

## 2. Queer Theory

For the theoretical scope of *Queer Enough?*, I wish to diverge from a primarily historical perspective on heterosexuality and homosexuality to establish a sociological view on the subject. I will establish the theoretical framework based on post-modern (de-)constructivist theories claiming that, instead of being naturally given categories, the concepts of gender and sexuality in general and the binary opposition of hetero- and homosexuality in particular are socially and culturally constructed. Consequentially, since the social construction of hetero- and homosexuality creates a hierarchical order, it will be crucial for the analysis of the films to examine the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity more thoroughly. I will expound Judith Butler's concept of the 'heterosexual matrix,' which is based on Monique Wittig's 'heterosexual contract' and Adrienne Rich's 'compulsory heterosexuality.' These three concepts serve to explain the notion of heteronormativity and to examine the possibilities to subvert heteronormative structures by the appropriation of queer. I will then move on to examine the newer concept of homonormativity, which was coined by Lisa Duggan in her work *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003). Moreover, Raewyn Connell's 'hegemonic masculinity' will be an important concept since I am interested in the entanglements of heteronormative structures and masculinity. Having established the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity,' the notion of homophobia can be explained in its complexity. I wish to move away from a purely psychoanalytical perspective of 'latent homosexuality' to a broader socio-political view. Simultaneously, Connell's ideas also serve to examine the possibility for LGBTQIAN+ individuals to transgress heteronormativity and homophobia and thereby question and possibly enhance the discourse about masculinities. Furthermore, I wish to expand the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' and establish what I would call 'hegemonic gay masculinity.' This combines Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' with the notion of homonormativity and serves as the analytical basis to examine the hegemonic relations within the group of homosexual men and other members of the LGBTQIAN+ community represented in the films. And finally, as they are part of the process of cultural production, the films analysed in this thesis make use of mechanisms to

## 2. Queer Theory

challenge heteronormativity and/or homonormativity and can therefore be analysed with regard to their subversive potential. Thus, the final part of this theoretical approach will give a general introduction on how cinematic techniques like the narrative style or the gaze may or may not facilitate the subversion of cultural discourses about sexuality.

### 2.1 Heteronormativity and Queer Subversion

To analyse how the hegemony of heterosexuality was established it is necessary to consider how heterosexuality compares to its allegedly ‘infamous’ counterpart homosexuality. The binary opposition between the two has been the subject of many constructionist approaches towards sexuality which seek to expose their supposed essentialism as artificial rather than natural. According to this viewpoint, all “sexual norms, values, perceptions, and behaviors” (Schwartz 80) are culturally and socially constructed:

In contrast to thinking about sexuality as biological or ‘natural,’ with the prime goal of reproduction, constructionists have aimed to show the myriad ways in which human sexualities are always organized through economic, religious, political, familial, and social conditions. (Plummer 16)

One of the most influential works concerned with the ‘invention’ of hetero- and homosexuality is Michel Foucault’s book *The History of Sexuality – An Introduction* (1976). Foucault argues that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw “a transformation of sex into discourse” (Foucault *Sexuality* 36) which helped to “expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction” (Foucault *Sexuality* 37). Before, sexuality was mainly discussed by means of “matrimonial relations” (Foucault *Sexuality* 37) and the married couple was central to social and cultural analysis. Modern industrial societies, in contrast, developed an increasing interest describing forms of sexualities that did not abide by the religious rules of Christian marriage (cf. Foucault *Sexuality* 37-38). While before sexual deviation was silenced, now “[t]here emerged a world of perversion” (Foucault *Sexuality* 40). The categorisation of sexualities in early modern societies, according to Foucault, “defined new rules for the game of powers and pleasures” (Foucault *Sexuality* 48):

In point of fact, this power had neither the form of the law, nor the effects of the taboo. On the contrary, it acted by multiplication of singu-

lar sexualities. It did not set boundaries for sexuality; it extended the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration. It did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals. (Foucault *Sexuality* 47)

This also changed the denomination and identification of norms and deviants and “the physiological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized” (Foucault *Sexuality* 43). Homosexuality was detached from being labelled as aberrational behaviour and became essential to the character or identity of a person: “the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault *Sexuality* 43). My interest in Foucault’s analysis lies primarily in the observation that the shift of discourses about sexuality at the same time induced “a multiple implantation of ‘perversions’” (Foucault *Sexuality* 37). Thereby, the exercise of normative power structures moved from the restriction of behaviour, happening ‘outside’ of the individual, to the restriction of identity, ‘inside’ of the individual:

The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power and sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. (Foucault *Sexuality* 48)

Hence, in modern Western societies, power is no longer enforced by an absolutist ruler from above but becomes an integral part of human interactions. Furthermore, in his essay “The Subject and Power” (1982), Foucault defines power not as a static instance, but as flexible interactions between institutions and individuals (cf. Foucault “Power” 794). Identifying power as the determining authority for the distinction of normative and deviant characteristics, he regards “the exercise of power as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions” (Foucault “Power” 791). It is crucial to note that in Foucault’s concept of power, the individual is not impotent but “thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up” (Foucault “Power” 789). Thereby, it attaches a constructed identity to the subject:

The form of power applies to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his

## 2. *Queer Theory*

own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault “Power” 781)

The resulting self-discipline brought forward complex power relations which create binary oppositions such as the interconnection of hetero- and homosexuality. Consequently, a normative discourse was established to ensure the hegemonic position of heterosexuality.

Drawing on Foucault’s theories, both Jonathan Katz and John D’Emilio trace the historical process by which hetero- and homosexuality were “created as ahistorical and taken-for-granted” (J. Katz 69). While J. Katz focuses on the social construction of heterosexuality, D’Emilio ties in where Foucault and other theorists seem to conclude and wants to capture the “concrete social processes” (D’Emilio 263) that undergird the emergence of the homosexual. What unifies these two approaches, however, is their Marxist perspective that regards modern capitalism as the source for the development of the categories of homo- and heterosexuality. J. Katz claims that “[t]he growth of a consumer economy fostered a new pleasure ethic” (J. Katz 70), whereas D’Emilio acknowledges the transformation of the family which “took on a new significance as an affirmative unit, an institution that provided not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness” (D’Emilio 265) with the growth of capitalism. Accordingly, these economic developments facilitated “the separation of sexuality from procreation” (D’Emilio 266) and simultaneously “made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbian and gay men” (D’Emilio 266). Before capitalism, “[t]here was, quite simply, no ‘social space’ in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay. Survival was structured around the participation in a nuclear family” (D’Emilio 266) which was “so pervasive that colonial society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person” (D’Emilio 265–266). Beyond that, J. Katz distinguishes yet another reason for the categorisation of hetero- and homosexual: the “rise in power and prestige of medical doctors” (J. Katz 69) who defined “a new ideal of male-female relationships that included, in women as well as in men, an essential, necessary, normal eroticism” (J. Katz 71). In J. Katz’ opinion, this new medical approach towards sexuality was “deeply authoritarian. The doctors’ normalizing of a sex that was hetero proclaimed a new heterosexual separatism – an erotic apartheid that forcefully segregated the sex normals from the sex perverts” (J. Katz 72–73). Normalising one form of sexuality implies that it is in constant need of its ‘other,’ since, as

Diana Fuss points out, “the denotation of any term is always dependent on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality, for example, typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality)” (Fuss 1). As a result, with one being a natural category and the other its deviation and thus unnatural, the binary opposition of hetero- and homosexuality does not ground on an equal footing but is highly affected by the hierarchy and the power relations executed on homosexuality by heterosexual norms, or in short, by heteronormativity. The segregation of normal from deviant forms of sexuality hence was a crucial step for the establishment of heterosexuality as the unscrutinised norm. This is manifested in the ways certain norms that regulate society come to be seen as naturally given – such as heterosexuality, which “soon triumphed as dominant culture” (J. Katz 73) and became “the most ordinarily taken for granted aspect of sexuality that there is” (Schwartz 80).

Accordingly, Amy Lind claims that “heteronormativity is a form of power and social institution” (Lind 205). She explains that until today, “political institutions reproduce heteronormative bias and are in the business of sexuality, even when they claim otherwise” (Lind 208). This means that

the concept of heteronormativity speaks more broadly to how societal norms, institutions, and cultural practices contribute to institutionalizing a form of hegemonic, normative heterosexuality that is discriminatory in both material and symbolic ways. (Lind 191)

Likewise, Adrienne Rich argues “that heterosexuality [...] needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*” (A. Rich 637). In her critically acclaimed essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), she carves out her concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” (A. Rich 632; 641; 645), which works by “a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained” (A. Rich 640). This cluster of forces coincides with the power relations Foucault refers to, and ultimately stands for the discursive structures that render the hegemony of heterosexuality possible. As Monique Wittig convincingly shows in her essay “The Straight Mind” (1980), multiple discourses

interpenetrate one another, support one another, reinforce one another, auto-engender, and engender one another. [...] The ensemble of these discourses produces a confusing static for the oppressed, which makes

## 2. Queer Theory

them lose sight of the material cause of their oppression and plunges them into a kind of ahistoric vacuum. (Wittig 104)

Thus, similar to A. Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality", Wittig's concept of the "heterosexual contract" (Wittig 110) is determined by various discursive structures but at the same time renders itself as naturally pre-given and thereby obfuscates the fact of its own cultural and social construction. Judith Butler's key work *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) eminently discusses this conclusion. Butler critically enhances the notions of 'compulsory heterosexuality' and the 'heterosexual contract' advanced by A. Rich and Wittig, to assert her idea of the 'heterosexual matrix.' At the beginning of Butler's argumentation stands her radical rejection of the differentiation between sex as biological on the one hand and gender as cultural on the other that sprang from earlier feminist and constructionist thinking (cf. Butler *Gender Trouble* 9-10). For her, the idea that sex is something naturally given "is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 23-24). Accordingly, these gender norms suggest that "for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expressed female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 208). Thus, Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' is in fact constituted of a "grid of gender intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 208). She explains:

'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (Butler *Gender Trouble* 23)

This means that the categories of sex, gender, and sexual desire need to be consistent to "produce configurations of behaviour that would be seen by others as normative gender behaviour" (West and Zimmermann 134).

Moreover, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 33). Like Wittig’s assumption of an “obligatory character of the ‘you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be’” (Wittig 107) within the social construction of sexuality, Butler emphasises that “the ‘unity’ of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 43). Therefore,

[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. [...] Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. (Butler *Gender Trouble* 24)

Homosexuality is one of those cases that ‘fail to conform.’ In this case, the relation between desire and sex is seen as not being in congruence since sexual interest in members of the same sex is perceived as not fitting into the correct performance of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 127). By doing one’s gender right, social practices are performed that actively (re)produce the ‘heterosexual matrix.’ Moreover, following Wittig, Butler argues that the binary opposition of men and women at the same time render heterosexuality the only legitimate form of sexuality (Butler *Gender Trouble* 24; Wittig 108).

To explain the possible strategies to transgress these normative standards and thereby potentially enhance the hegemonic discourse, it seems useful to revisit Foucault’s concept of power. According to Foucault, possibilities of subversion are always already included: “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed” (Foucault “Power” 794). He even goes so far as to claim that “[i]t would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape” (Foucault “Power” 794). Since, according to Butler, there is no “doer’ behind the deed” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 33), possibilities of subversion seem to be limited: “Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations

## 2. Queer Theory

of domination within society” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 33-34). However, as “an ongoing discursive practice, it [the gender performativity] is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 43). Therefore, the pejorative failure to conform to the “[h]eteronormative common sense” (Halberstam *Queer Art* 89), can be reframed into the affirmation of “existing alternatives to the hegemonic system” (Halberstam *Queer Art* 89). Consequently, the refusal of heteronormative conditions “presents an opportunity rather than a dead end” (Halberstam *Queer Art* 96). As Butler points out,

precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder. (Butler *Gender Trouble* 24)<sup>9</sup>

This means clear-cut gender identities in which the categories of gender and sexual orientation overlap can be diffused by queer social practices which constitute a break of gender norms. “This break is a space where the performative character of gender identity can clearly be seen” (Gutterman 65). As a result, subversive queer social practices expose “the fragility of the binaristic logic that frames the predominant cultural notions of sexual and gender identity categories” (Gutterman 64). Since the “practice of the social labelling of persons as deviant operates [...] as a mechanism of social control” (McIntosh 183), one possibility for LGBTQIAN+ individuals lies in their self-identification. By naming themselves, not only do they become visible, but they also claim agency and, thus, a position of power. This is why the re-appropriation of the once homophobic slur ‘queer’ is seen as an important step in the development of LGBTQIAN+ rights.

By drawing on its historic as well as socio-political genealogy from the 1970s onwards as well as discussing the implications that emerged with the re-appropriation of the term ‘queer,’ the following chapter seeks to define

---

9 As Butler points out in the essay “Critically Queer” (1993), “[t]he failure to approximate the norm, however, is not the same as the subversion of the norm. There is no promise that subversion will follow from the reiteration of constitutive norms; there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion” (22).



the concept 'queer' in order to carve out its viability for the subversion of heteronormativity and thus its aptitude for literary and filmic analysis. One of the main challenges is that "there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably" (Jagose 99). Due to the many opposing opinions, defining the term is a highly controversial endeavour. Most obviously, this is related to the controversial etymology of the term which was once used to describe homosexuals with a negative connotation (cf. Smith 281).<sup>10</sup> Even though the term has been re-appropriated by many individuals of the LGBTQIAN+ community to offer new possibilities of emancipation and empowerment, the label queer remains pejorative, insulting, and offensive to others (cf. Jagose 103; Smith 281). Moreover, there have been extensive debates about the practicability and availability of the category 'queer' for a variety of reasons (cf. Butler "Critically Queer" 19-20; Cohen 440).

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, queer was a pejorative expression or derogatory term for effeminate men at first, and later homosexuals in general (cf. Oxford English Dictionary). However, as Butler argues, it has always been more than an insult for homosexuals since the use of the term perpetuates the power structures so rigorously upheld by the heterosexual matrix:

The term 'queer' emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity. The term 'queer' has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names, or rather, the producing of a subject *through* the shaming interpellation. (Butler "Critically Queer" 18)

Working with Althusser's notion of interpellation,<sup>11</sup> Butler shows that the label queer has always been deeply inscribed into the identity formation of

---

10 As Jagose points out, also the appellation gay was once "mobilised as a specifically political counter to that binarised and hierarchised sexual categorisation which classifies homosexuality as a deviation from a privileged and naturalised heterosexuality" (Jagose 72).

11 According to the French philosopher Louis Althusser, interpellation describes the mechanism within an ideology that subordinates the individual to its subject position. His most recited illustration of ideological interpellation is the situation when a police officer calls out "Hey, you!". In the instant that any individual present turns around, this person accepts the invocation and thus the subject position that he or she has been ascribed to (cf. Althusser 142). In *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993), Butler expands Althusser's theory of interpellation, which in her sense becomes the act of naming through which an individual assumes either

## 2. Queer Theory

the subject: “The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. [...] This is less an ‘act,’ singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power” (Butler “Critically Queer” 17).

