

QUEER AND NOW: REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN FILM

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Great strides have been made in the past few decades in the way of Queer representation on television, but films fall inexplicably short. This project will consist of two parts, a written historical analysis and a short film. The written section will focus on an analysis of Queer representation in American film and its effect on society as well as discuss what better representation might look like in the future. The film portion will take an intimate look at the effect of representation (or lack thereof) on an individual's identity. Ultimately, this thesis will establish that more comprehensive and intersectional Queer representation in film will be beneficial for Queer individuals, the Queer community, and society at large.

## QUEER AND NOW: REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN FILM

Today, a casual scroll through the Netflix home page is likely to show you at least a few movies with Queer representation, but this hasn't always been the case. Things are improving, but even now more comprehensive and intersectional Queer representation in film will be beneficial for Queer individuals, the Queer community, and society at large. This portion of the thesis will cover the history of Queer representation in film over the course of the Pre-Hays Code Era (1880s-1930s), the Hays-Code Era (1930s-1960s), the Post- Hays Code Era (1960s-1990s), and the Modern Era (1990s-Present) It will also focus on the impact of a few key movies, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970), and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) to show the changes and similarities over time.

At the dawn of the film era there were in fact quite a few movies that featured some Queer representation. The earliest known film with live recorded sound was *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* in 1894, which featured two men happily dancing together. This wasn't necessarily any indication of a homosexual relationship at that time, but it provides a stark contrast to the regulation that would come with the Hays Code. 1927's *Wings* is said to be the first movie where two men shared a kiss. In 1930, Sternberg's *Morocco* featured Marlene Dietrich dressed in men's clothing and kissing a young lady. While films of the era were by no means outright declarations of Queer liberation, the characters were allowed to play around with their gender expression and with other people of the same gender far more freely than they would in the coming years.

The 1920s saw the reputation of the film industry grow more and more scandalous, from a culture of alcohol and drug use to implications of murder and rape. With the threat of legal regulation looming, the major film studios decided to crack down and regulate themselves first. They brought in William Hays, “a deacon in the Presbyterian church, former chair of the Republican party, campaign manager for Warren G. Harding's 1920 presidential campaign, and now postmaster general of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Under his leadership the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) adopted the Production Code that would shape the way Queer people would be depicted in film for the next few decades. Even with the explicit representation of Queer characters banned, writers and directors still managed to hint at homosexual behavior and all other manner of prohibited content. Any character that even suggested queerness had to be the villain, the joke, or the tragedy. This is where many of the false negative stereotypes of Queer people originate. Queer women were unhappy outcasts doomed to death or loneliness. Queer men were portrayed as pathetically effeminate, manipulative pedophiles.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, released in 1948, is an example of how Queer characters could be hinted at during the Hays Code era so long as they were, in this case, perverted killers. The film opens on two characters, Brandon and Phillip (played by Farley Granger and John Dall), in their apartment after they have just murdered their friend. Here we see an example of queercoding, where the characters play directly into Queer stereotypes without ever actually saying or showing that they are in fact Queer. Film critic Armond White states that “Brandon and Philip's special bond is apparent only to those mature enough to spot their intimacy. It's in the way Dall and Granger look at

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<sup>1</sup> Mashon and Bell, “Pre-Code Hollywood,” 3.

each other.”<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that this was intentional. John Dall was gay and Farley Granger was bisexual, and “Hitchcock was well aware of the sexual orientations of both actors and was reportedly pleased with what is now called the on-screen ‘chemistry’ between the two.”<sup>3</sup> The 1930s-60s were filled with movies of a similar ilk, in which any hint at Queer behavior or identity is swiftly tied to pain, suffering, and evil. When the Hays Code was eventually phased out in 1968 by the now Motion Picture Association (MPA), we began to see the some of the first explicitly Queer characters.

William Friedkin’s *The Boys in the Band* (1970) was one of the films to feature a cast of almost all Queer characters. While this was definitely groundbreaking at the time, the film “negatively depicts those gay lives that do not follow heterosexual paradigms, reinforcing long-held stereotypes of gays as sad, troubled, and unhappy people.”<sup>4</sup> The group of men spend most of the film fighting and berating one another with all manner of insults and slurs and the rest contemplating that maybe all a gay man can hope for is a short and painful life. Queer and non-Queer viewers alike saw that the best the Queer people could hope for was a miserable existence. Even with films like *The Boys in the Band*, Queer stories still hadn’t made it quite into the mainstream until the 1990s.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a boom in Queer characters on screen, but that didn’t necessarily mean that the narrative had changed. Ang Lee’s 2005 *Brokeback Mountain* was one of the first movies that truly broke into the mainstream, with well known actors Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger. Straight viewers could comfortably watch the movie “resting assured that the cowboys’ touching story poses no threat to their heterosexual privilege or the social order that requires that the movie’s gay love story be

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<sup>2</sup> White, “How Hitchcock’s Classic Mystery ‘Rope’ Cleverly Depicted Queer Life.”

<sup>3</sup> Badman and Hosier, “Gay Coding in Hitchcock Films.”

<sup>4</sup> Carrithers, “The Audiences of ‘The Boys in the Band.’”

‘tragic’ in the first place.”<sup>5</sup> This film is heralded as a gay love story but the main characters are still not allowed to end up together, even going so far as to have one of the characters murdered in what is interpreted by many as a hate crime. So despite importance of this film, the message is still much the same as Queer movies of the past. Queer people never get a happy ending.

In the past few decades there have finally been some films that begin to portray Queer characters in a more positive, less dire light, such as *Love, Simon*, but this is not enough. More diverse Queer representation is needed in the film industry because of the impact that representation has on society’s treatment of the Queer community as well as on Queer individual’s perception of themselves. Better representation would allow Queer people to see that not only are there other people like them out there, but that they have the potential to live a happy and fulfilling life. It would allow non-Queer people to realize that these people are not terrifying strangers, but their neighbors, their family, and their friends. These films do not exist in a vacuum. They have the potential to do so much good if we can create more Queer films made by Queer people, for Queer people.

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<sup>5</sup> Piontek, “Tears for Queers.”

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