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*“The Trouble with Gender – Analysing Stereotypical  
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the field of Queer theory is a recent one, having emerged in the early 1990s, it has played a major role in various academic disciplines. Research areas like gender studies, feminist theory, linguistics, identity politics, literature, cultural/media studies, performance theory, philosophy, sociological theories, and many more, have been influenced by Queer theory up to the present day. As the title of this master thesis indicates, my cultural texts, which I selected for my thesis, are films. I will focus on gender in general, including aspects like stereotypes, performativity, disguise, identity, and heteronormativity. In order to provide an insight into Queer theory, all three films are chosen from the genre of Queer Cinema. Moreover, they share the fact that they have been produced in the United States and can be classified as contemporary texts, ranging from 1999 until 2010 (*Boys Don't Cry*: 1999, *But I'm a Cheerleader*: 2000, *The Kids Are All Right*: 2010). Hence, in combination with Film theory, I will predominantly concentrate on one prevalent academic discipline: Gender studies.

In order to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of the movies, I will refer to influential scholars arising from the field of Queer theory. One of the most central notions raised by leading Queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, etc., is that any kind of essential identity, or norm in general, is rejected. As Halperin puts it (62), "Queer is [...] *whatever* [emphasis added] is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers* [emphasis added]. It is an identity without an essence". From this quotation, it is obvious that Halperin intends to convey that there is no essential notion, nor intrinsic norm in conjunction with any social identity. As a consequence, Queer theory rejects any kind of assumed norm, and argues that sexual identities and categories, like 'homosexual', 'heterosexual', 'bisexual', etc. are social constructions without any essential, or inherent core. It encourages to 'think outside the box', which I will intend to do in my analysis of the selected films. When looking at them, it becomes clear that the selected films provide an ideal basis for "whatever is at odds with the normal", be it transsexuality, homosexuality, rehabilitation camps for homosexual adolescents, or gender and behaviours deviating from the so-called 'norm'. I will demonstrate in what ways the characters in

these films deviate from normative conceptions, and what kind of aggravating, even fatal consequences such deviations will have.

Based on these considerations, Gender studies, which is the second major academic field of interdisciplinary study, besides Queer theory, will be of great importance for my thesis. When the French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex* 301, 1973), a groundbreaking basis was laid for the differentiation between sex and gender. Feminist theorist Judith Butler continued Beauvoir’s crucial thought in the development of her notion of gender performativity, as she claims that both sex and gender, are social constructs, meaning that there is no body that naturally “pre-exists its cultural inscription”<sup>1</sup>. Thus, gender is performative and not a set of concrete identities, but always reproduced through the body again and again. As a result, Butler argues that gender is not something one *is*, but something one *does*. In order to provide an introduction into the field of Gender studies, both Butler’s and Beauvoir’s notions of sex and gender, among others, will be discussed in the third chapter, in which I will deal with Gender theory in detail.

Basically, my thesis will be structured into two parts, whereby the first one deals with theoretical concepts and theories, like Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist and philosophical notions, or Gayle Rubin’s constructivist conception of gender, since these scholars have been very influential in the fields of Gender studies and Queer theory. For this reason and for the purpose of understanding and applying the theoretical concepts in the selected films, I will provide this theoretical framework, in which the mentioned theories (among other approaches) will be expounded.

As already stated, in the second half of my thesis I intend to apply the theoretical framework to the selected movies, in order to illustrate how such conceptions work within these cultural representations. I will examine in what ways (stereotypical) gender roles are presented, meaning how gendered behaviour is conveyed. Hence, the idea is to describe stereotypical gender roles and ways of behaving exhibited by gay and lesbian subcultures, and to analyse how these concepts are portrayed and evaluated in the selected queer movies. When dealing with this subject matter, significant question may arise, for instance, In what ways is gender depicted? How do behavioural actions, which are performed by men, differ

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/11880\\_Chapter\\_3.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/11880_Chapter_3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender\\_b\\_1291390.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender_b_1291390.html)



from those being performed by women? Is gender expression conveyed indirectly via behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, or directly, for instance, by the use of language (in dialogue), and/or by performing certain actions? Or, with the aid of bodily expressions, like gestures and countenance? Are there any similarities or differences between the individual movies? For example, in *Boys Don't Cry*, gender performance is a life-and-death issue, whereas director Lisa Cholodenko (*The Kids Are All Right*) represents gender roles as being something mundane and ordinary. In *But I'm A Cheerleader*, by contrast, stereotypical gendered behaviour and traditional gender roles, where gender should be in accordance with the biological sex of the character (meaning a man should behave like a 'real' man and should engage in activities which are associated with men and vice versa), are portrayed as a means of attaining "normal" and accepted gendered behaviour. To make it even worse, this 'normal' behaviour is conveyed as being necessary to switch over to the "right" heterosexual orientation. Due to the fact that the 'right' sexual orientation is represented as being heterosexuality, heteronormativity is imposed, which will be also of crucial importance in the course of this thesis. Since all of the selected movies feature gender- and identity-based themes and provide a vast range of symbolic imagery, I regard them suitable for the analysis in my thesis. I will intend to answer the raised questions by means of a close reading of the selected movie scenes and sequences. In order to support my findings, I will add screenshots from the scenes, if necessary. In terms of cinematic techniques and methods, I will analyse the chosen scenes or sequences according to camera movement, camera angle, and camera shots. I will also consider lighting, setting, sound, costumes, objects, and colours.

After years of invisibility and non-existence of queer characters, filmmakers have finally changed this with the emergence of Queer Cinema. Thus, one of the reasons why I consider an analysis of film within this genre valuable, as it emerged recently, is because there has not been explored much about gender issues from a queer perspective (in comparison to the heterosexual realm). Gender certainly plays a significant role in films (generally), as Film theorist Richard Dyer states, "Ideas of who you are don't just come from inside you but from the culture, especially from the movies, so we learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman" (qtd. in *The Celluloid Closet* 06:25-06:36). In the fictional world of the movies, everything is possible, thereby, it "offer[s] a wonderful laboratory for observing gender performance

at work”<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, queer films reflect the lives and experiences of homosexual people, rendering them as valid and important for the lesbian and gay community. Queer Cinema is about understanding queer people’s outsider status and “how it can contribute to the whole, to the community” (John Cameron Mitchell; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 01:03:13-01:04:21). Or, as Ruby Rich sums up, “When we are seeing queer movies, we are seeing more than a story, more than a plot, more than a happy ending, but scripts for our own lives, fantasies, dreams, and nightmares” (qtd. in *Fabulous!* 56:27-56:37).