In the late 1980s, some members of the LGBTQIAN+ culture began to rebel against these structures by reclaiming the term queer to re-appropriate it for their own positive use. Even though, at first sight, language is the target of re-appropriation, it has a wider effect on the perception of a specific group and the underlying power structures that a designation like queer implies:

To reclaim literally means to make one’s own, to regain, retrieve, recover, repossess, salvage, or rescue. We reclaim terms, words, specific phrases, so that we refashion their meanings to correspond to our particular goals, we rescue or salvage them from their earlier, often derogatory, meanings, we repossess them so that we make them our own, so that their meanings have the authority of our ownership behind them. Thus, the immediate target of ‘reclamation’ is language. However, language alone is not the ultimate goal of reclamation – linguistic reclamation is usually a tool for disarming the power of a dominant group to control one’s own and others’ views of oneself. (Godrej 2)

Thus, naming themselves and thereby identifying with their social role, the individuals become active and powerful themselves. Self-identification, most importantly though, implies not feeling ashamed for what one is. Accordingly, Ingrid Hotz-Davies sees shame as an

efficacious mechanism of social control, a tool which gains its power from the fact that it can work directly inside the selves of those insulted, shunned, expelled forcing them as it were to turn against themselves at the behest of a force that appears external but that has, in fact, its toxic allies within the psychological makeup of the individual exposed to its dictates. (Hotz-Davies 169)

The re-appropriation of an insult can, hence, be described as a form of auto-interpellation that serves to “disinterpellate” (Hotz-Davies 172) by “*showing* to anyone and everyone that one is not ashamed and cannot be

---

a male or female sex, and is thus constructed as a subject within the heterosexual matrix (cf. Butler *Bodies* 81-83). (She uses the example of uttering “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” after the birth of a child whereby the newborn is directly categorised within the binary gender order and subjugated to heteronormativity (cf. Butler *Bodies* xvii)).

interpellated by shaming” (Hotz-Davies 172). At least for some parts of the LGBTQIAN+ community, the re-appropriation of “the term queer as a figure of pride is a powerful act of cultural reclamation, and strategically useful in removing the word from that homophobic context in which it formerly flourished” (Jagose 104). Thus, re-appropriating the term served as a cultural practice for homosexuals to empower themselves by reversing the power structures that evolve around the label queer. One of the first public claims for a positive self-identification with the term was made by the American organisation ‘Queer Nation.’<sup>12</sup> In a 1990 leaflet they explain why they use the word instead of ‘gay,’ even though they are aware of the fact that for many homosexuals it is “forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best – weakening and painful at worst” (“Queers Read This”). Despite raising these objections, they emphasise the power of the term to counter homophobia: “QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him” (“Queers Read This”). Similar to techniques used, for instance, by the Black Power Movement, “the taking back of negative words has been a survival strategy” (Smith 285) for this new generation of homosexuals. Consequentially, it served as a counteraction towards a more conservative mainstream of gays and, hence, as “a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other individuals and a new self-understanding” (Smith 280).

With entering the realm of academia, and often in line with post-structuralist and constructivist thinking, the term started to become even more differentiated. Queer developed into a concept

that problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality – and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve ‘naturally’ from such consolidations. By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal. (Jagose 99)

Eve K. Sedgwick, amongst others, played a vanguard role in carving out its academic significance by defining the term in close relation to the feelings of shame that it alludes to: “Queer, I suggest, might usefully be thought

---

12 The organisation ‘Queer Nation’ formed in 1990 in New York to discuss possibilities to counteract violence directed at homosexuals (cf. Smith 277). Both Queer Nation and its British counterpart ‘OutRage’ use the label queer as a form of empowerment with “often extravagant actions” (Smith 279) that indicate their “‘in your face’ agenda” (Smith 278).

## 2. Queer Theory

of as referring in the first place to [...] those whose sense of identity is for some reason turned most durably on the note of shame” (Sedgwick ‘Queer Performativity’ 60). Thus, for her, “‘queer performativity’ is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma” (Sedgwick ‘Queer Performativity’ 58) but simultaneously also “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick *Tendencies* 8). Scholars like Butler and Sedgwick promoted a conceptual shift of ‘queerness’ towards “the performativity of gender and sexuality in the formation of identities” (Valocchi 751) and hence included power structures upheld by heteronormativity. Nevertheless, queer theory has also been criticised for different reasons.

Firstly, some scholars have objected to queer theory as well as queer activism for being politically and socially impractical because they are either seen as too “radical and oppositional” (Smith 281), sometimes even “described as aggressive” (Jagose 126), or “too politically naive and idealistic to be effective. Ignorant of the real machineries of power, queers will not be able to achieve anything from the marginalised position they champion” (Jagose 106). Others, like Cathy Cohen, claim that they are not radical enough and, therefore,

a truly radical or transformative politics has not resulted from queer activism. In many instances, instead of destabilizing the assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity, queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything ‘queer.’ An understanding of the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects on both sides of this dichotomy has been left unexamined. (Cohen 438)

The main argument against the usage of queer, though, is the accusation of over-generalising a group of people that have a great variety of interests and issues. Despite being an all-encompassing category, queer has become another exclusionary category for some members of the LGBTQIAN+ community. Especially an older generation of homosexuals refuses to identify with the label even with a positive connotation since it “painfully recalls the homophobic abuse of a former era” (Smith 281). In her essay “Critically Queer” (1993), Butler points out that even though the re-appropriation the term queer can be a powerful act of subversion, one is never fully able to

occupy a term. The “history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrains the very usages that now emblemize autonomy” (Butler “Critically Queer” 19) always resonates with it. According to Butler, this “conceit of autonomy implied by self-naming” (Butler “Critically Queer” 20) ignores the “complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which composes the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked” (Butler “Critically Queer” 20). In this sense, and in particular when it is used as an identity category, queer might possibly “enforce a set of overlapping divisions” (Butler “Critically Queer” 20). Particularly lesbians, non-white homosexuals, non-binary, trans\* and inter\* persons often do not or cannot identify with a community that does not address intersectional issues. Opponents of a collective ‘queer agenda’ argue that “queer politics brings very differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that, despite its heterogeneity, must address broad questions and common identifications” (Warner *Queer Planet* xvi). Thereby, “it reinforces a spurious idea of lesbian and gay homogeneity” (Smith 283) that is not necessarily given, especially because, as Warner points out, “too often the common ground has been assumed to be that of relatively dominant positions: whites, males, and middle-class activists of the United States” (Warner *Queer Planet* xvi). This critique shows that also queer theory is not invulnerable to normative constraints. Butler illustrates this proposition by drawing a parallel to the ongoing discussion on the political benefit of coming out of the closet:

As much as identity terms must be used, as much as ‘outness’ is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: for whom is outness an historically available and affordable category? [...] Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethical, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? (Butler “Critically Queer” 19)

However, neither Butler nor Warner generally reject the usage of queer or queer theory, but rather call for a careful examination and constant re-examination of the concept. Butler advocates a more critical debate on the exclusions drawn by queer theory in order “to extend its range, to make us consider at what expenses and for what purposes the terms are used, and through which relations of power such categories have been wrought”

## 2. Queer Theory

(Butler “Critically Queer” 20). Likewise, Warner emphasises “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner *Queer Planet* xxvi). This means “for both academics and activists, ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (Warner *Queer Planet* xxvi). Condensing Butler’s and Warner’s thoughts, it seems not sufficient to define queer as simply counter-normal or non-normative, but to additionally emphasise its productiveness to defy prevailing norms and conventions.

Likewise, Cohen argues that the concept of queer might “be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin” (Cohen 438). This indicates the great potential of queer to open up a discursive counterspace to the normal and thereby scrutinise questions of heteronormativity and homonormativity. In this sense, queer “occupies the space of the notyet, is always promissory, horizontal” (O’Rourke 108). As José Esteban Muñoz further points out, being bound to a utopian vision in the future, queer becomes an ideal that might go beyond the preoccupation with pragmatic approaches to present issues:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 1)

He argues for leaving behind the short-sighted and assimilationist present form of “queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now that is underlined by what [he] consider[s] to be today’s hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda” (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 10) and calls for “being singular plural” (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 10) to approve of the differences within the group of the LGBTQIAN+ community while envisioning an idealistic queer future. This vision includes that “queer posits a commonality between people which does not disallow their fundamental difference” (Jagose 112) and hence, ideally, queerness can be conceptualised as a “mode of opening up to and meshing with the strangeness of others, of opening up to the incalculable strangeness of the future to come, of opening up to aesthetic and political practices that do not yet exist but need to be envisioned” (O’Rourke 115). Even though this understanding is rather impalpable since it refers to a very idealistic conception of queer that has not occurred

yet, it seems useful to compare the idealistic visions of a queer utopia to the present reality in order to detect the gaps and breaks within the dominant hetero- or homonormative culture. For instance, it is important to understand that queer theory and activism should not stop questioning heterosexist norms after some achievements – gay marriage being the most prominent example – have been successfully reached. At the same time, of course, queer does not generally oppose claims such as gay marriage:

It does not offer itself as some new and improved version of lesbian and gay but rather as something that questions the assumption that those descriptors are self-evident. Queer is not a conspiracy to discredit lesbian and gay; it does not seek to devalue the indisputable gains made in their name. Its principal achievement is to draw attention to the assumptions that—intentionally or otherwise—inhere in the mobilisation of any identity category, including itself. (Jagose 126)

Most importantly, then, queer constantly needs to be redefined and reassessed to account for its utopian vision and should become “distinctly anti-assimilationist” (Smith 279). It is “a politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive” (Cohen 444-5).

Another reason why the re-appropriation of the term queer might have become so successful is the perception that self-identification implies not feeling ashamed for what one is. In accordance with Foucault’s idea of the implantation of perversion, Ingrid Hotz-Davies sees shame as an

efficacious mechanism of social control, a tool which gains its power from the fact that it can work directly inside the selves of those insulted, shunned, expelled forcing them as it were to turn against themselves at the behest of a force that appears external but that has, in fact, its toxic allies within the psychological makeup of the individual exposed to its dictates. (Hotz-Davies 169)

Subversive social practices pursued by LGBTQIAN+ individuals can only be productive when, or more precisely because, they “refuse [...] to accept that the shamings and the feelings of shame [they are] exposed to are justified” (Hotz-Davies 169). Therefore, shamelessness becomes a productive counteract against heteronormative structures, “a weapon against a ubiquitous threat of homophobia and in general the tyranny of the normal” (Hotz-

Davies 181). This might also be a reason why the slogan ‘Gay Pride’ became so prevalent in the gay liberation movement. Lind emphasises the ambivalence of the notion of visibility regarding homo- and heterosexuality by demonstrating the dynamic process between the invisibility of heterosexuality as the unmarked sexuality, and its visibility as the normalised, ubiquitous sexuality. A similar mechanism is at play with homosexuality, which is marginalised and thereby pushed into invisibility while it is simultaneously hyper-visible as the abject ‘other,’ perverse sexuality (cf. Lind 190). Lind points out that sexuality itself might be regarded as “a form of power, one that has been used both in repressive and productive ways” (Lind 190). Seen from a productive angle, the power structures that repress deviant forms of sexuality can be used to fight against the repression (Lind 190), while becoming visible can be an empowering process to move out of the margins of society. Thereby, one important mechanism for homosexuals to make themselves visible is coming out of the closet. Lind defines the closet as “a metaphor of privacy and secrecy” (Lind 196), while coming out marks the symbolic act “of entering the realm of public life” (Lind 196). No longer accepting invisibility, subordination, and marginalisation by society, it can be seen as an act of self-empowerment. LGBTQIAN+ individuals become visible, refuse to feel ashamed, and are able to challenge heteronormativity.

However, the relation of the closet and of coming out is a more complex process. In her critically acclaimed book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick identifies the charged relationship between knowledge and ignorance with regard to the closet. Drawing on speech act theory and performativity, she claims that “[c]loseted-ness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 3). Thus, coming out is “a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden” (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 70). Many LGBTQIAN+ individuals experience several coming-out-moments in the course of their lives. Often they first come out to one group of people who seem more open-minded or who they feel they can trust (for instance their close friends) and stay longer in the closet in front of others who might be more conservative or possibly homophobic (for instance their family members, work colleagues, or members of their religious affiliation) (cf. Seidman 8; Chambers 25). In his book *Beyond the Closet* (2004), Seidman defines the closet therefore as



a condition of social oppression. Closeted individuals suffer systematic forms of disadvantage and disrespect. Accordingly, the closet is not simply a product of individual ignorance and discrete acts of prejudice and discrimination, but is created by the actions of the government, the criminal justice system, families, and popular and scientific culture. In short, the closet refers to a state of gay oppression produced by a condition of heterosexual dominance. (Seidman *Closet* 8)

Rather than an individual decision, coming out is linked with heteronormativity and the social pressure that comes along with it. Some scholars even see heteronormativity as the precondition for the closet, arguing that it “produces the closet, for without the presumption of heterosexuality, there would be no closet. And heteronormativity constitutes the closet as a liminal realm [...] that is impossible to fully inhabit or fully vacate” (Chambers 25). In agreement with this view, Butler argues that the closet does not unfold its full power without the heteronormative discourse surrounding it. Even more important to her, however, is the assumption that the correlation between heteronormativity and the closet leads to the formation of ‘new closets’ once someone has come out:

If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.' [...] being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out.' In this sense *outness* can only produce a new opacity; and *the closet* produces a promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come. (Butler ‘Imitation’ 309)

Therefore, even though she acknowledges the positive impact coming out might have for some, she opposes any essentialist approach and is very conscious of the inherent risk “that the subjection that subjugates the gay or lesbian subject in some way continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once ‘outness’ is claimed” (Butler ‘Imitation’ 308–309). Insidiously, because homosexuals might be under the impression of freeing themselves while, in reality, the act of coming out might become normative (in that there is a ‘right’ way of coming out) as a regulatory tool of the oppressive system of heteronormativity. Likewise, Stephen Valocchi claims that “the naming of and then the fight against the closet, a process that is taken as a mark of progress for gays and lesbians, has the consequence of inscribing the homosexual/heterosexual binary deeper in public life and in the official

## 2. Queer Theory

commitments of the gay and lesbian movement” (Valocchi 761-762). This conclusion links the discussion of the closet to the more general question of visibility. The affirmation of one’s homosexual identity was and still is an important step for the advancement of gay rights. Nonetheless, identity categories presume some kind of core identity or core trait and might thus serve to make exclusions. Of course, this does not mean that affirmative acts should be abandoned, but rather calls for a careful interaction with identity categories. Butler condenses the argument as follows:

There is no question that gays and lesbians are threatened by the violence of public erasure, but the decision to counter that violence must be careful not to reinstall another in its place. Which version of lesbian and gay ought to be rendered visible, and which internal exclusions will that rendering visible institute? Can the visibility of identity *suffice* as a political strategy, or can it only be the starting point for a strategic intervention which calls for transformation of policy? [...] This is not a call to return to silence and invisibility, but, rather, to make use of a category that can be called into question, made to account for what it excludes. (Butler ‘Imitation’ 311)

For this reason, Seidman believes that “simply coming out does not rid us of feelings of shame and guilt, and that visibility alone does not threaten heterosexual privilege” (Seidman *Closet* 7).

Moreover, gay or queer pride in its function of gaining visibility and stripping off shame, has also been criticised in more recent discussions. Concentrating on the notion of shame, the essays in the collected volume *Gay Shame* (2009), edited by David Halperin and Valerie Traub, reject the cultural self-affirmation they associate with ‘gay pride’ (cf. Halperin and Traub 8). The reason for this lies, according to Deborah Gould’s paper, in a certain “desire for relief from the painful condition of non-recognition owing to sexual difference [which] can create a pull toward social conformity, and specifically toward adoption of mainstream political norms” (Gould 224). This development, however, comes “at the cost of suppressing gay difference and buying into mainstream oppressive values” (Gould 245). Thus, she argues that “countering shame by disavowing that which the mainstreams deems shameful and unworthy of recognition” (Gould 246) does not help to challenge “society’s understanding of what is shameful” (Gould 246). According to the authors of *Gay Shame*, instead of taking “pride in gay difference” (Gould 246), gay pride has “turn[ed] into mere social conformity” (Halperin 44).

