colour, and trans\* activists, many of them sex workers and homeless, from the gay liberation movement following the Stonewall Riots. Already in the 1970s, Sylvia Rivera drew attention to these deficiencies. Nevertheless, her role during the riots was massively understated by excluding her from Emmerich’s film (cf. Tedjasukmana 64). Instead of empowering the queer community, some critics argue that “Emmerich’s attempt to make Danny a larger symbol of something, and the ham-fisted way in which he inserts Danny’s drama into what’s now seen as a world historical event, feels reductive and insulting” (Ginelle n. pag.). Others even go as far as to infer that the portrayal of the LGBTQIAN+ characters “reinforces the oppression of trans\* people and creates a future of ongoing discrimination” (Appenroth 4). C  el M. Keegan sees this as part of “an emergent pattern in mainstream representations of LGBTQ history” that he calls “aesthetic gentrification of queer and trans cinematic worlds” (Keegan 50). Emmerich’s declaration that “[a]s a director you have to put yourself in your movies, and I’m white and gay” (Keating n. pag.), makes *Stonewall* “a fitting example of how some bourgeois, white gay cultural producers have adopted a thoroughly gentrified aesthetic practice for representing LGBTQ histories” (Keegan 53), thereby, “thoroughly erasing the crucial part trans women of colour played in the creation of gay liberation” (Keegan 54).

The film’s mode of representation of historic events could serve to transgress the boundaries between fact and fiction, by which the underlying social issues adjunct to the gay liberation movement could be assessed. However, as Chris Tedjasukmana points out, the problematic aspect about the film’s claim to authenticity by making use of the biopic genre was not so much the actual or supposed racist representation, but its “anachronistic narrative mode” (Tedjasukmana 67; (“anachronistischen Erz  hlweise,”



translation mine), which seemed to completely overlook the anti-racist cultural change that had been fought for in the context of queer historiography (cf. Tedjasukmana 67). In her film review for *The New York Times* Solvej Schou presents a similar argument when referring to another film titled *Stonewall* from 1995 which

likewise faced criticism, with its similar plot of a young white gay Midwesterner heading to New York and befriending a group of drag queens and trans women. But the new ‘Stonewall’ arrives amid a much-changed society, in a year in which the Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage a constitutional right. (Schou n. pag.)

This misconception of historic developments renders the film “uninterested in any history that doesn’t revolve around its white, male, stereotypically attractive protagonist,” as *Stonewall* veteran Bob Segal resumes (Segal n. pag.). Hence, “Emmerich tries to have it both ways: He wants to be on the right side of history – to absorb the radical politics of trans activists like Rivera and Johnson – while shoehorning their stories into a market-tested white boy” (Jung n. pag.). Most reviewers agree that the transgression between fact and fiction by freely mixing events and characters based on real events and persons with a completely fictitious narrative comes at the expense of marginalising the ‘real’ agents of the Stonewall Riots. Despite criticising the film for its (cis- and) male-centredness, the negotiation of masculinity has not been addressed thoroughly by reviews and research.

Like *Howl* and *Stonewall*, *Milk* is mainly perceived in its historical significance, both in its authentic representation of the past and in its influence on present political developments. In this way, the film offers a form of transgression that connects past and present “stirring a hybrid of fact and fiction, the evidentiary and the imaginary coalescing into a convincing moment of historical revivification” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 248). For most film critics and scholars, *Milk* serves as a direct response to the Proposition 8 referendum that banned gay marriage in California and was campaigned for during the film’s release in 2008 (cf. Ansen; Burns; Travers; Lenon 44, B. R. Rich). Rich remembers watching the film on its premiere night:

When the film began and silence descended, the audience began to realize what a house of mirrors we had entered. As Sean Penn disappeared into the body, voice, and mannerisms of Harvey Milk, it got harder and harder to separate the world on the screen from the one outside the theatre. (Rich *Cinema* 247)

Thereby, she argues, the film “transcends its own status as a film and became a political act” (Rich *Cinema* 256). Similarly, David Ansen claims in his film review for *Newsweek* that “[i]n the wake of California’s gay-marriage referendum, it’s hard to overstate how timely ‘Milk’ feels” (Ansen n. pag.) and film critic Peter Travers points out in an article for *The Rolling Stone*:

To those who say it’s ancient history since Harvey’s battle is no longer an issue, I say wake up and smell the hate crimes, and the bill banning gay marriage that passed on Election Day. To those who say its focus limits its audience, I say Harvey’s focus was human rights and therefore limitless. (Travers n. pag.)