When focusing on the anti-essentialist, constructivist notion of gender, which is asserted by many Gender and Queer theorists, I will pursue the question whether the presented behaviours and stereotypes in the selected films undermine, or confirm any gender norm. In consideration of my primary texts, I therefore hypothesise that, due to this stereotypical representation of gendered behaviour in the selected movies, assumed normative gender roles are not subverted, but confirmed. In view of this premise and with the aid of the theoretical framework, I expect to ascertain whether the proposed hypothesis is true or false. The core idea of this thesis is to provide a conclusion of the ways, gender roles and behaviours are being presented, and whether these behaviours depicted in the movies are conveyed as being (hetero)normative, and thereby confirmed, because of their presentation as being the norm in the addressed mainstream movies; or if such stereotypical representations are, for example, parodied, and therefore have subversive and undermining potential. Furthermore, I propose that the concept of gender is a fluid, cultural construction, which will be demonstrated by means of the concept of androgyny, Butler’s theory on gender, and exemplary scenes from the selected films.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will elaborate on Queer theory in great detail, by defining and re-defining the term ‘queer’, outlining the emergence of Queer theory and its social and cultural context, thereby providing the theoretical frame, in which this thesis is embedded. I will also take into consideration and explain significant components, like heteronormativity, stereotypes, and how queerness is represented in the American media. The third chapter extensively deals with Gender theory, in which Judith Butler’s concepts and theories will be expounded, for example, performativity, or gender as a stylised repetition of acts. I will also draw on the concept of androgyny because it shows that gender is fluid, not fixed. In the fourth chapter of

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender\\_b\\_1291390.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender_b_1291390.html)

my thesis, I will concentrate on the history of Queer Cinema, since the cultural texts, I am going to analyse, are chosen from the genre of Queer Cinema, as already stated. The fifth and final chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the three films *Boys Don't Cry*, *But I'm A Cheerleader*, and *The Kids Are All Right*.

## 2. 'QUEER' – ORIGIN AND MEANING

Before engaging with Queer theory in detail, the term 'queer' needs to be explained. During my research process, it turned out that defining 'queer' is not an easy task, since the term brings along a lot of definitions. Therefore, the paper seeks to *explain* [my emphasis] the notion of 'queer' and provide various explanations, rather than *define* [my emphasis] it, since this term comprises a vast semantic level. Moreover, many Queer theorists are apprehensive of any definition of 'queer', as this would be a "restriction", or a limitation (Jagose, Butler). This has both benefits and disadvantages: On the one hand, the rejection of an exact definition suggests a certain openness and fluidity, leaving room for various interpretations. On the other hand, it is difficult to explain and to grasp, due to its lack of a clear description. Defining the term 'queer' would be "a decidedly un-queer thing to do" (Sullivan 43), since queer rejects any kind of essential, fixed definition, as it will be elaborated in the course of the thesis.

According to Queer theorist and American literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "the word 'queer' itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root – *twerkw*, which also yields the G *quer* (traverse), L *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*" (xii). Due to the polysemous and multilayered character the term entails, there is no consensus on a unified meaning. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2003), for example, 'queer' is a "taboo and offensive word used to describe someone who is HOMOSEXUAL, especially a man. Do not use this word" (1342). It is rather surprising that such a negative description of 'queer' can be found in a dictionary published in 2003, since this term has undergone a significant process of redefinition in the early 1990s, which will be referred to later on. Especially the request, "Do not use this word" conveys a very negative attitude towards the notion of 'queer'. Moreover, the distinction in gender ("[U]sed to describe someone who is HOMOSEXUAL, especially a man") is rather unusual, since Queer theory seeks to challenge and deconstruct the concept of gender, identity and binaristic thinking. From a gender perspective, binaristic thinking comprises only two gender

categories: male and female. The issue of binary oppositions will be analysed in more detail later on. The *Longman Dictionary* provides another definition of 'queer', "old-fashioned strange or difficult to explain: *She gave a queer laugh.* [...] old-fashioned slightly crazy". The third explanation given by the LDOCE is 'queer' as a verb, "queer sb's pitch/queer the pitch for sb BrE *informal* to make it difficult for someone to do something that they had planned to do", which is also negatively connoted. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) provides similar conceptions of 'queer', "Strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric, in appearance or character", or "Not in a normal condition; out of sorts; giddy, faint or ill [...] bad; worthless". As a verb it means, "To quiz or ridicule; to impose upon; to cheat". The combination of these derogatory definitions and the established reference to the homosexual person, then, generates a very negative attitude towards the term 'queer' and, as a consequence, degrades homosexual people. The historian and gay activist Jeffrey Weeks, who has dealt with the shift in meaning of the word 'gay', states that, "[q]ueer was the universally used word, the definition of the oppressor, and the term symbolising the accepted oppression" (190). Consequently, as Weeks observes, 'queer' is not only a designating term for a homosexual person, but a "negative judgement of the heterosexist order on the individual who refuses to comply with compulsory heterosexuality". Moreover, Cranny-Francis et. al. convincingly state that this appraisal of the heterosexist order encompasses the set of derogative and negative terms which represent one part of the binaristic construction of heterosexuality (Cranny-Francis 74-75). The second part of the divide, in turn, is depicted as positive, normal, worthwhile, good, etc. As I have demonstrated, 'queer' is anything but neutral, and continues to be "a term of homophobic abuse" (Jagose n.p.) against people who do not fit into the heteronormative binary system. 'Queer' is not the only term which has been used to describe individuals in pejorative terms, but also both 'heterosexual' (surprisingly) and 'homosexual', which were not coined until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "and did not make their way into Western societies' public discourse until the middle of the twentieth century" (Katz 1976, 1995; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988, qtd. in Benshoff and Griffin 2). Unsurprisingly, 'homosexual' described people who engaged in same-sex relationships and behaviours in negative terms. However, the term 'heterosexual' was also used in order to stigmatise people, for example, those who practised sexual activities "outside the bonds of procreative matrimony" (Benshoff; Griffin 3). In the course of the twentieth century, heterosexuality became

to be associated with the “normal”, “right” sexual orientation lived by man and woman, whereas homosexuality remained the abnormal reverse (3).