This argument can be further undergirded by Jack Halberstam's critique of gay pride for its reactionary tendencies. In his essay "Shame and White Gay Masculinity" (2005), Halberstam seeks "to unravel and make visible the deeply invested identity politics of white gay men that have obscured more radical agendas" (Halberstam "Shame" 220). Comparing the logic of gay pride to feminism and the rebellion against racism, Halberstam condenses that, by centring on white (cis-)males, the gay movement advances pride as a weapon against shame, however, without "taking apart the social processes that project shame onto queer subjects in the first place" (Halberstam "Shame" 224). By stabilising the binary opposition of shame and pride, gay pride does not process the social reality that many queers live in and is therefore not able to challenge the circumstances that produced shame after all. Therefore, it is important to consider not only *that* someone is out of the closet or *that* homosexuality is visible but also *how* that person is out and visible and what this means for their surroundings. Eventually, normativity needs to be challenged rather than making it work towards the assimilation of homosexuality into the realm of heteronormativity. As a result, I suggest that visibility can only be a precondition to challenge the normative power structures in society and is thus just the basis for subverting heteronormativity by queer social practices and the accompanying self-empowerment. With the help of a queer utopia always looming in the future (and which might never be reached), hegemonic relationships within the boundaries of queerness can be detected and described, for instance, the dominance of white, homosexual cis-men within the LGBTQIAN+ community. This will be examined more closely in the following subchapter, drawing on Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity and Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity.

## 2.2 Homonormativity and Hegemonic Gay Masculinity

Despite the phonologic and morphologic similarities to the word heteronormativity, it would be wrong to infer that homonormativity is the simple reversal of heteronormativity and describes a privileging of homosexuals over heterosexuals.<sup>13</sup> It is rather a concept to describe the dominance of a

---

13 Some scholars do indeed refer to the term in this sense, but as Lisa Duggan argues, "there is no structure for gay life, no matter how conservative or normalizing, that might compare with the institutions promoting and sustaining heterosexual

## 2. Queer Theory

certain group within the LGBTQIAN+ community as well as the reluctance of this group to challenge the subordination of queers by heteronormativity. Even though this is definitively the most extensive consequence of homonormativity, the concept is more complex than that and, as will be examined in the following subchapter, closely related to the social stratifications implemented in a neoliberal society. Lisa Duggan was the central theorist to coin the term ‘homonormativity’ and to investigate its correlation with neoliberalism. The implications of her theory, however, have been carved out before, especially by Michael Warner. For this reason, I will first take a broader look on the issue of hierarchisation in the gay community before I will sketch the genesis of the concept in Duggan’s sense and how it was further developed by other scholars.

Already in 1993, ten years before Duggan made the term ‘homonormativity’ popular, Warner describes what he later called ‘gay normality’ in the introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet – Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993), initially as a debate about finding a “common ground of ‘identity politics’” (Warner *Queer Planet* xvi) within the LGBTQIAN+ community. However, in his opinion, “too often the common ground has been assumed to be that of relatively dominant positions: whites, males, and middle-class” (Warner *Queer Planet* xvi). This lies in the structural organisation of the gay liberation movement and its close ties with capitalism:

In the lesbian and gay movement, to a much greater degree than in any comparable movement, the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial districts. Nonmarket forms of association that have been central to other movements – churches, kinship, traditional residence – have been less available for queers. This structural environment has meant that the institutions of queer culture have been dominated by those with capital: typically, middle-class white men. (Warner *Queer Planet* xvi-xvii)

In *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) Warner further specifies this thought by analysing more thoroughly what ‘normal’ means and which implications this involves. For him, the notion of acceptance by the majority is central

---

coupling” (Duggan *Twilight* 94). Also, Peter Drucker stresses that: “[t]he rise of homonormativity by no means implies that the larger societies are less heteronormative; on the contrary homonormativity reflects and adapts to the heterosexual norm. The superficial multiculturalism characteristic of neoliberalism barely masks growing racial inequality” (Drucker 220).

for the urge of a minority group to be regarded as ‘normal’ i.e. “certified, approved, as meeting a set of normative standards” (Warner *Trouble* 56). “Like most stigmatized groups, gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture” (Warner *Trouble* 50). This form of integration, according to Warner, is problematic in so far as it creates a “hierarchy of respectability” (Warner *Trouble* 49) that assumes that it “makes them more respectable, easier to defend, the worthier pillars of the community, and the real constituency of the movement” (Warner *Trouble* 49). This implies that “those who are most concerned with winning respect might find themselves wishing that their peers in shame would be a little less queer, a little more decent” (Warner *Trouble* 50).

Arguing in a similar fashion, Helene A. Shugart points to the urge of many male homosexuals for “viability in a heterosexual and heteronormative community” (Shugart 70). For her, their concerns about their respectability obfuscates “the range and complexity of gay (and lesbian) identity [...], and ‘acceptable’ gay identity is limited to that which most closely approximates heteronormative conventions of masculinity” (Shugart 73). This development led to what Steven Seidman calls “the rise of the ‘normal gay’” (Seidman *Closet* 13-14):

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; [and] conforms to dichotomous gender norms, that is private, tender, caring, genitally centered, and linked to love, marriage, and monogamy. (Seidman *Closet* 14-17)

Seidman argues that assimilationists replaced the more radical liberationists of the 1970s and forged the legal equality of gays within the realm of heteronormativity (cf. Seidman *Closet* 227). Problematic about this process is that the “claim to normality justifies social integration but only for normal-looking and acting gays and lesbians” (Seidman *Closet* 14) which “involves minority rights, not the end of heterosexual privilege” (Seidman *Closet* 14). Thereby, those “gays and lesbians have been complicit with a heterosexual power-structure fundamentally indifferent or inimical to them” (Jagose 115). According to anti-assimilationist theorists, then, this complicity creates new forms of exclusions that marginalise members of the LGBTQIAN+ community who are not assimilated to mainstream society. Urvashi Vaid usefully condenses this argument in her book *Virtual*

## 2. Queer Theory

*Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (1995): “The irony of gay and lesbian mainstreaming is that more than fifty years of active effort to challenge homophobia and heterosexism have yielded us not freedom but ‘virtual equality’” (Vaid 5). For her, actual equality cannot be achieved without challenging the structural and institutional status quo within larger society. Instead of simply integrating an assimilated form of homosexuality, the institutional manifestations of heteronormativity as such have to be transformed to be more inclusive of racial, gender, and economic difference.

In summary, without using the same terminology, other scholars have made use of the concept of homonormativity in similar ways to Duggan. The following paragraphs will now examine her perspective more closely. In her book *Sex Wars – Sexual Dissident and Political Culture* (1996), Duggan describes how she realised in the late 1990s that the sexually and gender-diverse LGBTQIAN+ community was not as inclusive as she thought it was, especially with regards to issues of class or race. She learned that it was in fact dominated by a white middle-class majority (cf. *Sex Wars* 214-215). To specify her perspective, she takes the struggle for gay marriage as an example. Very similar to other anti-assimilationists’ argumentation, she calls attention to the negative impact of a desire for respectability inherent to being married: “Both legally and socially, married couples are held in greater esteem than unmarried couples because of the commitment they have made in a serious, public, legally enforceable manner” (Duggan *Sex Wars* 227). “If pursued in this way”, however, “the drive for gay-marriage equality can undermine rather than support the broader movement for social justice and democratic diversity” (Duggan *Sex Wars* 228). In her critically acclaimed book *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003) she draws a connection between the desire for respectability of some homosexuals and the neoliberal structures they developed in. She argues that “within the neoliberal mainstream, some proponents of ‘equality politics’ [...] promote ‘colorblind’ anti-affirmative action racial politics, conservative-libertarian ‘equality feminism,’ and gay ‘normality’” (Duggan *Twilight* 45). Consequently, she develops her definition of homonormativity by inferring that these

new neoliberal sexual politics [...] might be termed *the new homonormativity* – it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privat-

ized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (Duggan *Twilight* 50; italics added for emphasis)

Thus, in the same fashion as Warner and Seidman, Duggan asserts that gay normality, or homonormativity, stratifies members of the LGBTQIAN+ communities and thereby creates hierarchies of respectability. People who clearly conform to the heterosexist norms of gender intelligibility sit at the top while the bottom of the hierarchy is made up by those who are less conforming to these normative standards. What is *new* about her concept of homonormativity, though, is that it encompasses the increasing trend towards more right-wing gay conservative politics within the LGBTQIAN+ community which was brought about by a higher public visibility of homosexuality in more recent years. In Duggan's opinion, gay assimilation developed from being a matter of (personal) preference for those who are "the most assimilated, genderappropriate, politically mainstream portions of the gay population" (Duggan *Twilight* 44) to becoming enforced by political groups of gay conservatives that vehemently wish to deny more 'deviant' LGBTQIAN+ individuals access to basic human rights by "invoking a phantom mainstream public of 'conventional' gays who represent the responsible center" (Duggan *Twilight* 44).

Most distressingly for her, those groups are gaining more and more popularity.<sup>14</sup> Thereby, for Duggan, "[t]his new formation is not merely a position on the spectrum of gay movement politics, but is a crucial new part of the cultural front of neoliberalism in the United States" (Duggan *Twilight* 49). This shows that the homonormative agenda seeks to promote one 'legitimate' form of homosexuality while at the same time forcing everyone who does not concur with this norm into the invisible realm of privacy. The public/private debate shifted from the need for a right to privacy (as a relief from the anxiety of being exposed as homosexual and thereby publicly shamed) to initiatives for public visibility, which started in the 1970s and were further advanced by AIDS activists in the 80s and 90s (cf. Duggan *Twilight* 51). However, alongside this radicalisation concerning the right to 'public privacy,' "a new strain of gay moralism appeared – attacks on 'promiscuity' and the 'gay lifestyle' accompanied advocacy of

---

14 In the chapter 'The Incredibly Shrinking Public' she extensively criticises a manifesto by the writers of the Independent Gay Forum (IGF) called 'Forging a Gay Mainstream,' in which they explain their assimilationist gay conservative views as the most positive way to co-live with the heteronormative majority of society (cf. *Twilight* 50-51).

monogamous marriage as a responsible disease prevention strategy” (Duggan *Twilight* 53). From within this ‘new strain,’ the gay conservatives have been advocating homonormativity from the 1990s onwards.

Other scholars, for instance Gavin Brown, do not agree with Duggan. He criticises her concept of homonormativity by emphasising that “standard Homonormative<sup>15</sup> critiques fail to adequately explain or appreciate the positive benefits lesbian and gay men might accrue from being able to openly socialize as gay people in sexually mixed leisure spaces” (Brown 1068), even though he acknowledges that “these benefits are not universal and come with costs attached” (Brown 1065) and that “gay life has become privatized and domesticated” (Brown 1066). In my opinion, this argument misses the point that some LGBTQIAN+ individuals still suffer from stigmatisation while others benefit from neoliberal privileges. Moreover, it suggests that Duggan’s critique of homonormativity entails that being gay means to be radical and that gays cannot choose to lead more private, conforming lives. This, however, is completely off Duggan’s point; instead, she tries to excavate the structures which oppress those LGBTQIAN+ individuals who do not conform, often not by choice but because of their sexual and cultural practices.

Peter Drucker, by contrast, usefully expands and works upon Duggan’s concept of homonormativity in his book *Warped – Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (2015), equally stressing that “neoliberal moral deregulation has not only expanded sexual possibilities but also fostered new kinds of conformism” (Drucker 19). He puts even more emphasis on economic reasons for the emergence of gay normality, ever since “there are profits to be made from LGBT niche markets” (Drucker 20). Moreover, he criticises that “lesbian/gay identities have become increasingly ‘homonationalist,’ taking their place in an intensifying global hierarchy and an unequal world” (Drucker 220). The concept of homonationalism is closely related to that of homonormativity because it describes the exclusion of certain LGBTQIAN+ individuals from the understanding of an American national identity. The term was first brought up by Jasbir Puar in 2007. She

---

15 The capital H in ‘Homonormativity,’ according to Brown indicates “a clear distinction between homonormativity, as an assemblage of specific social changes in a range of countries over the last two decades that appear to have had particular social and political consequences, and Homonormativity, the conceptual theorization of those changes” (Brown 1065). For the purpose of *Queer Enough?*, this distinction is redundant, since I will make use of Duggan’s conception of the term which covers both aspects.



claims that the LGBTQIAN+ movement is used to justify racism, xenophobia, and specifically prejudice against Islam, which is perceived as fundamentally homophobic, while at the same time the discrimination against the LGBTQIAN+ community that still occurs in Western societies is deliberately ignored (cf. Puar 83). Although in this format, it is a tool of right-wing populism, the structures of homonationalism are also found in other cultural and social phenomena. As bell hooks points out:

Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation. When the dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as sign that progressive political change is taking place, that the American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference, it invites a resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism. The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms. (hooks 25)

Thus, the urge to belong to the American cultural mainstream can lead to the creation of new forms of exclusion. I agree with Duggan, Drucker, and hooks that including only a certain group of homosexuals and not questioning the power structures and hierarchies within neoliberalism legitimises the inequalities that these structures constitute. In this sense, the term homonormativity can be used to describe both the discourses and the social practices that are involved with it. In order to do this, I would like to introduce the concept of 'hegemonic gay masculinity' which is based on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Condensing essentialist, positivist, normative as well as semiotic approaches to masculinity, Connell suggests that "[r]ather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives" (Connell 'Social Organization' 33). She argues that "[m]asculinity, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell 'Social Organization' 33-34). In consistence with Butler's notion of performativity, Connell identifies gendered identities as performative "*gender projects*" (Connell 'Social Organization' 34), which implies that "[h]egemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic

position in a given pattern of gender relations” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 38).

In her definition of hegemonic masculinity, Connell emphasises the influence of four features: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalisation. Based on Antonio Gramsci’s model of hegemony, hegemonic masculinity “embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 38-39). However, the hegemony of one group “is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power” (Connell *Masculinities* 77) and is, hence, “a ‘currently accepted’ strategy” (Connell *Masculinities* 77). Since hegemony usually involves the cultural dominance of one group, the oppression of another, hence subordination, is inevitable. In the case of hegemonic masculinity, subordination is displayed on two main layers. On the overall level, women are oppressed by the cultural hegemony of men in general, while in particular, “there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men” (Connell *Masculinities* 78). The subordination of homosexual men might be one of the most apparent examples. According to Connell, it is

more than a cultural stigmatization of homosexuality or gay identity. [...] Oppression positions homosexual masculinity at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity. (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 39-40)

In Connell’s view, this accounts for the fact that homosexuality is so “easily assimilated with femininity” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 40) even leading to a “symbolic blurring with femininity” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 40) in the cultural representation of gay men. Moreover, it leads to “an array of quite material practices” (*Masculinities* 78) for the subordination of homosexuals and other ‘deviant’ forms of masculinity which “include political and cultural exclusion, cultural abuse [...], legal violence [...], ‘street’ violence [...], economic discrimination and personal boycotts” (Connell *Masculinities* 78). Nevertheless, even men who are not part of the group of hegemonic men “gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal divided, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Connell *Masculinities* 79). For this reason, Connell accredits especially heterosexual men a “relationship of complicity with

the hegemonic project, [...] without the tensions and risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (Connell *Masculinities* 79). In contrast to “naked domination or an uncontested display of authority” (Connell *Masculinities* 79), this situation enables them to form coalitions with women which are necessary for functioning social formations (such as the family) and which exercise male domination through cultural institutions (such as marriage) (cf. Connell *Masculinities* 79). Whereas hegemony, subordination, and complicity “are relations internal to the gender order” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 41), marginalisation describes the interaction of these concepts with other social and cultural structures, most notably race and class. Moreover, it is “always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 42) and “therefore creating subsets of hegemonic masculinities” (Connell and Messerschmidt 847).<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, to analyse the complex relations of masculinity, Connell distinguishes “two types of relationship – hegemony, domination/subordination and complicity on the one hand, marginalization/authorization on the other” (Connell *Masculinities* 81).