Thus, the film succeeds in “validating Milk’s conviction that a gay politician could turn the tide of public opinion against homophobia” (Burns 319). As Andrew O’Hehir concludes: “‘Milk’ was never going to be just another movie, and in a season marked by the simultaneous election of our first Black president and the enactment of a gay-marriage ban in California, it’s in danger of becoming primarily a symbol or a statement, and not a movie at all” (O’Hehir n. pag.).

Shifting the focus more on the film’s transgression of genres, Julia G. Erhardt analyses *Milk* in order to carve out more general characteristics of LGBTQIAN+ biopics. In her opinion, the way the film adapts the genre and corresponds to the political situation during the time of its release bridges the gap between gay and/ or queer and more mainstream heterosexual audiences (cf. Erhart 261-279). For her, *Milk* “both is and is not a conventional biopic” (Erhart 261). The way the narrative is composed is a means to

downplay the significance of the individual in favor of a collective movement, and in so doing express an idea of group identity that runs counter to the conventional privileging of the individual in the generic biographical form. At the same time, the fact that they are spoken by a blockbuster Hollywood star chosen to play an ‘exceptional’ individual within a movie bearing a one-man title makes it difficult *not* to view the film as a biopic. (Erhart 261)

In her opinion, *Milk* is “not a mainstream film but a movie targeted at a presumably guaranteed, albeit niche, audience” (Erhart 261) and at the same time “able to exceed its non-mainstream boundaries and potentially reach a wider audience” (Erhart 261). For this reason, the film “marks a departure from both the generic studio-era biopic and the earlier gay biopics”

(Erhart 274), since the “dramatic changes in social and political capital that many (especially middle-class, developed-world) LGBT individuals have enjoyed since Stonewall and particularly into the twenty-first century, make possible a commercial interest in ‘other’ historical LGBT lives” (Erhart 263).

Suzanne Lenon, on the one hand, distances herself from the assumption that the film offers a different, possibly queer perspective, even though she acknowledges that “Proposition 8 and its aftermath breathed social and cultural meaning into the critical acclaim *Milk* received, and the movie itself became a way to rouse and anchor support for gay (marriage) rights” (Lenon 45). On the other hand, however, she finds that “the film reproduces the logic of a single-axis identity and politics that racializes gay as white, one that ultimately works to entrench whiteness at the heart of lesbian and gay equality seeking projects” (46). Therefore, she finds that the film reflects “the hegemonic whiteness of mainstream queer activism” (49):

The movie’s overarching narrative frame of a movement coming into political and social visibility, recounted without the tangible presence of bodies of colour or where such bodies mediate the whiteness of gay male self-determination, produces an erroneous discursive construct that equates gay as white. (47)

For Lenon, the film clearly positions itself in the debate on assimilation versus subversion. Hence, “focusing on Harvey Milk as an individual not only gives the contemporary lesbian/gay/queer movement a white idol, but also canonizes a certain white gay male history as the story of queer liberation” (Lenon 47).

In a very different approach towards the film’s converse with its characters’ masculinity, Sara Martín Alegre argues that both the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* and the feature film *Milk* “fail to read and interpret adequately the process by which patriarchal masculinity grants power to marginal or subordinated masculinities and other minorities, remaking itself in the process as liberal masculinity” (Alegre 180) and thereby “disregard [Milk’s assassin Dan] White’s struggle to safeguard his traditional masculine identity, [...] nonchalantly dismissing this struggle as just primal bigotry” (Alegre 180). In her detailed research, Alegre elaborates that “White’s backward patriarchal sense of entitlement to power rather than his homophobia [was] the main reason for his violence” (Alegre 191). Otherwise, however, the negotiation of masculinity with (homo)sexuality

and American national identity in the film has not been thoroughly addressed.

As has been shown in this short assessment of the current research as well as film reviews, the three films are examined in terms of themes such as transgression, authenticity, masculinity, American national identity, as well as the debate on assimilation versus subversion. However, the interconnection of these themes and a broader perspective on masculinity and queer (film) studies has not yet been adequately studied and thus constitutes the academic void *Queer Enough?* seeks to address. For my conceding analysis it will be necessary to delineate the most important theoretical concepts such as hetero- and homonormativity, queer subversion, and hegemonic (gay) masculinity in the succeeding chapters. Moreover, I will introduce the methodological concepts of the heteronarrative and the gaze, in order to interlace all of the above concepts and make them applicable to the films.