The term 'queer' has not only been used in order to insult and devalue homosexual people, but also to mark differences in class. In England, 'gay' was associated with opulent places of event, visited by wealthy people, whereas 'queer' was used to refer to locations such as pubs or cottages frequented by workers (Cranny-Francis 75). Besides indicating differences in class, the use of 'queer' differs geographically. In Taiwan, for example, the term certainly is not unconventional, but it has been questioned in terms of use, since it is highly associated with America and Americaness, as Dinshaw points out, “its implication in specifically American social contexts informed by racial tensions and reactions against the term ‘gay’” (8). Thus, the term 'queer' has not only been negatively connoted in America and Europe, but in Taiwan as well.

## **2.1. Redefining Queer**

From previous examples, it should have become clear that 'queer' has not been associated with positive attributes at all. It was used by straight people and members of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual communities to remind themselves and other members of their reduced status in society. From the early 1990s onwards, however, 'queer' was reclaimed and redefined by members and activists of/for the LGBT community. A revaluation of the term “that turn[ed] it from a negative into a positive term” (Glover and Kaplan 107) took place. In contrast to 'gay', which was used by many people to refer to themselves in a positive way, conveying that “one was sexually free, not necessarily homosexual” (Weeks 1989, qtd. in Benshoff; Griffin 3), 'queer', as noted above, was frequently associated with negative feelings. The reason why 'gay' has had some positive connotations are, for example, as Cranny-Francis observes (75),

[T]he term 'gay' has always had some positive connotations, whether in its more banal usage as airy or off-hand (as in expressions such as 'gay-blade', meaning, ironically enough, a carefree young heterosexual man), or as a positive attribute of (heterosexist) women. These ambiguities and the general sense of light-heartedness associated with the term make its choice as a term of positive self-identity and community formation very attractive.

Thus, in contrast to the term 'queer', 'gay' has been attributed rather positive feelings than negative ones. In fact, it conveyed queer notions even before the term 'queer' was used; it described diverse forms of sexuality: homosexuality, heterosexuality

outside marriage, transsexuality, prostitution, and so on (Benshoff; Griffin 3). However, it was not until 1984 that the *Wall Street Journal* allowed the use of the word 'gay' (*Fabulous!* 24:34).

Another reason why 'queer' experienced a shift in meaning, was the emerging AIDS crisis which "sent waves of fear through the urban gay community, as growing numbers of previously healthy men became ill and died gruesome deaths" (Hall 51). The issue of AIDS will be examined in the next chapter. It is important to consider that 'queer' has also been ascribed new sets of meanings by various scholars and activists, especially gender theorists. Many critics wonder why such a shift in meaning has happened, and Cranny-Francis comes up with a possible explanation. She states that, 'queer' provides a way to "affirm multiple non-heterosexist identities and varied non-heterosexist experience" (76). It is an umbrella term "for all those outside of heterosexuality, as well as a way of specifying multiple identities" (Bennett; Grossberg; Morris 288). Thus, 'queer' challenges seemingly fixed gender and sex categories like 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual', etc., and offers new possibilities for (sexual) identification. As Queer theorist Annamarie Jagose convincingly states, "queer marks a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural" (98). The Italian feminist Teresa de Lauretis regards the concept of queer as a given opportunity to avoid imitating the binary hetero-homosexual model of identity and combining gay and lesbian with feminist work. She has also used the expression 'Queer theory' for the first time at a conference in 1990 at the University of California. De Lauretis edited a collection of essays given the title, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities", which was released in the feminist journal *Differences* in 1991 (Hall 55)<sup>3</sup>. The notion of Queer theory will be explained later. Another positive aspect is that the concept of queer offers a way of overcoming and destabilising forms of address that create hierarchies and privilege, for instance, 'man' over 'woman', and from a queer perspective, 'gay' over 'lesbian' (Dyer 186; qtd. in Bennett et. Al. *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*).

It may be useful at this point to provide an explanation of the term 'identity', since it is both complex and difficult to define. According to Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris, identity is a stable, consistent concept of belonging to a social group (172),

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa de Lauretis justifies her usage of the term 'queer' instead of 'lesbian and gay' by stating, "to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any of these terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead both to transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them" (qtd. in Hall 55).

Identity is to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances; about a person or a group being, and being able to continue to be, itself and not someone or something else. [...] The question of identity centers on the assertion of principles of unity, as opposed to pluralism and diversity, and of continuity, as opposed to change and transformation.

Thus, identity means to relate to other people in terms of class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, attitude, and so on. Features like race, class, etc. enable people to share their experiences and to create a feeling of membership, as Cranny-Francis explains, “[sharing] what they [people] see as crucial features of their social positioning” (33). Another crucial feature of social positioning is sexual orientation, gay men and lesbian women identify with, meaning, they create a feeling of connectedness with other homosexual people. Although such an identificatory process enables people to establish communities and groups, it simultaneously excludes others, namely those who neither identify with homosexuals, nor with heterosexuals. This is where Queer theory comes into play, because, as already mentioned, it seeks to disrupt sexual identity categories.