Within the social organisation of masculinity, also violence plays an important role as it “is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions, for example, in heterosexual violence against gay men” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 44). Not only does violence in this sense become “part of a system of domination but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection” (Connell *Masculinities* 84). An increase in violence from the hegemonic group is in Connell’s view the “most visible evidence of crisis tendencies” (Connell *Masculinities* 85), which “may, for instance, provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity” (Connell ‘Social Organization’ 45). Nonetheless, those crisis tendencies might as well initiate changes in the hierarchy of intermale dominance, which underlines the instability as well as variability of hegemonic masculinity:

Hegemony may be accomplished by the incorporation of such masculinities into a functioning gender order rather than by active oppression in the form of discredit or violence. In practice, both incorporation and oppression can occur together. This is, for instance, the contemporary position of gay masculinities in Western urban centers, where gay com-

---

16 This, of course, implies that the “relation of marginalization and authorization may also exist between subordinated masculinities” (Connell *Masculinities* 81). I will examine this thought more closely when introducing the concept of hegemonic gay masculinity later in this chapter.

munities have a spectrum of experience ranging from homophobic violence and cultural denigration to toleration and even cultural celebration and political representation. (Connell and Messerschmidt 848)

This indicates the possibility of an internal hierarchy within the group of homosexual masculinities, which has already been discussed in the chapter about homonormativity. Before I will carve out what I would like to introduce as ‘hegemonic gay masculinity,’ I will elaborate on homophobia, which is often manifested in violence against homosexuals and strongly connected to disruptions in the concept of masculinity and an increasing instability of hegemonic masculinity.

Not only does Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity emphasise “the depth and pervasiveness of homophobia” (Connell *Masculinities* 39) and how closely it is “connected with dominant forms of masculinity” (Connell *Masculinities* 40), but also serves well to establish an understanding of homophobia<sup>17</sup> that usefully expands psychoanalytic theorisations. To arrive at a multi-layered definition of the term, it will be vital to clarify the psychoanalytical notion first. I will then go on to examine a broader socio-political view of homophobia in order to apply Connell’s concept. In psychoanalysis, homophobia, is seen as ‘latent homosexuality,’ which derives from repressed homoerotic desires. It is the “irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance” (Adams et al. 440) a person feels when confronted with homosexuality. Several theoretical strands have tried to unearth the reasons for the phenomenon of latent homosexuality which implies “an externalization of the person’s hatred and fear of his or her own homosexual feelings. The heterosexual projects his fear of his own homosexual desires onto the external world” (Wickberg 56). Thereby, the “anxiety about the possibility of being or becoming a homosexual” (Adams et al. 440) is described as being caused by “remnants of homosexuality in the heterosexual resolution of the Oedipal conflict” (Adams et al. 441). On the one hand, this model serves well to explain the “emotional malaise and irrational attitudes displayed by some individuals who feel guilty about their erotic interests and struggle to deny and repress homosexual impulses” (Adams et al. 441). On the other hand, however, it is not sufficient to explain the multidimensional structures of negative attitudes towards homosexuality that are so deeply in-

---

17 Even though many aspects that pertain to homophobia also apply to trans\*phobia, I will concentrate on the definition of homophobia and its entanglements with masculinity.

culcated into heteronormative culture and that especially male homosexuals experience with other men.

Michael Kimmel tries to account for broader socio-political impressions men have about their social position in his essay “Masculinity as Homophobia – Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” (2001). Even though the psychoanalytical model of latent homophobia as the “repudiation of the homosexual within” (Kimmel 276) cannot be neglected in Kimmel’s opinion, he sees homophobia as “more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay” (Kimmel 277). Instead, he argues that a pervading incongruence between the social and the individual self-awareness of men accounts for the fact that they might see themselves as powerless, even though – seen as a group – they are the ones in hold of power (cf. Kimmel 282). Likewise, Luca di Blasi stresses this line of argumentation. In his book *Der weiße Mann – Ein Antimanifest* (2013), he examines why men have the impression that they steadily lose significance in society and how they deal with this problem. He claims that white, heterosexual, middle-class cis men who have heretofore set the normative standards in society fear the rise of other possible models of masculinity because they confound their own decentralisation with marginalisation and the depletion of privileges with discrimination (cf. di Blasi 8; 48-49). This implies that those heterosexual men, who do not realise their own privileging in society and therefore do not feel powerful as individuals, perceive the whole group of heterosexual men as victims and thus forcibly try to keep up or even expand their power (cf. di Blasi 18). Condensing Kimmel’s and di Blasi’s argumentation, homophobia can be described as the manifestation of a culturally engrained male anxiety about their own status in society next to an individually experienced phobia stimulated by one’s own repressed desires.

To add yet another layer to the definition of homophobia, these anxieties are also strongly connected to Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity since men who feel powerless often fear that they do not meet the social requirements for the masculine gender role. Gregory M. Herek observed, for instance, that the “[p]ersonal and institutional prejudice against lesbians and gay men” (Herek 452) is usually accompanied by a generally more conservative mentality, including “religiosity [and] adherence to traditional ideologies of family and gender” (Herek451) in several studies he conducted. This shows that homosexuality is perceived as a threat to hegemonic masculinity and the discursive structure of heteronormative societies.

## 2. Queer Theory

Similar to Connell, also Kimmel emphasises that “[m]anhood is neither static nor timeless” (Kimmel 267) nor “the manifestation of an inner essence” (Kimmel 267) and claims that masculinity is “a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world” (Kimmel 266). At the same time, “[w]ithin the dominant culture the masculinity that defines white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured” (Kimmel 284). Not only are deviant forms of masculinity measured against the hegemonic model, but all men are constantly assessed in terms of their own ability to conform to the gendered norms. The emphasis in Kimmel’s essay thereby lies on the anxiety to be exposed as not being a ‘real man’ according to the standards of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Kimmel 274-276). As a result, any instabilities in the system of the hegemonic discourse threatens a man’s definition of his own masculinity and may cause deeply seated insecurities in his identity.<sup>18</sup> He thus concludes that homophobia is usually associated with

the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as (Kimmel 277)

These feelings of fear and shame Kimmel described here are then projected onto individuals who diverge from the normative model of masculinity. Since their own uncertainty about their manliness in public “probes men to enact all manners of exaggerated masculine behaviours and attitudes to make sure that no one could possibly get the wrong idea about [them]” (Kimmel 280), they feel like they have to degrade homosexuals who “become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stack a claim for their own manhood” (Kimmel 280). Moreover, violence plays an important role in homophobia, as for instance, “[t]error is used as

---

18 Kimmel examines the phenomenon of homophobia and sexism by drawing on the psychological explanation for the behaviour of bullying children: “the *least* secure about his manhood” (Kimmel 274) is usually the one who constantly bullies other children, proving his own masculinity by degrading other, most often inferior children (cf. Kimmel 274–275).

a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions, for example, in heterosexual violence against gay men” (Connell *Masculinities* 83). Thus, Connell concludes that violence is a tool for sustaining the hegemonic position of masculinity, “authorized by an ideology of supremacy” (Connell *Masculinities* 83). Any aberration from the norm is thus “met with efforts to silence, change, or destroy the differences” (Gutterman 62), making the shaming, subordination of, as well as violence against homosexuals an integral part of homophobia. Nonetheless, also LGBTQIAN+ culture brings about new forms of hierarchies, a position which will be addressed by the introduction of the concept of ‘hegemonic gay masculinities.’

Since the power structures inherent to hegemonic masculinity are not stable, but “always contestable” (Connell ‘Social Organisation’ 38), the struggle against the normative form of masculinity is immanent to the concept. As has been shown in the elaboration of the term homonormativity, there also exists a hierarchy within the LGBTQIAN+ community and amongst homosexual men that favours assimilation to heteronormative standards in society. The following paragraphs seek to put this view into relation and combine the concept of homonormativity with Connell’s hegemonic masculinity to carve out what I call ‘hegemonic gay masculinity.’ As Connell has argued, homosexual masculinity has always been seen in relation to the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity, which served to account for its deviation and “involved the criminalization of male-to-male sex, as well as intimidation and violence outside the law” (Connell *Masculinities* 154-155). The reason for this lies in the broader arrangement between the sexes, that is

organized mainly through the heterosexual couple. This is the taken for granted meaning of ‘love’ in popular culture and it has massive institutional support. Masculinity is necessarily in question in the lives of men whose sexual interest is in other men. (Connell *Masculinities* 90)

As has been argued before, homosexuality is associated with femininity. “Patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (Connell *Masculinities* 143). Accordingly, for gay men, encounters with hegemonic masculinity “often have an undercurrent of threat. Weariness, controlled disclosure, and turning inward to a gay network are familiar responses” (Connell *Masculinities* 155). To avoid hegemonic masculinity, gay subcultures were formed that “negotiat[ed] boundary relationships with mainstream society” (Connell *Masculinities* 144). In the wake of the gay rights movement, these subcultures “grew and became institutionalized”

## 2. Queer Theory

(Connell *Masculinities* 144), which led to a “stabilization of lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual order” (Connell *Masculinities* 85).

However, once institutionalised the hierarchisation of gay practices branched out since social institutions are necessarily affiliated with power relations. This leads to an “internal conformity of the gay world” (Connell *Masculinities* 152) and to a presupposed understanding of gay masculinity. As Connell suggests,

'coming out' actually means coming *in* to an already-constituted gay milieu. There has been debate among gay theoreticians, especially those influenced by Foucault, about the collective identity sustained in this milieu: whether it is a means of social regulation and, thus, ultimately, oppression. (Connell *Masculinities* 152)

This form of oppression manifests itself in the cultural practice of the members within the gay community. Even though “an affirmation of gay identity and a consolidation of gay communities” (Connell *Masculinities* 159) is generally appreciable, it may also have negative effects. Especially the younger generation of homosexual men “have little sense of being connected to a broad movement of reform” (Connell *Masculinities* 159). They “are in a position to adopt, negotiate or reject a gay identity, a gay commercial scene and gay sexual and social networks, all of which they encounter ready formed” (Connell *Masculinities* 161). As a result, these men are relatively apolitical and no longer interested in challenging the heteronormative structures that suppressed their precursors some decades earlier:

The gender eroticism of these men, the masculine social presence most of them maintain, their focus on privatized couple relationships and their lack of solidarity with feminism point in the same direction. There is no open challenge to the gender order here. (Connell *Masculinities* 161)

These men can be described as homonormative, as they are not challenging heteronormative standards in society and thus produce ‘hegemonic gay masculinity.’

To explain what I mean by hegemonic gay masculinity, I will draw on Connell’s classification that involves the notions of hegemony, suppression, complicity, and marginalisation (cf. Connell *Masculinities* 77-82; ‘Social Organisation’ 38-42). Concerning the dualism of hegemony and suppres-



sion, I suggest that the most heteronormatively assimilated gays, that is the most homonormative ones, constitute the current form of a hegemony that seeks to suppress everything that does not conform to these standards – especially men who do not adjust to their masculine gender role. The aforementioned institutionalisation of gay subcultures plays an important role for this aspect, since “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power” (Connell *Masculinities* 77). That the standards for relationships are heavily relying upon the heterosexual model is a telling example for homo- and heteronormative assimilation. Accordingly, monogamous marriage-like relationships are valued higher than having affairs or various sexual encounters with different men (cf. Connell *Masculinities* 153-154). Moreover, also in their appearance, some gays prefer to assimilate to the heteronorm while resenting other gays that do not conform to this normative “perceptions of gayness” (Connell *Masculinities* 156). The homosexuals Connell interviewed for her study were “critical of men who ‘flaunt’ their gayness” (*Masculinities* 156) and “express[ed] distaste for queens, i.e., effeminate gays” (Connell *Masculinities* 156). One of them maintained that he was “a very straight gay” (Connell *Masculinities* 156). Connell goes on to explain that “[t]he apolitical outlook of the group itself demonstrates the stabilization of a public alternative to hegemonic masculinity” (Connell *Masculinities* 162), however, this phenomenon comes with the price of establishing other forms of oppression. As Seidman points out, “some gays, mostly white, middle class, and urban, have benefited from legal reform and a softening of homophobia. But the vast majority of lesbians and gay men still feel compelled to take refuge in the closet” (Seidman *Closet* 5). Warner’s thoughts on gay normality as well as Duggan’s concept of homonormativity have shown, these white, middle-class gays constitute a norm which is the most assimilated to the heteronormative mainstream in society. Even more so, they might even claim the power of hegemonic masculinity. These gays are at the top position of the hegemonic gradient and thereby facilitate the subordination of other LGBTQIAN+ individuals; thus, they form hegemonic gay masculinity.

In contrast to hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic gay masculinity is complicit on two levels. Firstly, it is complicit with hegemonic masculinity in general since “gay communities provide a certain resistance, but not a significant challenge, to the culture of male dominance in the society as a whole” (Connell *Masculinities* 144). This is, however, a very contradictory position, because hegemonic masculinity seeks to oppress homosexuality

## 2. Queer Theory

and a man “cannot become homosexual without shattering this hegemony somehow” (Connell *Masculinities* 162). At the same time, “hegemonic masculinity has social authority, and is not easy to challenge” (Connell *Masculinities* 156). For Connell this is closely related to the fact that the construction of one’s masculinity is a very complex process:

Some engagement with hegemonic masculinity is found in each of these lives. It ranges from heavy commitment to wistful fantasy, but it’s always there. In no sense is their homosexuality built on a lack, a gender vacuum. Yet the construction of masculinity occurs through relationships that are far from monolithic. The gender dynamics is both powerful and sufficiently complex and contradictory to be inflected in different ways. (Connell *Masculinities* 147)

Hegemonic gay masculinity can thus be described – as Connell also suggests for the ‘very straight gay’ – as “a loyal opposition to hegemonic masculinity” (Connell *Masculinities* 202). Moreover, there is also complicity with the standards of hegemonic gay masculinity within the gay community. This means that many gays are complicit with the hegemonic model even though they do not necessarily live up to these standards. As Connell points out “[t]he relation of marginalization and authorization may also exist between subordinated masculinities” (Connell *Masculinities* 81). As for hegemonic masculinity, this accounts for the marginalisation of masculinities that are further affected through intersectional relations. Especially the factors of race and class, and gender identity play an important role in this, since hegemonic gay masculinity is dominated by white, middle-class cis men.

In summary, hegemonic gay masculinity is closely related to homonormativity, ‘the normal gay,’ or the ‘very-straight-gay.’ However, the concept conflates the aforementioned notions to describe homosexual masculinity and serves well to concentrate on relations of various masculinities within the LGBTQIAN+ community. Moreover, considering Connell’s classification of factors that serve to stabilise hegemonic masculinity, it might be useful to analyse how queers negotiate hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalisation. The following chapter elaborates on the ways in which these strategies are manifest in works of cultural representation such as films, which can be analysed as representing and at the same time determining social perceptions about LGBTQIAN+ individuals.