Moreover, since the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, people began to challenge established notions of identity. It was believed that only gay men were at risk of becoming infected with the fatal illness, however, it soon turned out that “sexual behaviour is far more complex and far less normative than heterosexual discourse allowed” (Cranny-Francis 77). This means that boundaries between the binary system of heterosexuality and homosexuality are blurred, because there are heterosexual men having sex with other men, however, who do not consider themselves as gay, or heterosexual couples engaging in “sexual activities which might formerly have been considered gay male practices” (77). Consequently, there are no clear-cut distinctions between ‘heterosexual’ and ‘gay’ sex practices anymore, which has a direct, subverting effect on identity formations,

[S]ince heterosexual discourse assumes a transparent, naturalised relationship between identity and practice, this move was fundamentally disruptive of notions of identity and, therefore, of heterosexual discourse itself” (Cranny-Francis 77).

Thus, the AIDS epidemic did not only have negative consequences, but also positive ones. It united all kinds of identities, namely those who did not fit into the heteronormative community.

Cranny-Francis continues by saying that the notion of queer also subverts the concept of a one-dimensional version of lesbian and gay identity which “reinforces and sustains heterosexism” (76). In other words, there has been an effort to show that there are more sexual identities than only ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’, ‘male’ or ‘female’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, and to disrupt the existing binaristic thinking, which is prevalent in contemporary society. As the feminist Associate Professor Rosemary Hennessy convincingly states (99; qtd. in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*),

[Queer marks] an effort to speak from and to the differences and silences that have been suppressed by the homo-hetero binary, an effort to unpack the monolithic identities ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, including the intricate ways lesbian and gay sexualities are inflected by heterosexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity.

Thus, queer does not only take into account issues regarding gender and sexuality, but notions like ethnicity and race as well. In several Asian contexts, for example, people regard the term ‘queer’ as being more receptive to cultural specificity and difference than terms like ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, or ‘homosexual’ (Sullivan and Jackson, 2001; qtd. in Bennett; Grossberg; Morris 289). The literary critic Michael Warner has also made the observation that identifying as queer brings along more issues than only sexual orientation. A queer understanding entails (Warner xiii),

Gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body.

This quotation shows that ‘queer’ is not an easily definable concept, as I already mentioned and also brings along political issues. One could argue the queer movement dissociates itself from identity politics (Cranny-Francis 74). Warner continues by stating that identifying as queer requires great effort because queer people need to fight about the enumerated issues all the time (xiii). This is due to the fact that characterising oneself as queer means to challenge the common understanding of what the state stands for, what differences in gender signify, or what the notion of fairness means in a patriarchal oriented society (xiii). However, Warner argues that there still needs to be a lot of work done, since heteronormative values are so deeply embedded in the logic of the sexual order. He explains this assertion by referring to the general belief that “preservation of the species is a law of nature” (2000: 4). He concludes that this belief has become both normative and



naturalised since “marital hetero sex has a rationale in nature” (4). Thus, the problem, Warner tries to highlight, is that the existentialist view of heterosexuality seems to justify the status quo as an expression of natural law (4). Owing to the fact that we are living in a culture of sexual norms that survive since the Stone Age, “including prohibitions against autoeroticism, sodomy, extramarital sex, and [...] birth control” (2000: 5), such anchored norms and beliefs are hard to get rid of. Warner observes, “For many people, the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them” (2000: 6). Also, the general assumption that certain sexual tastes or practices should be automatically everyone else’s standards is widespread. The problem, as Warner emphasises, is that any kind of sexual variance is regarded as pseudo-morality since such ‘sexual dissidents’ step out of the heterosexual, reproductive matrix, thereby representing a deviant understanding of ‘normal’ sexuality.

Generally, queer does not only seek to create and raise other identities to the surface, but to subvert and “challenge the mechanism of identity and its inevitably regulatory and delimiting function” (Cranny-Francis 76),

Queer challenges the concept of identity and the binaristic (self/other) thinking it encodes. It rejects the binaristic definitions of gender and sexuality that construct heteronormative descriptions of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual.

Annemarie Jagose has made a crucial observation. She points out what Queer theory achieves. It does not only deconstruct the homo/heterosexual binary, but also challenges the seemingly normal categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’.

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytical framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (Jagose 3).

In my queer reading of the chosen films, I will focus on exact those gestures, behaviours, and outward appearances, which contradict “stable“, “normal“ relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Particularly in *Boys Don’t Cry*,

I will consider aspects like cross-dressing, disguise, and gender ambiguity. In combination with gender roles and appearances allegedly fixed concepts like ‘man’ and ‘woman’ will be challenged in *The Kids Are All Right* and *But I’m A Cheerleader*.

## **2.2. Queer Theory and its political significance – Thinking outside of the box**

“We’re here. We’re queer. We’re fabulous”; “We’re queer. We’re here. Get used to it” (Pickett 157), these are well known political slogans used by the Queer movement in order to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities. Due to the fact that ‘queer’ used to be an offence, this ‘in-your-face’ use of the term indicates a shift in meaning. Consequently, it has transformed from an insult, which was mainly directed at gay men, as already shown by means of the *Longman Dictionary* entry, to a positive and inscribing message. The statement, “We’re here” conveys the notion of presence in a sense of ‘We don’t want to hide anymore, accept it or forget it! We want to be visible in society! We want to be given a voice!’. When looking at the first political slogan, it is obvious that ‘queer’ is linked to the word ‘fabulous’, which evokes positive connotations. Thus, it is clear that Queer political activists strive for a transformation in meaning of the term ‘queer’, namely, from negative to positive connotations (Bennett; Grossberg; Morris 287).

Carolyn Dinshaw, who is writing for the *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, also observes a significant difference in meaning between ‘gay’ and ‘queer’. She argues that, in the 1990s the term ‘gay’ was associated with assimilation and conservatism, whereas ‘queer’ “suggested a more confrontational, radical politics” (8). Within the last years, ‘queer’ frequently has been used on sitcoms and reality TV shows, when the term has become a bland synonym for ‘gay’, “indexing mainstream liberal values and lifestyle consumer culture” (Dinshaw 8). Besides the explanation and shift in meaning I intended to demonstrate, Queer theory represents the theoretical framework I am dealing with during the course of this thesis.

Given these facts, the concept of queer rejects stable, essential, fixed identities and gives rise to new, hybrid sexual notions and thereby “challenges stereotypes of gender and sexuality”, which will be shown in the course of this thesis (Cranny-Francis 78). However, it is important to bear in mind that queer does not only show the various ways of being gay or lesbian, but it comprises all kinds of sexual minorities: “bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered people, interracial couples whether homosexual or heterosexual, disabled sexualities, sadomasochistic

sexualities whether homosexual or heterosexual, etc.“ (Benshoff; Griffin 5). Moreover, some critics consider AIDS activists as the archetypal 'queers' because they were transgressing identities, which is what made AIDS activism queer: “a straight woman fought for a gay male friend's treatment, a white lesbian pursued health access for black HIV infected mothers“ (Aaron 6-7).

Queer theorists assert that human sexuality is very complex and can never be fully grasped, even less it can be forced into a single category like 'heterosexual', or 'homosexual'. Thus, individual sexuality is fluid, which makes it rather difficult to pin down, and as a consequence, Ott and Mack state, “the rather simple categories we use to name sexuality can never fully represent an individual's actual, varied sexual drives“ (198). Consequently, Queer theorists intend to reveal the deficits of such labels and categories and to show how they privilege some people, whereas others are excluded and even marginalised. Moreover, it is important to consider that queer encourages to think outside of the box, rather than to assimilate. As Sedgwick concludes, “[Queer describes] the experiential linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures“ of sexual identities (qtd. in Bennett 8). Like the notion of 'queer' seeks to disrupt identity categories, as already analysed in the previous chapter, Queer theory intends to destabilise “socially constructed systems of meaning surrounding human sexuality“ (Ott; Mack 197). As I indicated, the term cannot be easily explained. Halperin (2003) points out that the concept of 'Queer theory' was used before its meaning was elucidated. At the beginning, Queer theory was “a placeholder for a hypothetical knowledge-practice not yet in existence“ and even the term 'theory' induces the phantasm of a “set of specific doctrines, a singular, substantive perspective on the world, a particular theorization of human experience [...] no one knew, what the theory was“ (340). It is an interdisciplinary field that does not aspire to represent only the binary system of heterosexuality and homosexuality, but the full spectrum of human sexuality (Ott; Mack 197). Or, as Spargo states (9),

Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. If queer theory is a school of thought, then it's one with a highly unorthodox view of discipline. The term describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images; analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires.

This quotation is another example showing that the field of Queer theory comprises a diverse range. Readings of the representation of same-sex desire in films will be the major topic of interest in this thesis.

As already mentioned, Queer theory seeks to convey that designations and labels are categories that have been constructed by society through cultural practices. Many people assume that being heterosexual, meaning desiring the opposite sex, is something inherent, respectively something natural. Ott and Mack provide a very convincing example which shows that, actually, there is no natural connection between the word 'heterosexual' and a woman's sexual drives and practices. They state that a woman is not inherently heterosexual just because she prefers to have sex with men. "[S]he is simply a woman who has sex with men" (198). This woman grew up in a society where institutions and power discourses led her to believe that such "attractions and behaviours are properly called 'heterosexual'" (198). However, as already stated, there is no essential, meaning natural, connection between the signifier (the word 'heterosexual') and the signified (desiring the opposite sex). Instead, categories like 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual', as Ott and Mack argue, function as heuristics (mental shortcuts), which are used by people to describe their sexual orientation (198). The following subchapter describes how Queer theory has emerged.

### ***2.2.1. Rise and Social Context of Queer Theory***

By the early seventies, many gay liberation movements strove for more tolerance and acceptance for homosexual people and urged lesbians and gay men to 'come out', meaning to disclose their sexual orientation. These movements promoted issues of homosexual desire as normal, natural, and positive. Moreover, as Seidman states, "they criticized the institutions of heterosexuality, marriage, and the family, and conventional gender roles for not only oppressing homosexuals but for oppressing women" (7). So, the gay liberation movements also fought for women's rights.

When in June 1969 the violent demonstrations against the police raid at the Stonewall Inn (which is a famous gay bar) happened, the lesbian and gay community of New York contributed significantly to the start of a modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement. By virtue of these incidents, many North American newspapers were announcing "the birth of a new liberation movement demanding fair and equal treatment for homosexuals" (Benshoff; Griffin 4). Owing to the Stonewall Riots, as they are called, gay pride festivals and parades were held every year in June, all

kinds of queer groups began forming, and homosexuality was removed from the official list of mental disorders by the American Psychiatric Association in 1974 (Katz 1976; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, qtd. in Benshoff; Griffin 4). This was certainly one of the major successes in the history of the lesbian and gay liberation movement. Such events finally enabled homosexual people to tell “their” stories, which had long been forbidden. The riots and other liberation movements were about visibility, about standing up, which certainly influenced lesbian and gay filmmakers as well. Thus, they began to document the movement (Michelangelo Signorile; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 07:44)

During such times, ‘queer’ was still negatively connoted, exactly like ‘faggot’, ‘sissy’, or ‘dyke’. Therefore, homosexuals identified themselves as either ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ (Benshoff; Griffin 4). By the mid 1970s, lesbian and gay subcultures began to emerge, as indicated. People started to look at the sphere of independent documentary, thereby they reclaimed “their” history (Ruby Rich; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 08:17). Lesbians tried to distance themselves from patriarchal society, and gay men formed all-male communities in urban centres (4). Within these subcultures, certain rules, codes and beliefs were established, for example, what to wear, what to say, and what to eat (4). Paradoxically, these lesbian and gay subcultures were striving for tolerance, equal rights, and acceptance, however, in setting up those policies, they fixed rigid categories, which contradicted the fluid, anti-essential maxim, the lesbian and gay movement intended to convey. Frequently, activists used the motto “Born this way”, which underlined the biological, essentialist notion of sexual orientation and, accordingly, prevented a constructivist, fluid understanding of sexuality (Benshoff; Griffin 4). In the 1980s, the emergence of the AIDS crisis again led to discriminational acts against homosexuals, especially men, since people denoted AIDS as the “gay-plague”. Moreover, Christian fundamentalists regarded AIDS as a curse to punish homosexuals (4).