### 2.3 Formal-Aesthetic Features of Queer Cinema

When describing the representation of LGBTQIAN+ individuals in films and in order to determine whether or not the films analysed in *Queer Enough?* can be regarded as queer, it is crucial to define queer cinema. Benshoff and Griffin delineate five factors for queer film that serve as the foundation for my methodological approach towards queer cinema. They argue that a film “might be considered queer if it deals with characters that are queer” (Benshoff and Griffin 9). Keeping the legacy of defamation of LGBTQIAN+ individuals in cinema very much in mind, however, “the mere presence of a queer character [does not] make a film a queer film” (Benshoff and Griffin 9), since often films “use a single stereotypically queer character as the butt of homophobic jokes” (Benshoff and Griffin 9). Inspired by the Bechdel-test, which examines the portrayal of women in motion pictures,<sup>19</sup> the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has developed a test to determine whether or not a film portrays LGBTQIAN+ characters in a stigmatizing way. According to the so-called Vito-Russo-test, a film is not discriminatory toward LGBTQIAN+ individuals only if all of the following criteria are met:

- The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.
- That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity. I.e., they are made up of the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight characters from one another.
- The LGBT character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect. Meaning they are not there to simply provide colorful commentary, paint urban authenticity, or (perhaps most commonly) set up a punchline. The character should ‘matter.’ (GLAAD)

However, even if all of the three statements apply to a film, its aesthetic can foreground a particular image of LGBTQIAN+ characters. Thus, also Benshoff and Griffin submit that “a queer film is one that both contains queer characters and engages with queer issues in some meaningful – as

---

19 The test was made famous in 1985 by American cartoonist and author Alison Bechdel in her comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. It is not a scientific test but is now widely used to perceive and judge the stereotyping of female characters and to draw attention to the fact that women are misrepresented in feature films.

opposed to derogatory or exploitative – way” (Benshoff and Griffin 9-10). Furthermore, the process of production, or the “authorship” (Benshoff and Griffin 10) of the film, as they call it, might as well be a factor to define a film as queer. As they contend, “queer filmmakers can and do inflect a queer sensibility into their work, even when obvious gay and lesbian characters and issues are not present” (Benshoff and Griffin 10). Then, also the reception of the film might determine whether a film is queer. According to Benshoff and Griffin, a queer film can hence be “one that is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators” (Benshoff and Griffin 10). For this reason, any film can be considered a queer film, which is why “a whole system of reading Hollywood films 'against the grain,' known as *camp*, evolved within early-twentieth-century gay cultures, in effect queering manifestly straight films” (Benshoff and Griffin 10). Camp refers to a stylistically excessive way of perceiving cultural products of all kinds (such as film, music, literature, visual arts, fashion, furniture, interior design, and others), which is oriented towards artificiality and exaggeration. According to Susan Sontag, “[c]amp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon” (Sontag 54). For her, theatricality, passion, and playfulness must be visible; also, camp irony is predominantly used in a sentimental and affectionate way, never wanting to merely show off the chosen objects, persons, and works of art or expose them to ridicule (cf. Sontag 59-60). Moreover, another parameter for considering a film as queer assumes the affiliation with a certain genre. As Benshoff and Griffin point out, the narrative structure of some genres is more suitable for queer cinema, including, next to avant-garde or independent films, science fiction or fantasy films, as they sometimes portray “new and varied types of sexualities” (Benshoff and Griffin 11), or the “hyperreal world” (Benshoff and Griffin 11) of musicals, or animations for “blurring the real and the unreal, figuring identity as fluid, and imagining fantastic spaces in which shape shifting and sex changing are as plausible as anything else” (Benshoff and Griffin 11). Eventually, Benshoff and Griffin argue that whether a film is queer depends on how the film facilitates a certain way to look at the action and characters on screen. Thus, the so-called *gaze* which is established in a film might account for the film’s queerness (cf. Benshoff and Griffin 11).

For the analysis of the films I have chosen, I suggest that the gender or sexuality of the author or creator as well as the spectator are not expedient for the purpose of deciding whether a film might be considered queer or not. This is mainly because the belief that only a queer ‘author’ is able to make a queer film is a very exclusionary as well as essentialist

assumption. Especially with the ongoing discussion about the meaning of queer altogether, barring any perceived non-queer filmmakers from the community of queer cinema is, in my opinion, highly unrewarding for the larger discourse about queer. This is even more true for the third factor: even though the camp way of ‘reading against the grain’ and the queering of straight cinema sets an example in favour of the visibility and positive perception of the LGBTQIAN+ community, I do not fully agree with their argument, since only LGBTQIAN+ recipients are able to perform this act of queering, whereas straight viewers are never able to perceive a film as queer then. Not only does this determine the definition of queerness, but also perpetuates the dichotomous relation of ‘queer’ and ‘straight’ as definite binary categories. Moreover, for me, there is a semantic difference between the *queering* of film, which can be described as a social practice and is not quite the same as a *queer* film as such. The sexual orientation of the filmmaker or the recipient is not a viable parameter for my analysis which is why I will not focus on the author- and spectatorship of the films. Most convincingly, hence, whether films represent the homosexual characters we see onscreen in a meaningful and non-derogatory way can be subsumed by the analysis of their content and their formal-aesthetic design.

Alexandra Juhasz usefully expands Benshoff and Griffins list of features by arguing that “for cinema to be truly queer, to be productive, or even better yet, dissident, I will insist that it need be attached to something that matters: a stake” (Juhasz 262). Hence, radical and productive queer cinema, in her opinion, “takes into account current tensions – the changing politics of visibility and identity construction, and other such inequitable distributions among queers – and allows these unsettleds to be seen within a stable format” (Juhasz 260). Instead of reproducing “replicas or copies of dominant forms where LGBT people are merely transplanted into the already-written and acceptable roles of melodrama or reality TV” (Juhasz 257), however, queer cinema “copies more common media conventions to play these recognizable and comfortable forms against something uncommon, disruptive, and queer” (Juhasz 257). Referring to José Muñoz’ concept of disidentification<sup>20</sup> as an “erotic play between content and form” (Juhasz 257), she positions queer cinema between assimilation and opposition to dominant heteronormative ideology. Thereby, “the incompatible of truly queer claims, characters, goals, as they rub against the more expected

20 Muñoz describes disidentification as the act of defying the identification of a subject according to Althusser’s notion of interpellation (cf. Muñoz *Disidentifications* 11).

and acceptable forms of indie narrative cinema, produces a friction that can transform cinema” (Juhasz 257). In a similar vein, Nowlan proceeds from formal-aesthetic criteria and submits that queer cinema “foregrounds the constructedness and performativity of social identities” (Nowlan 17). Thereby, it “actively strives towards the deconstruction of binary opposites, and especially, violent hierarchies” (Nowlan 18) and “emphasizes – and valorizes – boundary crossings, liminal and proximate states, hybridities and fusions, and contradictions and paradoxes” (Nowlan 18). He argues that queer cinema exhibits a camp sensibility as it “is often hyper-self-reflexive and overtly foregrounding of intertextuality, as well as frequently relying extensively on appropriation and expropriation, pastiche and montage, and irony and parody” (Nowlan 18). Not only does queer cinema “emphasize[...] defiance, refusal and demand versus the normative” (Nowlan 18), but it

rejects both separatism and assimilation, and both ghettoisation and normalization, while dismissing a resort towards setting up positive role models with which straight audiences can easily identify [sic], as well as other conventional moves as part of non-queer lgbt film that caters toward a potentially easy crossover appeal with mainstream audiences who are willing to accept 'good queers' [...] yet who are at the same time unwilling to accept 'bad queers' (Nowlan 18)

This engenders “tensions emanating from an intrinsically contradictory as well as definitively utopian desire: on the one hand to maintain an edgy, alternative, marginal, and even underground social-sexual existence, and on the other hand to defeat and transcend prejudice, denigration, repression, and subjugation” (Nowlan 19), in short to rebel against the structures one wants to be accepted by which is the general ambiguity of queerness (cf. Nowlan 17-19). Likewise, Amy Borden identifies a “recognizable homonormative style dominated by conceptions of white gayness” (Borden 101) in mainstream as well as in independent films. She perceives “queerness as a film practice rather than a genre” (Borden 99). Since “genres suggest objective status and discursive boundaries, conceiving queer cinema as an international practice rather than as a genre retains indeterminacy as the key value of queer studies” (Borden 100). She distinguishes queer cinema from LGBTQIAN+ cinema, which “draws from classical Hollywood style - narrative closure, spatial and temporal coherence, and a cause and effect plot - to build mainstream and community-oriented films that work to normalize LGBTQ+ characters” (102). In queer cinema, by contrast,

“process takes precedence over identity by valuing hybridity and indeterminacy [which] reasserts a celebration of the radical as a fundamental aspect of LGBTQ+ politics” (Borden 99). Building on this distinction, I aim to delineate LGBTQIAN+ *cinema* from *queer cinema*. Whether or not a film is classified as queer cinema can be ascertained by pursuing a close reading on the content level as well as an analysis of the aesthetic composition. For this reason, it is worthwhile to study the films’ narrative structure and thus how they make use of genre-specific ways of cinematic narrating, including genre-specific roles as well as the gaze that is established on screen.

#### 2.4 Heteronarrative and the Gaze

Structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers such as Northrop Frye and Roland Barthes establish a connection between the concepts of narrative, archetypes, myths, hegemony, and ideology. Drawing on structuralist theory in his seminal work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye assumes that a system of simplification (i.e. language) filters our perceptions and breaks them down into more simple ideas that can be narrated. For literature and other forms of narrative art, this means that certain conventions are established that govern the way narratives are composed and read (i.e. understood) (cf. Frye 104-105). These conventions are expressed in symbols that function as a “communicable unit” which Frye calls “archetype: that is, a typical or recurring image” (Frye 99). In contrast to later postmodern or deconstructivist perspectives, Frye does not locate these archetypes in ideology, but tries to formulate a theory of literary criticism from ‘within,’ suggesting that the knowledge about literature derives directly from literature itself. Roland Barthes, in comparison, establishes a different concept of myth, which he defines in *Mythologies* (1957) as “a system of communication” (Barthes 109) that

abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all the dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes 143)

Thus, “what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality” (Barthes 119) and “it is always in part motivated” (Barthes

126) and produces “universalism, the refusal of any explanation, an unalterable hierarchy of the world” (Barthes 154). Instead of hiding its tendency to perpetuate simplified models of the world, the major function of myth is to naturalise its concept. Thereby, dominant ideas are so naturalised they become common sense and hence seem politically innocent. Ultimately, ideologically upheld hierarchies are not derived from a person's own experience but made coherent and comprehensible through simplifications which are mediated through narratives (cf. Barthes 143; 151-154). This means that the use of certain narrative traditions within cultural production, whether as myth or archetype, influences the way ‘reality’ is perceived and, hence, takes an active part in shaping and upholding hegemonic structures. Deciphering these mythological structures serves to grasp the relation between language and power structures and, extending Frye’s position, unveil the ways in which ideology is inculcated in society. As a powerful agent in popular cultural production, the cinema has its own narrative conventions, myths, and archetypes, which shape the ways in which ‘reality’ is perceived.

Beginning in the studio era (between the 1920s to the 1960s), American filmmakers have created a narrative tradition that became the most powerful and pervasive style, almost “a lingua franca for worldwide filmmaking” (Bordwell 1). David Bordwell argues that Hollywood, including its speciality divisions, features

fairly firm standards of plot construction and characterization. A film’s main characters, all agree, should pursue important goals and face forbidding obstacles. Conflict should be constant, across the whole film and within each scene. Actions should be bound into a tight chain of cause and effect. Major events should be foreshadowed (‘planted’), but not so obviously that the viewer can predict them. Tension should rise in the course of the film until a climax resolves all the issues. (Bordwell 28)

The narrative structure influences the way “viewers turn dramatic and visual patterns into an intelligible story” (Bordwell 16). This intelligible story, like myth, is shaped by socially constructed presuppositions pertaining to class, hierarchy, race, or – as of special interest for *Queer Enough?* – gender and sexuality. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of intelligibility, Judith Roof examines “how ideas of sexuality and narrative inform one another” (Roof xiv) and postulates that “the sexuality of narrative is straight” (Roof xxvi). As “organising epistemes and as expressions of figuratively heterosexual reproductive ideology in twentieth-century Western culture” (Roof xxvii), narrative and (hetero)sexuality are “interdependent, mutually re-



flective, reciprocal” (Roof xxvii) and thus inextricably linked. Together, the two concepts uphold and perpetuate “heteroideology” (Roof xxviii), since narrative in Roof’s opinion “plays a large part in the stubborn return of a particularly heterosexual normativity” (Roof xxix). The structure of this narrative, which Roof calls “heteronarrative”, follows a heterosexual logic of reproduction that renders the appearance of homosexuality impossible unless it “provides the pretext for the heteronarrative’s spectacular return” (Roof xxiv) through which “narrative typically reorganizes its perversities into a heterosexual mainstream” (Roof xxxiv). Heteronormative viewers can enjoy watching homosexual content, because they already know that the heteronormative equilibrium will be reinstalled at the end. This certainty not only originates in techniques of foreshadowing from within the narrative itself, but also because the viewers have already experienced this form of narrative many times before. For Roof, this raises the question “how it is possible to divert that mainstream into a lesbian narrative without having that narrative simply reinscribe the heteronarrative with lesbian players” (Roof xxxiv). According to her, instead of content, a different formal composition is the important realm for “shifting the very understanding of story” (Roof xxxv) and thus “would effect small changes in ideology” (Roof xxxvi).

Therefore, films that challenge traditional narrative structures “allow for a critique of Hollywood narrative and its insistent focus on heterosexual romance” (Benshoff and Griffin 11). When analysing the narrative structure, it seems especially useful to examine the special features innate to the genres of the films, since it determines the code (i.e. the organisation of signs in a text) or discourse of Hollywood narrative filmmaking (cf. Benshoff 43). A more open or experimental genre or a mix of different genres might mirror the possible subversive content of a queer film. According to Laura U. Marks, hybrid cinema usually

implies a hybrid form mixing documentary, fiction, personal, and experimental genres, as well as different media. By pushing the limits of any genre, hybrid cinema forces each genre to explain itself, to forge any transparent relationship to the reality it represents, and to make evident the knowledge claims on which it is based. Hybrid cinema is in a position to do archaeology, to dig up the traces that the dominant culture, and for that matter any fixed cultural identity, would just as soon forget. One cannot simply contemplate a hybrid (or a work of hybrid cinema):

## 2. Queer Theory

one cannot help but be implicated by the power relations upon which it reflects. (Marks 8)

By transgressing the borders of genre, hybrid cinema might enable other forms of transgression. Furthermore, the way the camera guides the view of the audience determines the films' narrative structure. For this reason, I will focus on the way the cinematic gaze is established in the films as the second parameter to assess whether the films support or challenge the 'heteronarrative.' For the analysis of the gaze in the aesthetic composition of the films, it will be useful to elaborate on the (alternative) gaze that is established in queer films. As Benschhoff and Griffin suggest, a queer gaze changes "the very act of experiencing a film – the psychological process of looking at and identifying with characters" (Benschhoff and Griffin 11) and hence, enables the recipient to perceive the film "from a queer viewing position" (Benschhoff and Griffin 10). The analysis of the gaze in films was made popular by Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Drawing on Lacanian gaze theory, she argues that classic Hollywood films encourage the viewer to take on a male perspective, the 'male gaze.' This leads to a "'masculinisation' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real-life movie-goer. Inbuilt patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as 'point-of-view'" (Mulvey "Afterthoughts" 125). Thereby, women are turned into the objects of representation, mere "icons" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 12), who have no function despite supporting the male protagonist who, in contrast, symbolises the "representative of power" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 12). As "the bearer of the look" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 12), the male protagonist also controls the audience's gaze and perception. Mulvey despises mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 1960s and 70s for "reflecting the dominant ideological concept" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 7) and thereby "cod[ing] the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 8). Mulvey suggests that alternative cinema, in contrast to mainstream Hollywood productions, is able to "leave [...] the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with the normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 8). For her, shifting the gaze can only happen if films "free the look of the camera and free the look of the viewer" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 18). When applying Mulvey's concept to the representation of homosexuals in films, certain parallels to the representation of women can be identified: homosexuals

were also objectified in mainstream Hollywood films for the sole reason to foster the dominance of heterosexuality.