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scientists have been benefitting from major progresses in the medical field. However, a new psychiatric discourse that emerged between 1900 and 1950, which “figured the homosexual as a perverse, abnormal human type” (Seidman 6) dominated public discussion. Queer people had to live a secret life, in other words, they had to “stay in the closet” (Benshoff; Griffin 3), which is an idiomatic expressing for living not openly homosexual. Although the American biologist Alfred Kinsey challenged the psychiatric/biological model by

regarding human sexuality as a continuum, rather than a binary system, where either heterosexuality or homosexuality exists, and nothing in between, lesbians and gays still were victims of social prejudice and discrimination. Jeffrey Weeks argues that homosexuality has often been the target of social oppression, since “[homosexuality is] the form closest to the heterosexual norm in our [Western] culture” (41). Due to the fact that most people experience both homosexual and heterosexual feelings and behaviours in their lives, Kinsey assumed that human sexuality is anything but easily to delimitate. He did not accept the belief that an individual is either exclusively heterosexual or homosexual (Seidman 6-7). However, Kinsey’s revolutionary thought regarding human sexuality was met with great discomfort by scholars supporting the medical model (Seidman 6).

Nevertheless, there was a growing public awareness of homosexuality, which encouraged scientists and especially sociologists to study homosexuality. Sociologists were interested how homosexuals managed to adapt to a hostile society and how this new created subject of the ‘homosexual’ (mostly the male homosexual) takes part in “a deviant sexual underworld of hustlers, prostitutes, prisons, tearooms, baths, and bars” (Seidman 7). Weeks states that homosexuality “[has] produced the most substantial forms of resistance to hostile categorization and has, consequently, a long cultural and subcultural history” (Weeks 41). Thus, as Weeks argues, the notion of homosexuality needs to be investigated in order to show how it influences regulations of sexuality, the development of sexual categories, and the spectrum of arising sexual identities. Although the aim of such studies was to portray homosexuals as victims of unjust discrimination, they contributed to the public image of the homosexual as a strange, abnormal type of person standing in marked contrast to the “normal” heterosexual.

As opposed to the gay liberation movements of the early seventies, however, sociologists did not critically analyse the categories of sexuality, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. Moreover, they did not challenge the binary system of hetero- and homosexuality. Furthermore, Seidman criticises that many sociologists lacked an historical perspective and ignored important issues such as politics and general dynamics of social modernisation when dealing with the question of homosexuality (8).

When looking at this first wave of a gay affirmative politics roughly speaking between 1968 and 1973, and the various emerging studies on homosexuality, a new

period in lesbian and gay studies began – the age of 'social constructionism'. The notion of social constructionism has roots in both academia and political activism. Referring to labeling and phenomenological theory (labeling theory investigates the tendency of majorities to label minorities negatively<sup>4</sup>, whereby phenomenological theory deals with the active construction of the world by an individual<sup>5</sup>), social constructionism is also heavily influenced by Marxism and Feminism. As the term 'social' already indicates, social constructionism suggests that people make sense of the world in terms of social and interpersonal influences. With regard to sexuality, "[s]ocial-constructionist perspectives challenge the antithesis of sex and society. Sex is viewed as fundamentally social" (Seidman 8). One crucial idea of social constructionism is that sexual categories like 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' are socially and historically constructed. This constructivist notion is contrary to sexual essentialism and it means, as Rubin explains, that "human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms" (10 in *Thinking Sex*). She states that it is more realistic to think of sexuality as a social construction. Rubin encourages to regard sex "in terms of social analysis and historical understanding" (10) in order to get a realistic picture of the politics of sexuality,

One may then think of sexual politics in terms of such phenomena as populations, neighborhoods, settlement patterns, migration, urban conflict, epidemiology, and police technology. These are more fruitful categories of thought than the more traditional ones of sin, disease, neurosis, pathology, decadence, pollution, or the decline and fall of empires (10).

Thus, these categories are not consistent nor stable, but their meanings and social functions vary in the course of history and time. As Seidman adds (8),

In particular, constructionists argued that instead of assuming that "the homosexual" is a transhistorical identity or a universal human type, the idea that homosexual desire reveals a distinctive human type or social identity is said to be unique to modern Western societies.

Besides accumulating and encompassing any kind of deviant sexual identity (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.), Seidman introduces Queer theory as a political academic field which breaks with categories and fluctuates between transgression and permanent rebellion. It was propagandised "through a series of academic conferences held at Yale and other Ivy League universities, in which scholars, primarily from history and the humanities, presented their work on

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<sup>4</sup> [http://sociology.about.com/od/L\\_Index/g/Labeling-Theory.htm](http://sociology.about.com/od/L_Index/g/Labeling-Theory.htm)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.westmont.edu/~bsmith/general/lectureoutlines/15personality/phenomenological.html>

lesbian/gay subjects“ (Fuss 1991, qtd. in Stein; Plummer 133). In Queer theory, many approved academic and literary works mainly stem from Philosophy, Literature, and Cultural Studies.

One of the leading French philosophers, Michel Foucault, contributed a great deal to Queer theory. Therefore, I intend to include some basic notions and ideas by Foucault in this chapter. Many critics have argued that, owing to Foucault’s intellectual influence and the rise of Postmodernism, lesbians and gay men have become more visible than ever before, such as innovators and social theorists (Stein; Plummer 136). In his famous work, *The History of Sexuality, Vol I* (1980), he emphasises that sexuality is not a biological concept, but a social and historical construction that has been “regulated through the various discourses in which it was spoken“ (Benshoff; Griffin 5). This means that institutions like religion, medicine, the media, law, education, etc. create certain codes and habits of language that produce meanings to speak about sexuality, for example, in specific manners, “that inflect one’s understanding of it“ (5). Foucault deals with the homosexual subject, meaning how society creates an identity through sexual acts (‘sexual spaciation’) (43),

As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and a possibly mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. [...] We must not forget that that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized.

Moreover, Foucault also argues that sexuality has been constructed through institutional discourses, which established “regimes of truth“, meaning “general politics“ of truth in a society that have been constructed by various discourses. He also promotes an anti-universal view of homosexuality, and of sexuality in general. Due to the Victorian era’s “discursive explosion“, which means for Foucault a “constant incitement“ to speak about sex (17) (By means of his assertion about the multiplication of discourse, Foucault challenges the ‘Repressive Hypothesis’ in his work *The History of Sexuality*), “sexuality became a mainstay of identity, heterosexual monogamy came to function as a norm, and sexual deviants began to



see themselves as distinct persons, possessing particular “natures” (qtd. in Stein; Plummer 135). Thus, Foucault argues for an anti-continuous view of the history of homosexuality, as many Queer theorists do, since nowadays, people have different concepts and ideas of homosexuality in mind as opposed to former times, for example, the Victorian era. These various concepts of homosexuality may differ greatly from each other, where a defining “essence” of homosexuality is called into question (Stein; Plummer 136).

Although social constructionists convey a non-essential, changing notion in terms of sexual categories that challenges the essentialist, universalistic conception of homosexuality, they contributed to a making of the homosexual minority. Seidman continues by saying that, instead of turning the homosexual into a political minority by social prejudice, constructionists sought to investigate various social factors producing a homosexual identity which worked as the basis for homosexuals as a new ethnic minority (9). Accordingly, social-constructionist studies authorised viewing lesbian and gay subcultures as minorities, which was certainly not in favour of affirmative lesbian and gay politics.

Since the 1990s, social-constructionist approaches have been institutionalised in lesbian and gay studies programs. As already indicated, those programs mainly deal with essentialist theories and the contestation thereof. The emergence and variation of homosexual identities and communities is another crucial aspect. It is important to consider, however, since the late eighties, these constructionist perspectives have been contested by discourses belonging to the rubric of Queer theory. Such discourses, as Seidman states, were often difficult to differentiate from social constructionist conceptions. They have attempted to shift the debate away from analysing and explaining homosexual categories and identities to the dominating mechanism of the hetero/homosexual binary in Western society. To put it in a nutshell, Queer theory seeks to engage critically with the political and social mechanisms operating in the hetero/homosexual binary system by,

[shifting the debate away] from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interests to a politics of knowledge and difference (Seidman 9).

The upcoming subchapter describes in what ways the AIDS crisis contributed to the rise of Queer theory and gay politics.

### **2.2.1.1. The Aids Crisis and the Rise of Queer Politics**

Although the gay and lesbian movement has achieved a relatively high level of general social tolerance, at least in the United States, by the end of the seventies, this minor success was overshadowed by a serious setback for the arising tolerance towards the lesbian and gay community. This backlash was the result of the emerging AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) crisis at the beginning of the 1980s. The epidemic stigmatised lesbians and especially gay men as being at fault for causing the deadly disease, since AIDS was first diagnosed in 1981 among homosexual men. Thus, AIDS frequently was referred to as the 'gay disease', 'gay cancer', or 'gay plague', and some health service providers and investigators even informally labeled the disease, "gay-related immune deficiency (GRID)", conveying a biased, initial assumption that it affected only homosexual men (Epstein 50). Sadly, even still nowadays, this prejudiced assumption of gay men being responsible for the spread of the epidemic is perpetuated by various means, for instance, the media. Headlines, such as "Alert over 'gay plague'"<sup>6</sup> and "'Gay plague' may lead to blood ban on homosexuals"<sup>7</sup> contributed to a general anti-gay notion. The problem is that this anti-gay notion changed into a radical, homophobic attitude, which continues to be a major barrier to ending the global AIDS epidemic<sup>8</sup>. People who belong to the group of AIDS victims are stigmatised and frequently discriminated against. They are often exposed to harassment and persecution. The problem with AIDS is, as the American writer Susan Sontag demonstrates, in contrast to people having cancer or other dangerous illnesses, "[m]ost people outside of sub-Saharan Africa who have AIDS know how they got it" (24). Moreover, this diagnosis is a brand mark of belonging to this particular, stigmatised group. Sontag illustrates her claim by asserting that AIDS is frequently negatively connoted, since many people associate the epidemic with deviant sexuality, and addictions to illegal chemicals and drugs (25),

The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency – addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant.

Thus, people who suffer from HIV and AIDS are judged more harshly than people, for instance, suffering from cancer (which can also be the result of "unsafe behavior",

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.avert.org/uk-aids-history.htm> (Daily Mirror, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1983)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.avert.org/uk-aids-history.htm> (Daily Telegraph (1983) May 2nd 1983)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.avert.org/homophobia.htm>

such as cigarette consumption). Understandably, Sontag asserts that AIDS is regarded as a “disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity” (26).

Despite the harsh reactions and prevalent negative attitudes towards homosexuality on behalf of heterosexual people, the gay community struggled to foster an understanding which conveys that HIV infection results from imprudent behaviour rather than sexual orientation, where anybody, regardless of their sexual orientation is at a risk of contracting HIV. Moreover, it is important to consider that AIDS is not just an illness. Ed Cohen and Julie Livingston indicate a difference between the notion of ‘illness’ and ‘epidemic’ and try to make aware of the political component involved in the issue (40-41),

[E]pidemics only become epidemics [...] when they precipitate biological effects that transgress the threshold of the political. Otherwise, it’s just illness. Thus, epidemics inevitably reveal, albeit in painful and often life-threatening ways, how living together exposes us to one another and to broader life world.

So, by thematising AIDS in the media, in culture, and bringing it to the public sphere, politics certainly play a major role. The political aspect becomes important in terms of public engagement. Seidman states that this setback against the gay and lesbian community had a positive effect because it gave rise to a new political activism (10),

Both the backlash and the AIDS crisis prompted a renewal of radical activism, of a politics of confrontation, coalition building, and the need for a critical theory that links gay affirmation to broad institutional change.