Thus, the question arises how the gaze can be queered. The strategy of making 'the other' visible and thereby shifting the perspective towards the marginalised, might construct a new cinematic gaze from a queer-centred perspective that differs from the patriarchal male gaze identified by Mulvey. Jack Babuscio, for instance, relates to what he calls a 'gay sensibility,' which is, following Sontag's notion of camp, "a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; [...] a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed and defined by gayness" (Babuscio 40). This relies on the assumption that gays perceive the world differently and thus showing a film from the gays' perspective presents the world from a different angle. Or as Andy Medhurst puts it: "The homosexual perception, precisely because of its marginalised nature, may see the order of things more clearly than those perceptions implicated in the maintenance of that order" (Medhurst 58). However, this position might essentialise gayness to a homogeneous experience, which suggests that all gays see the world in a similar way. Even more so, Erin C. Tobin points to the fact that using categories like lesbian, gay, and queer in such an essentialising manner leads to an exclusivity that might establish a lesbian or gay gaze that is limited in scope, since in this case "spectatorship becomes a fixed position determined by sexual orientation" (Tobin 63). Thereby, the gay or lesbian "perspective is the 'normative' viewing position" (Tobin 63). This might create what I call a homonormative gaze in opposition to a queer gaze. For Tobin, "a queer gaze is not synonymous with 'gay gaze,' but rather, it is an active and deliberate reading-against-the-grain that intentionally challenges normative viewing and hegemonic representation" (Tobin 64). Drawing on Sedgwick, who argues in *Epistemology of the Closet* that the discourse of sexuality is based on a binary opposition of hetero- and homosexuality which can be deconstructed through a queering of this either/or dichotomy, Tobin suggests "a queering of the straight/gay spectator dichotomy (and it should be noted that 'queering' in this sense denotes a destabilization and complexity) enables a queer gaze" (Tobin 64). This "opens up possibilities for non-heteronormative viewing" (Tobin 9), regardless of the sexual orientation of the viewer or the subjects viewed. The gay gaze might thus be able to pursue identity politics for (white male gender-conforming) gays but does not challenge the structures of heteronormativity. In contrast to the homonormative gaze, which has an assimilative function, a queer gaze "challenges dominant assumptions about

## 2. *Queer Theory*

gender and sexuality” (Benshoff and Griffin 10). Hence, I distinguish three different gazes: a queer gaze which transgresses heteronormative patterns, a gay gaze that allows for a gay sensibility, and a homonormative gaze, that enforces homonormative structures. By enabling the recipient to perceive the film “from a queer viewing position” (Benshoff and Griffin 10), it changes “the very act of experiencing a film – the psychological process of looking at and identifying with characters” (Benshoff and Griffin 11), and hence, the male gaze.

Therefore, the queer gaze “questions any ‘natural’ appearance, and the transformability of our identities contests that there can ever be a unified subject who is the spectator of the world” (Wray 70). As Tim Wray argues, “ambiguity is perhaps the key identifying feature of queer culture. Looking through the queer gaze we search for these ambiguities – for the hidden, disguised and imaginary” (Wray 72). The gaze that is established in most Hollywood films, however, takes on the perspective of white, heterosexual men and is thus a male (homonormative) gaze. Benshoff and Griffin suggest that the reason for this lies in the presupposition that “many heterosexual viewers are still resistant to seeing through a queer character’s worldview. In psychological terms, the act of identifying with a queer character may be threatening to someone’s sense of his or her own gender or sexuality” (Benshoff and Griffin 11). Due to the structures upheld by hegemonic masculinity, a queer gaze “poses a potential threat to some men’s sense of masculinity: admitting an interest in such films poses a challenge to their presumed patriarchal authority” (Benshoff and Griffin 11-12). A heteronarrative structure or use of genre and a gaze that do not challenge heteronormativity while at the same time privileging hegemonic gay masculinities perpetuates homonormative structures and can therefore not be described as queer. Combined with the theoretical concepts of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and hegemonic gay masculinity, I suggest that these two parameters form a valuable basis for the analysis of the films’ narrative structure and formal-aesthetic composition.

### 2.5 *Historical Background and the Biopic Genre*

The three films I have chosen for my analysis narrate iconic moments and agents in the history of the LGBTQIAN+ rights movement. Before I will outline my methodological approach that helps to undertake an in-depth analysis of the films’ content and formal-aesthetic composition, I want to

discuss the historical background to both the social, cultural, and political context of the films as well as the historical figures depicted in them. In order to remain in the chronological sequence of the historical events (not the films' release dates), the emergence of the Beat Generation, with Allen Ginsberg and his poem "Howl" (1956) at its core, will be examined by setting it against the background of the American political and cultural environment in the 1950s. The focus lies on the public reception of the poem and the subsequent legal indictment of its publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, since these occurrences take centre presence in the film *Howl*. From there, I will move to the historical context for the film *Stonewall*, which includes the social, cultural, and political developments that lead to the Stonewall Riots in New York's Christopher Street on June 27, 1969 – for many the watershed moment in LGBTQIAN+ history – as well as the central figures that participated in the riots. For the historical background of the film *Milk*, I will focus on the gay liberation movement in San Francisco and the legislation against homosexuals which oscillated between relaxation and regression, as well as the emergence of the anti-gay countermovement eventually ushering in a new wave of gay rights activism at the end of the 1970s. This will include the main facts and figures of Harvey Milk's life and political career as well as the circumstances of his assassination by his colleague Dan White.

The discursive environment during the period following World War II was mainly based on the conformity of U.S. society. This so-called consensus (or Liberal consensus) gained its peak in the 1950s, when passive behaviour was highly encouraged by a political system (cf. Wittner 121) that "typically attempts to justify dominance by appealing to self-evident or 'common sense' truths" (Sterritt 26). As David Sterritt points out,

[i]ntellectuals who championed alternative views or subordinate groups were considered wrong not only for the opinions and constituents they chose to represent but also for their audacity in daring to challenge the unified popular will. (Sterritt 27–28)

Not only was consensus identified with passivity, loyalty, and conformity, but also fostered socially stimulated 'othering' – a performative act of demarcation and stratification by which people are made 'other' (cf. Wittner 123). The conservative family episteme of the 1950s led to a high marriage rate at a relatively young age, mostly for the reason to avoid premarital sex (cf. Norton 814). Establishing the strict adherence to classical gender roles and traditional views on sexuality (cf. Norton 814) helped to intensify

## 2. Queer Theory

the repression of homosexuality (cf. Kazin et al. 394), which was widely seen “as a clinical aberration” (Plummer 17) and even more so “as beyond respectability” (Eaklor 101). After World War II, “only heterosexual intercourse within marriage was deemed socially acceptable, and consequences for sexual misconduct could be severe” (Norton 816). The “condemnation of homosexuality” (Rayside 131) served the U.S. government “in its determination to maintain a public sphere uncorrupted by deviant sexual practices” (Rayside 131), which is why homosexuals were “subjected to violence and contempt” (Schwartz 85). The important role of fear should not be underestimated in this context: the fear of Communism, of an all-out atomic war, but also of homosexuality and everything deviating from the social norm (cf. Sterritt 77). Starting a crusade against so called un-American behaviour which included homosexuality, the US government, especially Senator Joseph McCarthy, equalised sexual deviance with Communism and thereby framed it as a negative force that tried to corrupt American values (cf. Harris 223). Thus, “heterosexual panic blurred into patriotic panic” (cf. Harris 224):

The equations of un-natural/un-American worked with reciprocal efficiency to deter difference by constructing a binary of health and disease mapped onto one of patriotism and treason. The alignment of queer and commies enabled, therefore, the rise of a national security state with panoptic ambitions, while disguising the economic bottom line to the politics of containment, naturalizing as loyal duty the commitments to marriage, family, and corporate organization. (cf. Harris 224)

A group of young intellectuals and writers surrounding Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs sought to challenge those moral pillars of 1950s society in the U.S. – they came to be known as the Beat Generation.

Allen Ginsberg was born into a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey in 1926. His father Louis Ginsberg was also a poet and a high school teacher, and his mother Naomi was a Russian émigré. They led a bohemian and leftist lifestyle and were politically active in Greenwich Village, New York. Both of his parents became vital influences on Ginsberg’s literary work, but in very different ways. His father influenced the young writer as his poetic predecessor, while his mother’s mental illness, which was treated by means of neurosurgical lobotomy, was a recurrent topic in his writing. The procedure seemingly traumatised the young Ginsberg, especially because he had to sign the paperwork for his mother’s surgery, and he accounts for

this painful experience of his childhood and youth in his poetry. After he graduated from high school in 1943, Ginsberg entered Columbia University in New York where he met Kerouac and Burroughs and was drawn more and more into their rebellious artistic activities, which eventually culminated in their expulsion from university (cf. Watson 23–37).

The core Beat Generation writers<sup>21</sup> were a relatively heterogeneous group unified by their “shared horror of conformity, social engineering, and the death of spontaneous living” (Sterritt 23) and their “rejection of the nuclear family system, the bedrock of American society” (vaan der Bent et al. 7). “They challenged the Puritan work ethic ingrained in American culture” (vaan der Bent et al. 8) and thus played an important role in “post-World War II Bohemian culture in the United States and constituted a countercultural movement that opposed ‘square,’ bourgeois culture” (vaan der Bent et al. 2). Nonetheless, early critics would “tend to perceive the Beats as isolated rebels who recklessly and often spontaneously defied authority” (Levy 107), leaving the political scope of their works un-regarded. From today’s perspective, this view does not do justice to their political influence since the Beat writers were indeed “willing and able to engage themselves on political and legal battles, as they did when they defended their constitutional right to write, publish and distribute their works” (Levy 107). As Christopher Gair convincingly argues, “[a]lthough there was only minor interest in civil rights on the part of most of the Beat Generation” (Gair 26), they got involved with other marginalised groups and cultural forms. They were, for instance, fascinated by jazz music and Afro-American urban vernacular (cf. Gair 26-27). Hence, Ginsberg and his peers

were not uniformed guerrillas organizing violent assaults on mainstream ideology, nor did they intend to be. Rather, the most influential among them were radically individualistic thinkers who fought consensus and conformity more by eluding or transcending these than by mobilizing militant allies for some sort of head-on sociocultural battle. (Sterritt 104)

Despite their cultural activism from the 1940s onwards, “their profile only started to assume national significance as an alternative to white American orthodoxies after the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems*

---

21 The canonisation of the male writers has led to an underrepresentation of the female writers and activists of the Beat Generation. Thus, the movement has received criticism for fighting moral beliefs about gender and sexuality from a distinctly male perspective (cf. Knight 6).

in 1956” (Gair 27). However, their recognition as literary figures with high cultural value did not ensue until the early 1970s. In the 90s, their reception shifted to a downright “Beat Craze” (van der Bent et al. 1).

Most critics claim that the public reading of Ginsberg’s “Howl” in October 1955, which took place at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, constituted the birth of the Beat Generation (cf. Gair 28; E. Katz 193; Sterritt 106), “most accurately foreshadowing Ginsberg’s future activity as a political gadfly” (Sterritt 106). As a political poet, Allen Ginsberg was “able to look behind America’s curtains of conventional propriety to see how repressive aspects of culture are actually affecting people” (E. Katz 184). The readings of *Howl* “took place in a clearly political context” (E. Katz 184) and the poem “has a distinct and deliberate relationship with the national and international politics of its day” (E. Katz 184). The poem offers criticism directed against U.S. consensus but is also read as a clarion call to enhancing the sexual discourse of the time (cf. Doty 14). Bob Rosenthal claims that “Allen’s howl wakes readers to use eyes and ears and tongues to strip the gaze away and perceive the world with clarity no longer hidden or denied. [...] For so many, it was simply being able to say, ‘I’m Gay. I am Okay. I am Gay’” (Rosenthal 44).

Nevertheless, “[w]ith its candid references to sex, drugs, madness, and nightmares, the poem was considered obscene” (Shinder xx). After its publication as *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 by City Lights Books in San Francisco, publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was arrested and charged with disseminating obscene literature. For the conceding trial in 1957, Ferlinghetti sought help from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), who “quickly assembled a top team of defense attorneys, including [...] J.W. ‘Jake’ Ehrlich” (Levy 110), while “Assistant District Attorney Ralph McIntosh, who had a long record of successfully prosecuting publishers and producers of nudist publications and pornographic movies [...] represented the state” (Levy 110). It is important to note that Ehrlich called nine well-esteemed literary experts “with outstanding qualifications in the literary field” to the witness stand (Ehrlich 116), while his opponent’s witnesses lacked this elite status and reliability (cf. Ehrlich 116). “McIntosh called only two expert witnesses, David Kirk and Gail Potter. In contrast to those called by the defense, neither Kirk nor Potter were leading figures in the field of literary criticism” (Levy 111). Favourably judging for the poet and the publisher, “[a]ll of the defense experts agreed that ‘Howl’ had literary merit, that it represented a sincere effort by the author to present a social picture, and that the language used was relevant to the theme” (Ehrlich 116).



Eventually, the poem was pronounced not obscene by Judge Clayton W. Horn, a decision seen as a crucial landmark victory in censorship debates that paved the way for the publication of other supposedly obscene works of art (cf. Levy 112–113). Paradoxically, “by seeking to censor ‘Howl,’ conservatives added greatly to the Beats’ fame and influence. The trial transformed ‘Howl’ from an obscure poem into a best-seller and the Beats from a minor artistic movement into defenders of democracy” (ibid 107–108). Ginsberg, hence, became “part of a movement that emerged in the late 1950s, blossomed in the early 1960s, and reached its zenith toward the close of the decade” (Levy 116). This assumption was further confirmed by Ginsberg’s involvement in the beginning countercultural activities and especially the hippie movement. Topics such as gay rights, freedom of expression, censorship, the legalisation of drugs, and religious freedom were on his political agenda. Ginsberg claimed that the Beat Generation is strongly linked to the decriminalisation of divergent sexualities and the emergence of the civil rights movement (cf. Watson 302). Therefore, the Beat Generation is often regarded as a trailblazer for the gay liberation movement that came to full bloom after the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

While the 1950s were defined by consensus and conformity, the two following decades were a period of revolutionary social upheaval which resulted in the installation of new civil rights for many marginalised groups. As has been argued before, during the post-war era of consensus, homosexuality was a delicate issue in American society. Thus, the first step towards the formation of a movement was to “conceptualize [...] homosexuals as a minority group ‘imprisoned within a dominant culture’” (Kazin et al. 394). Founding the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles in 1950 was seminal for this development. Being soon installed in other cities across the U.S. (e.g. San Francisco and New York), the organisation introduced the term homophile and was quite radical in its plans of action (cf. Carter 18). However, the radicalism soon diminished and the Mattachine Society “incorporated as an educational and research group, espousing the belief that by providing accurate information about homosexuality to the public it could ‘eliminate discrimination, derision, prejudice and bigotry’” (Carter 19). Inspired by the African American movement and countercultural activism that “challenged multiple forms of erotic repression” (Stein 12), homosexuals and other sexual minorities began to grow more and more radical during the 1960s. This development “found expression in new slogans like ‘Gay Power,’ as well as in more confrontational forms of protest, especially in relation to police harassment in burgeoning urban gay enclaves” (Kazin

## 2. Queer Theory

et al. 395). Pivotal were the Stonewall Riots starting on June 28, 1969 in New York City, which were widely seen as the “symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement” (Norton 865) and soon spread over the whole country (cf. Plummer 17). The Stonewall Inn was a former horse stable that became a restaurant in the 1930s and a gay bar in 1967. Opened as a so-called bottle club, which only allowed members in who brought their own drinks, the operators adopted a method “commonly used by organized crime to circumvent liquor laws” (Stein 2). It was a popular location for a variety of people of all classes, races, sexes, and genders. Even though most of the patrons were probably white, middle-class, and identified as gay men, “[t]here was a significant and visible presence of gender-queer people, some of whom identified as butches, drags, queens, transsexuals, or transvestites. Some were hustlers and prostitutes” (Stein 3). Since the bar was “unlicensed, unsanitary, and suspected of violating liquor laws” (Stein 3) and there were rumours about “investigations into police corruption, male prostitution, and blackmailing rings,” it was raided by the police on a regular basis. Ed Murphy, who ran the Stonewall Inn and was said to have had connections to organised crime and mafia circles that bribed the police, usually ensured that the raids proceeded without significant complications for the bar (cf. Carter 79-80). This seemed to have happened during the early morning hours of June 28 in 1969. As usual, the police officers raiding the bar checked on the patrons’ IDs and “detained several bar employees, patrons without identification, butches, transvestites, and people who talked back or fought back” (Stein 3), everyone else was supposed to leave, but soon a crowd of people coming from inside and passers-by gathered in the street in front of the Stonewall. When the police emerged from the bar and tried to conduct the captives, the crowd suddenly erupted: “According to some accounts, a lesbian was the first to fight back; multiple accounts emphasize the distinctively aggressive defiance of trans people and street youth” (Stein 5). Being outnumbered by the protesters, the police lost control and retreated into the Stonewall Inn, which was violently attacked by the crowd. “Eventually police reinforcement arrived and members of the Tactical Patrol Force, specialists in riot control, tried to clear the streets. Over the next several hours, thousands of people rioted in the streets with campy courage and fierce fury” (Stein 5). The event soon went down in history as “an iconic symbol of resistance to oppression and an inspirational example of empowerment for the dispossessed” (Stein 1) and

[o]ver the next several decades, as the rebellion was commemorated in pride protests and parades in and beyond New York, the building where the uprising began was used for various commercial purposes. In 2016, President Obama officially designated the Stonewall Inn Monument at the site of the Stonewall Inn. (Stein 5)

Even though the importance of the Stonewall Riots for gay rights is uncontested, the circumstances surrounding the riots are debated controversially amongst activists, artists, and historians. In the introduction to his documentary history of the Stonewall Riots, Marc Stein argues that the riots were idealised to a great extent. “Keeping in mind that *there is always more to the story*” (Stein 5), he shows that to produce a conclusive, mono-dimensional truth about what happened during the early hours of June 28, 1969, is impossible and, in fact, also not desirable. In Stein’s opinion, the riots are “justifiably viewed as a key moment in the mobilization of one of the most transformative social movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Stein 1). Nonetheless, the experience and interpretation of historic events are highly dependent on their context as well as on the “cultural identities,” “social roles,” and “communication networks” (Stein 2) of the people involved and might also “change over time” (Stein 6). This is the reason why a “single person’s narrative does not and cannot provide us with the authoritative truth of what happened” (Stein 2). All attempts to express the ‘truth’ about the Stonewall Riots would therefore lead to a homogenisation of the LGBTQIAN+ community which in all probability comes at the expense of groups and individuals who are already often misrepresented and the most negatively affected by intersectional discrimination. Assembling a variety of different materials from various sources, Stein’s book tries to avoid presenting ‘the truth’ about Stonewall and rather raises questions about the mystification of the riots and its effects on historiography. There are several myths about the Stonewall Riots that he addresses in his introduction. In the following, I will focus on the three most pervasive ones, namely that the riots were unprecedented, that it was the culmination of homophile activism of the preceding years and that it ushered in a new era for LGBTQIAN+ people.

First, Stein dismantles the myth that the riots were “a spontaneous eruption of anger and an unprecedented explosion of resistance” (Stein 8). Not only is this myth one of the most widely spread perceptions of the riots, but also the most pervasive, since it is “repeated subsequently during pride marches, and now invoked commonly in the mainstream media” (Stein

8). Moreover, the “campy version of this interpretation places emphasis on the fact that the funeral of Judy Garland<sup>22</sup> [...] took place hours before the riots began and contributed to their emotional intensity” (Stein 8), which is an oversimplification of the processes that led to the rebellion and trivialises their political scope. Surely, it was not the first time in history that LGBTQIAN+ people fought back, opposed the police, and stood up for their rights, since “there were long traditions of LGBT resistance and protest and [...] these traditions influenced both the rebellion and the mass mobilization that followed” (Stein 8). In 1966, for instance, a very similar riot took place in the Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco but did not become as famous as Stonewall (cf. Kazin et al. 395). Thus, contrary to the view that the riots were unprecedented, some historians argue that “the uprising was the culmination of two decades of organized LGBT movement activism in the 1950s and 1960s” (Stein 8). Stein agrees that political activism happening before Stonewall had “laid the foundations for the riots by changing the consciousness of the community and country, challenging gender and sexual oppression of U.S. society, and promoting the notion that LBGT people were entitled to freedom, equality, and justice” (Stein 9). However, he is highly aware of the fact that the homophile movement was not at all homogeneous and in part very assimilationist. As he submits, many homosexuals<sup>23</sup> of that time (especially members of the Mattachine Society) “embraced the politics of respectability” and “few homophile activists believed that rioting was an effective or desirable form of protest” (Stein 10). Moreover, these more conservative gays took offence at bars such as the Stonewall Inn which “led them to criticize gender and sexual practices that they commonly associated with gay bars, including casual sex, sexual promiscuity, sex work, public sex, erotic expression, and gender transgression” (Stein 10). Finally, another myth about Stonewall assumes that “the dark and dreary world of homosexuality in the pre-Stonewall era suddenly disappeared in June 1969 and was replaced by the light and bright universe of gay liberation” (Stein 8), which is of course a highly misleading view of the developments of gay rights in the U.S. and thus

---

22 The actress and singer Judy Garland was an icon of the LGBTQIAN+ subculture “whose triumphs and tragedies had been followed by many LGBT fans and whose rendition of ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow’ had inspired queer hopes for better futures” (Stein 8).

23 In fact, Harvey Milk was one of the conservative homosexuals who preferred to pass as heterosexual and leave his sexual activities to privacy. (cf. Carter 31)

has little support amongst gay activists and historians. Despite the fact that homosexuality was slowly being decriminalised,<sup>24</sup> sexual intercourse between members of the same sex remained illegal in most U.S. states and “[u]ntil 1973 homosexuality was labelled a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association” (Norton 865). Opinion polls show that still in 1977 homosexuals were not tolerated by a significant majority of the population (cf. Fejes 2) and their oppression was seen as legitimate due to their immorality and corruption of ‘true’ American values (cf. Fejes 6). As a result, LGBTQIAN+ people still had to face severe discrimination and incomparable defamation: they could be expelled from their jobs or from college and were often also legally prosecuted (cf. Norton 865). Moreover, after a period of reforms that improved the situation for gays in the 1960s, the larger political context took a turn for the worse towards the end of the decade. Developments such as the escalation of the Vietnam war, the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the increase in police violence and the election of the conservative Republican Richard Nixon for President (cf. Stein 13-14) had “radicalizing effects of rising expectations and dashed hopes” (Stein 12) which found their expression in the rebellion. However, some would argue that the “radical potential [...] was lost as the LGBT movement moderated, mainstreamed, bureaucratized, and institutionalized” (Stein 16). Thus, any “linear narratives of progress” should be replaced by more “periodic and cyclical” (Stein 17) approaches to the history of the LGBTQIAN+ rights movement.

Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, the LGBTQIAN+ community is in no way a homogeneous group of people with a collective identity and, hence, also improvements varied massively depending on identity markers such as sex, gender, race, and class. Despite growing liberation for mostly white, middle-class gays, discrimination did not suddenly end “especially against people of color, immigrants, poor people, sex workers, and gender-queers” (Stein 7). In fact, these groups were excluded when the gay liberation movement became more and more mainstreamed and thereby also more white, middle-class, and homonormative. The early commemoration marches were soon dominated by white males, who laid claim to the riots and were, hence, criticised harshly, since the other members of the community felt and in fact were marginalised by this claim (cf. Stein

---

24 Illinois was the first state to repeal sodomy laws in 1961, but it was not until 2003 that the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled sodomy laws unconstitutional (cf. Bernstein 17-18).

17) despite the assumption that “it was the effeminate men who did most of the fighting” (Carter 204). According to some activists, the important role of lesbians, trans\* people, queers of colour, street youths, and sex workers in the Stonewall Riots was systematically de-emphasised already at the beginning of the 1970s (cf. Tedjasukmana 64).<sup>25</sup> Thereby, white, middle-class, and male demands within the gay rights movement were privileged while other groups of the LGBTQIAN+ community were marginalised and misrepresented – a tendency that was extensively criticised by activist Sylvia Rivera during the Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in 1973 (cf. Tedjasukmana 64). Rivera, who identified as queer and non-binary (Duberman 124-126), but was often described “as Puerto Rican, gay, and trans” (Stein 17), had to fight her way to the stage amongst catcalls to deliver her angry speech about the missing solidarity for homeless queer youths within the community.<sup>26</sup> Rivera herself had fled her intolerant family and lived on the streets with a group of other homeless youths. Changing her name from Ray to Sylvia (cf. Duberman 66-67), she started “[h]ustling on Times Square at age 11” (Duberman xxi). She and her friends were regular customers at the Stonewall and so she happened to be present during the night of the riot (cf. Duberman 192-202). She is reported as having anticipated the monumental impact of the revolt as she uttered “I’m not missing a minute of this – it’s the *revolution!*” (Duberman 198) when the riot started. Even though she was amongst the rioters and became an active member in the newly formed organisation Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and its spin-off Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) (cf. Duberman 235), she got marginalised by the other members:

A Hispanic street queen's transgressive being produced automatic alarm: Sylvia was from the wrong ethnic group, from the wrong side of the tracks, wearing the wrong clothes – managing single-handedly and simultaneously to embody several frightening, overlapping categories of Otherness. By her mere presence, she was likely to trespass against some

---

25 The group of people involved in the Stonewall Riots is often referred to as gay, even though it was more diverse. The reason for this might be that “the words and concepts used in 1969 are not the same as the ones used decades later, it is often necessary to translate when encountering identity-based terms” (Stein 18). Nonetheless, this assumption is in my opinion not sufficient to explain the ways in which queers of colour, trans\*, and homeless people were excluded from the movement later.

26 The speech is accessible online on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-JIOWUw1o>.

encoded middle-class white script, and could count on being constantly patronized when not being summarily excluded. (Duberman 235-6)

Frustrated with the trans\*phobic and trans\*misogynist climate during meetings and its culmination when she wanted to draw attention to the miserable situation for queer street youths on the stage of the 1973 commemoration parade, but was not allowed to speak at first, she quit her participation with the GLF and the GAA, but “continued to march in the yearly Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, missing only twice in twenty years” (Duberman 282). Moreover, with her close friend Marsha P. Johnson, she later founded the organization Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which helped queer street youths by providing a shared home for them (cf. Duberman 251-255). Rivera herself lived on the streets for most of her life and died of cancer aged 50 in 2002 (cf. Jacobs n. pag.). Next to Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, born as Malcolm Michaels Jr. and “commonly identified as African American, gay, and trans” (Stein 17), was also one of the initiators of the riot and another important figure in the aftermath. Some activists argue that she might even have started the riot by throwing a shot glass into a mirror inside the Stonewall Inn, shouting, ‘I got my civil rights.’ As historian David Carter points out, this assertion cannot be validated (cf. Carter 298), but Johnson was most definitely on the vanguard of the movement (cf. Calafell 27). NYPD inspector Seymore Pine, who led the raid on the Stonewall Inn during the night of the riot, acknowledged in his testimony that “the first significant resistance that he encountered inside the bar came from transvestites” (Carter 261). Activist Craig Rodwell reported to have seen Johnson “climb to the top of a lamppost and drop a bag containing a heavy object on the [police] car’s windshield, shattering it” (Carter 188). Even though her activism was similarly marginalised as Rivera’s, Johnson became a leading figure in the fight for gay and trans rights throughout the years following the Stonewall Riots. Not only was she involved in the GAA and GLF and later in their own organization STAR, but also in ACT UP during the AIDS crisis, disclosing in 1992 that she was HIV positive herself (cf. Calafell 27). Her mysterious death in July 1992 that has not been resolved to date has caused controversy, because it was initially declared a suicide and later an accident, but many of Johnson’s peers believe it was murder (cf. Calafell 27; Dubermann 310; Jacobs n. pag.). After years of misrepresentation and marginalisation, New York City eventually honoured both Rivera and Johnson with a memorial statue in Greenwich Village, close to the former Stonewall Inn (cf. Jacobs n.

pag.). While this could be read as a positive sign for more liberation, queer struggles can thereby easily be incorporated into US-American national identity. The debate about the exclusion of trans people, BIPOC as well as street workers and homeless queers from the gay liberation movement is still discussed controversially today and by far not settled yet.<sup>27</sup> What came to be the gay liberation movement was dominated by white, male, cis-gendered homosexuals who pushed the issue of gay rights from the rebellious margins into the mainstream political agenda. One of the most well-known figures for this development was Harvey Milk. The following paragraphs will summarise some of the developments during the 1970s, especially focusing on Milk's political activism as well as antagonism and his assassination.

In the 1970s, San Francisco was one of the few cities where the gay liberation movement established an active community (cf. Fejes 6; 182). It was soon labelled “the international gay Mecca” (Shilts 57). As Randy Shilts convincingly argues in his biography *The Mayor of Castro Street – The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (1982), “[t]he story of Harvey Milk is, to a large extent, the story of the gay movement in San Francisco, and, ultimately, the nation” (x). Like many homosexuals during that time, Milk decided to keep his sexuality a secret for most part of his life. “Remaining ‘in the closet’ offered individuals some protection against widespread discrimination, but that option also made it very difficult to organize a political movement” (Norton 865). He had been leading a closeted, rather conservative life, serving in the Navy, working as a successful researcher at the Wall Street firm Bache & Company and had not participated much in political matters (cf. Carter 35, Shilts 44-45). Moreover, for Milk, “homosexuality was something to conceal, to be vaguely ashamed of, certainly nothing to walk down the street and crow about” (Shilts xv). At some point in his life, Milk developed an increasing interest in politics and abruptly decided to change his entire lifestyle when he was fired after spontaneously joining a protest against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970 (cf. Shilts 45). Soon afterwards, in 1972, Milk and his partner Scott Smith left New York and settled in The Castro, a former Irish dominated working class quarter of San Francisco which was about to become the city's gay neigh-

---

27 The release of the documentary *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* in 2017, for instance, fueled the debate around the narrative authority over Johnson's life story. Director David France was accused of having whitewashed her and her peers' struggle by “engag[ing] in colorblind strategies that erase Johnson's experience as a black trans\* activist, instead framing her as a queer victim” (Calafell 28).



bourhood and the centre of Milk's political activism: "Castro Street had become Harvey's hometown, and he had worked to make it a hometown for tens of thousands of homosexuals from around the world" (Shilts xvi), gaining him the unofficial title of the mayor of Castro Street. Convinced that "[s]omebody had to change society" and that he would "be the one to do it" (Shilts 84), Milk ran for office as City Supervisor three times and once for a position in the California State Assembly, which he lost only by a hairsbreadth (cf. Shilts 176). Victory eventually came in 1977, when he prevailed against sixteen other candidates and was elected to the Board of City Supervisors by 30% of the vote (cf. Shilts 217). Moreover, despite his short time in office and with the help of mayor George Moscone, Milk even managed to pass a civil rights bill that outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation. The only colleague who voted against the ordinance was the Irish Catholic Supervisor Dan White, with whom Milk had had a political dispute over White's proposed objection to a psychiatric centre in White's district. White declared war on Milk since Milk had voted against his agenda, so he would vote against Milk's gay rights ordinance in return (cf. Shilts 233-234). Even though Milk tried to make peace with him, White was never able to settle their dispute. Moreover, he frequently clashed with other members of the Board of Supervisors and finally resigned from office in 1978 for the stated reason that the annual salary of \$9.600 would be insufficient to provide for a family. Ten days later, however, he changed his mind and tried to claim his job back (cf. Shilts 297-299). In spite of reinstating White, as he had previously agreed to, mayor Moscone decided to appoint a liberal politician who had been active in his neighbourhood (cf. Shilts 299-309). In the end, this infuriated White to such an extent that on November 27, 1978, unrecognised by security, he entered San Francisco City Hall through a side window of the building and assassinated first mayor Moscone and then Supervisor Milk (cf. Shilts 314-315). Afterwards, he surrendered to the police and confessed the deed the same day (cf. Shilts 321-322). To the surprise of Milk's friends and followers, on the evening of Milk's and Moscone's death, an unprompted candlelight vigil began "on the corner of Castro and Market Street, the place that would one day be called Harvey Milk Plaza" (Shilts 329), slowly moving towards City Hall. At the height of the walk, the "massive crowd stretched the entire district from City Hall to Castro Street, some 40.000 strong utterly silent" (Shilts 330). Even though he "served less than eleven months in office" (Shilts xiv), the intense agitation following Milk's death proves that he had made

a significant impression on the gay liberation movement in San Francisco and beyond (cf. Fejes 215).

These events emphasise that the mid-1970s saw major improvements in homosexual rights such as “the repeal of sodomy statutes and the passage of antidiscrimination legislation at the local level” (Kazin et al. 395). Nevertheless, the emergence of gay rights at the same time brought more conservative forces to the scene who were “calling on the established trope of homosexuality as subversive to American values” (Kazin et al. 395). For this reason, “[t]his diverse and growing social movement also experienced serious setbacks and barriers to social change” (Fetner xii). The political campaigns of “Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen, singer, and television star famous for promoting Florida orange juice” (Fetner xii–xiii) were a decisive force for these developments. Bryant, who was a nationwide celebrity, assumed the role of “an embodiment of the traditional American wholesomeness and values that had been so greatly challenged by the cultural and social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s” (Fejes 2). Hence, Bryant became the leader of the anti-gay countermovement in 1977 and

claimed that gay men are child molesters trying to get jobs in schools and day care programs for easy access to young boys. As she says in her autobiography, 'homosexuals cannot reproduce - so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America.' (Fetner xiii)

As Tina Fetner carves out in her book *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (2008), “the emergence of the anti-gay countermovement that would evolve into what is known today as the religious right” (Fetner xii) made a significant impression on the gay liberation movement. Accordingly, gay rights activists began to work “in an antagonistic dialogue with the religious right” (Fetner xiii–xiv). Especially the efforts of Bryant’s campaign ‘Save Our Children,’ which was later renamed ‘Protect America’s Children,’ achieved large-scale support among the wider public. In Florida, Bryant’s initiative was successfully passed by 69 to 31 votes (cf. Fejes 4), “keeping gay rights out of Miami – Dade County for decades” (Fetner xiii). Its rapid consequent expansion over all of the U.S. “seemed to indicate a strong national trend of opposition to legal equality for lesbians and gay men” (Fejes 4). Between 1977 and 1978, Bryant’s movement performed “successful ballot initiatives [and] repealed gay rights laws in Wichita, Kansas, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Eugene, Oregon, each

accompanied with the passionate rhetoric similar to that in Dade County” (Fejes 4).

In California, state senator Josh Briggs was strongly influenced by Bryant and the evangelical Christian belief system (cf. Fetner 24). He started an initiative in 1978, which “would have made homosexuals (as well as those who expressed support of gay rights) ineligible for employment in the state’s public school system, stating explicitly that any currently employed gay and lesbian teachers, counselors, and administrators must be fired” (Fetner 24). The so-called Proposition 6, later known as ‘Briggs Initiative,’ was on the one hand fuelled by Bryant’s nationwide success and on the other “surely also responding to the state of lesbian and gay politics in California, where San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk had become the first openly gay elected official in the United States” (Fetner 25). Thus, as Fetner adduces, “[t]he Briggs Initiative was a statement of disapproval of San Francisco’s acceptance of gay men and lesbians, and sought to demonstrate that the rest of California would not follow suit” (Fetner 25). However, everything turned out quite differently as the Briggs Initiative provoked strenuous opposition on the side of the gay rights activists, with Harvey Milk leading the way. Eventually, they succeeded when Proposition 6 was not passed (cf. Fetner 25).

Until today, the anti-gay countermovement remains a constant threat to LGBTQIAN+ rights. Apart from that, it had a strengthening impact on the gay movement during the 1970s. This effect mainly concerned two areas of gay activism: firstly, the anti-gay movement forged a “transformation of the meaning of coming out of the closet” (Fetner 19), since “[m]any activists felt that to be ‘out and proud,’ that is, to embrace homosexuality positively and publicly, was an inherent radical political act that would change negative public opinions about homosexuality” (Fetner 19–20). And secondly, gay rights activists usually found difficulties to get news coverage for their campaigns and hence in a way welcomed the media attention drawn to them by the anti-gay movement. To that effect, “Anita Bryant created new opportunities for media coverage that activists in the lesbian and gay movement could not achieve on their own” (Fetner 128). More significantly though, the nationwide success of anti-gay activism “alerted the rest of the country to the agenda of a growing conservative movement and likely caused some people to consider issues like lesbian and gay rights for the first time” (Fetner 128). In support of this argument, Fetner found that “[o]pinion poll data suggests that the overall effect of the increased attention to the issue of homosexuality was increased tolerance” (Fetner

128). Nonetheless, media coverage alone is not enough to change the representation of sexual minorities. It is also crucial to examine the ways in which they are represented, especially when considering the long tradition in US-American cinema to depict homosexuality in a derogatory way.

Depicting the historic moments outlined above, the three films that *Queer Enough?* investigates can be defined as docudramas, a genre which, as the name already indicates, is a hybrid form oscillating between the seemingly contradicting poles of documentary and drama (or feature film) (cf. Steinle 148). As a specific form of docudrama, the films further belong to the genre of biopics, i.e. biographical adaptations of a famous person's life (cf. Bordwell and Thomson 131). In contrast to *Howl* and *Milk*, *Stonewalls* central character is not modelled after the life of a famous person. However, the film makes use of the biopic genre by presenting Danny Winters as if he *was* a historic figure – namely the person who sparked the gay liberation movement. For this reason the film was included anyway.

In his seminal study *Bio/Pics – How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), George F. Custen defines the conventions of the genre and its influence on the public perception of historic characters and events looking at films that were produced during the studio era, the so-called classical period of US filmmaking from 1927 to 1960 (cf. Custen 3). Nonetheless, these codes and conventions have shaped narrative cinema until today and are still relevant for Hollywood films. It is worth outlining them to carve out the affiliations of the genre with issues of truth and authenticity. According to Custen, biopics are “an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity” (Custen 7) since the films are often considered as historically accurate in their “attempt to present the film as the official story of a life” (Custen 8). The fact that “events are wholly staged, and the historical agents are portrayed through actors’ performances” (Bordwell and Thomson 131), however, generates a tension between documentary and fictional drama and seems to blur the lines between fact and fiction (cf. Bordwell and Thomson 132; Steinle 149). Strategies of authentication enhance this effect for example by “incorporat[ing] unstaged material” (Bordwell and Thomson 132), such as “newsreel” (Bordwell and Thomson 132) or “authentic footage” (Bordwell and Thomson 132). Thereby, the films claim authenticity, since the audience is “not merely absorbing the film as a diegetic narrative and as a piece of filmmaking, but also as a version of ‘reality,’ a distorted and purposefully contrived window on a biographical and historical place and time that invests the film

with special import” (Atkinson n. pag.). Accordingly, Michael Atkinson argues that

[c]inema isn't to be trusted on its best day, and yet dramatic films fashioned from someone's biography are met with eagerness and credulity, and commonly become part of how we remember the subject, converting what is already usually legend into codified, reconceived pseudo-myth. (Atkinson 2012)

The deliberate employment of the genre in order to raise certain expectations in the audience is an important means for filmic representation to emphasise its message, but also to allege its ideological agenda, which can be ascribed mainly to what Custen calls “translatibility problem – from event to its telling” (Custen 9), which means that “recorded or written history is a text that freezes the narrative in a particular, interested form” (Custen 9). Biopics are thus susceptible for myth-creation in Barthes' sense in that they simplify human complexities, generate universalism, and are mediated through narratives. Therefore, Custen describes them as being composed of a “repeated set of myths” (Custen 17) that is “ideologically self-serving” (Custen 8) to American nationalism. The “pose of accuracy, and its foregrounding of this issue as a litmus test in assessing different mediations of past events, empower some groups (and some symbolic forms) at the expense of others” (Custen 10). Not only do films decide whose lives are worth telling, then, but also suggest which lives are socially acceptable (cf. Custen 12). For most of Hollywood filmmaking this meant that biopics were “a world dominated by white males” (Custen 29). Dennis Bingham expands Custen's study and specifies the developmental stages the biopic genre passed in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting with “the classical, celebratory form (melodrama)” (Bingham 17) during the studio era, all the way up to “minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or third world, whereby Janet Frame or Harvey Milk and Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them)” (Bingham 17).

As mainstream cinema opened up, LGBTQIAN+ subjects became the protagonists of contemporary biopics which appropriated and possibly transgressed the narrative conventions of the genre. Some of the films seek to establish a different view on ‘real’ historic events, from the perspective of the marginalised or oppressed and thus to rewrite history. As Rich suggests, they possess a certain “value in setting history straight (or better

yet, queer)” (B. R. Rich *Cinema* 124). The most pervasive common feature of these films “is the idea that same-sex attraction and/ or unconventional gender attributes are central to the biopic subject’s identity, significantly impacting his or her life and work” (Erhart 265). According to Julia G. Erhart, these films “supplement community historiographies, which recognize the significance of gay historical figures” (Erhart 264) in the way they “depict well-known individuals associated with more or less positive contributions to society and culture” (Erhart 265). However positive this effect may be, it can also lead to assimilation, since the negative character traits are omitted to reinforce the qualities of the good (sexual) citizen in LGBTQIAN+ characters by incorporating “the typical biopic tradition of picking the ‘sexiest’ moments in an author’s life to contemplate their greatness or their pain in a romanticised manner, ready for public consumption” (Shachar 13). Thereby, the concentration on seemingly ‘positive’ character traits of the portrayed historical figure links questions of authenticity to those of identity and nationhood. Romantic plot lines are often added for a “stabilizing or ‘humanizing’” (Erhart 271) effect: “Romantic love, it would seem, both domesticates the male lead and contains the more controversial issues introduced elsewhere in the films” (Erhart 271). It seems a “convention that the partnering be life-long and more or less monogamous” (Erhart 271), which is also a bedrock of heteronormative and homonormative structures and part of gay ‘normality.’ Moreover, historical films fail to portray a variety of visible queer personalities. Even though the representations get “increasingly broad” (Benshoff 2016 261), as Benshoff argues, “the first among them tended to be middle-class white gay 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). As has been argued in the preceding chapters, this produces a hierarchy within the queer community and amongst homosexual men that favours assimilation to heteronormativity and seeks to suppress everything that does not conform to these normative standards.

Since LGBTQIAN+ characters have never been completely absent from Hollywood cinema, visibility *as such* is no palpable indicator for a non-derogatory representation. It seems, therefore, more relevant to examine the *ways* in which LGBTQIAN+ individuals are made visible. The reason for a mutual influencing of the perception of a social group on and off screen generally lies in the films’ control of the audience’s sympathies. The deliberate employment of narrative conventions to raise expectations in the audience is an important means for filmic representation to allege an ideo-

logical agenda. Scrutinising the ways in which LGBTQIAN+ characters are represented in contemporary LGBTQIAN+-themed cinema, *Queer Enough?* examines how they negotiate questions of homosexuality, heteronormative oppression, emancipation, and masculinity to show whether or not the films signify monolithically or if they offer a queer performativity and thus open up a discursive counterspace to the 'normal.'

Methodologically, I use Markus Kuhn's film narratology as a heuristic concept and undertake a work-immanent-descriptive analysis (Kuhn 8; "werkimmanent-deskriptive Analyse", translation mine), in order to carve out the narrative and formal-aesthetic strategies used in the films and their functions for the representation of LGBTQIAN+ characters and themes. This means I derive my analytical material from within the filmic works themselves and, for example, dispense with audience- and effect-related approaches (cf. Kuhn 8). Adopting Gerard Genette's narrative theory, Kuhn distinguishes between 'histoire,' which refers to the content, and 'discourse,' that is the formal-aesthetic composition of filmic narratives (cf. Kuhn 12). Although these two narrative levels are highly intertwined and, hence, cannot be completely separated (cf. Kuhn 12), I subdivided my analysis in two parts accordingly.

In the first part of the analysis, i.e. chapters 3.1 and 3.2, I focus on the content of the films, especially on the depiction of heteronormative oppression and the central characters' emancipation from those structures which are enacted in all three films. This content-based analysis mainly consists of close-readings of important scenes in the three films on the basis of the relevant theoretical concepts such as heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity that I have put into a meaningful context and developed further in my theoretical approach. Regarding the depiction of masculinity, it is worthwhile to look beyond the content to the formal-aesthetic components that support a particular mode of representation. Thus, in the second part, i.e. chapters 3.3 and 3.4, I move from the content level to the formal-aesthetic level. Here, I am particularly interested in the genre-specific narrative standards and cinematic mechanisms such as the camera work, image composition, coloration, i.e. the *mise-en-scène* of the films. Thereby, the focus lies on the narrative structure and the gaze the films establish to determine to what extent the films make use of mechanisms of assimilation that might perpetuate structures of homonormativity and reinforce hegemonic (gay) masculinity.