AIDS did not only promote political activism, but, according to Michel Foucault, it is characteristic of a paradoxical social nature. ‘Biopolitics’, which is a term coined by Foucault, describes the risks rooted in “population“, which means (qtd. in Cohen; Livingston 41), “the risks of living together with others of our species and of other species“. The paradox shows itself when thinking of “the threats that address us when we live together coexist with the impossibility of living alone“ (41). Foucault concludes his thought by saying (qtd. in Cohen; Livingston 41),

We are – and must be – both hurt and sustained by others. This inexorability suffuses the tension between the etymological opposites immunity and community, which mark the paradoxical social nature that AIDS manifests.

Cohen and Livingston come up with another paradox AIDS entails. As already indicated, the term ‘AIDS’ is not only an acronym (Acquired Immune Deficiency Sndrome), but it also orthographically doubles the word ‘aids’, ‘to aid’, in the sense

of 'to help', 'to assist', 'to support'. As Cohen and Livingston put it in a very accurate way, "[a]s a result of this weird irony, when we speak of aids for AIDS, we evoke our paradoxical situation as dangerous and necessary to each other" (41). Although, on a global scale, 25 million people have died from the consequences of an HIV-infection until now, the described paradox can be adapted to the rise and development of Queer theory<sup>9</sup>. On the one hand, this deadly epidemic certainly has caused a lot of pain, suffering, and grief worldwide, however, on the other hand, it has contributed to a political activism that helped Queer theory to find its way into the academic world.

It is important to consider that there have not only been external factors contributing to a shift in lesbian and gay politics, but also internal changes, meaning within lesbian and gay subcultures. Hitherto, social differences and categories like race and sex had been disregarded by the community. Consequently, mainstream gay culture has been criticised by homosexual people of colour for the exclusion and depreciation of their values, forms and experiences of life, interests, for example, "their writing, political perspectives, relationships, and particular modes of oppression" (Seidman 10). Moreover, lesbian and gay communities have also been attacked by homosexuals of colour and various other ethnicities for reflecting a white, middle-class perspective exclusively (Anzaldua; Moraga 1983, Lorde 1984, Beam 1986, Moraga 1983; qtd. in Seidman 10). Thus, gay people who felt excluded from the gay community's representation, found fault with the constructed categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian', since those categories functioned as disciplining political forces by excluding people from the community due to reasons of race and ethnic origin. Therefore, they started to identify as queer, since queer did not bring along categories.

Because of the emerging questioning of sexual categories like 'lesbian' and 'gay', as already indicated, a general openness in terms of categories and sexual identities appeared within the homosexual community. Suddenly, various lesbian sexual identities entered public life out of lesbian subcultures, for instance, butch-fems, sadomasochists, dykes, lipstick lesbians, etc. (Seidman 10-11), "mocking the idea of a unified lesbian sexual identity". Consequently, the lesbian and gay community had to face some basic questions: What is a lesbian or gay identity? Is there an inherent identity at all? What is the essence of a lesbian or gay identity? On the one hand, some members of the community encouraged essentialist

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.aerztezeitung.de/medizin/krankheiten/infektionskrankheiten/aids/article/611399/weltweit-bisher-25-millionen-aids-tote.html>

perspectives, meaning an inherent, natural notion of homosexuality. The following example of the ‘gay brain’ will demonstrate this essentialising notion of homosexuality. In 2008, Swedish researchers published a study (in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Journal*), through which they have found out that some physical attributes of the homosexual brain equal those found in the heterosexual brain of the opposite sex,

[Neuroscience researchers] found that the brains of homosexual men and heterosexual women were more symmetrical than the brains of heterosexual men and homosexual women. A similar difference emerged when the researchers looked in particular at the amygdala, a brain region associated with emotional reactions. Heterosexual women and homosexual men had more connections between their right and left amygdala and more connections with other brain regions than did homosexual women and heterosexual men<sup>10</sup>.

According to this study, gay men and heterosexual women had brain halves of resembling size, whereas lesbians and heterosexual men showed a bigger size of the right brain hemisphere. Hence, a “UK scientist said this was evidence sexual orientation was set in the womb”<sup>11</sup>. As already mentioned, for some members of the lesbian and gay community, this is an evident example that homosexuality is anchored in biology. As Seidman states, people choose this essentialist view in order to “unify homosexuals in the face of a political backlash, defend themselves against attacks prompted by the plague, and to overcome growing internal discord” (11). On the other hand, many critics moved in the opposite direction by promoting a social constructionist model of homosexuality by means of a radical politics of difference. Although people of diverse ethnic origin and sex rebels have already tried to push affirmative gay politics into this direction, as already mentioned, a new group of Queer theorists emerged. They were strongly influenced by French poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis and changed lesbian and gay theory to a large extent.

There was a general notion of challenging the concept of identity, as I mentioned briefly with regard to the emerging lesbian “sub-identities”. The challenging of the assumption of a unified homosexual identity also became a main area of interest within Queer theory (Seidman 11),

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<sup>10</sup> <http://playthink.wordpress.com/2008/06/17/the-gay-brain/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7456588.stm>

Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. I interpret Queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics.

Seidman convincingly describes the different assumptions having been made about the homosexual subject hitherto and in present times, when Queer theorists are sharing their views. There have been a lot of debates concerning the homosexual subject, for example, about its origin, moral significance, its varying social functions and roles, and whether it has a unified, stable essence, or whether it changes according to culture and time. Until now, there has been a general consensus that the homosexual subject is a “stable, unified, and identifiable human type” (11). However, this narrow-minded view was challenged when Queer theorists argued that, identities are not made up of only a single essence, but they consist of various ‘identity-components’, for instance, “sexual orientation, race, class nationality, gender, age, able-ness” (11), which are working together. Thus, identities are always multiple and fluid.

The shifting character of identity constructions is not the only aspect Queer theory entails. Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer have established four crucial hallmarks of Queer theory. First of all, they emphasise the importance of discourse and social life combined with sexual power by stating, “a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides” (134). Secondly, they mention the challenge of the prevalent assumption that there exist fixed, universal gender and identity categories. According to Queer theory, “[i]dentities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing” (134). In the third place, Stein and Plummer state political strategies of carnival, transgression, and parody, instead of civil-right strategies, in order to achieve “deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics” (134). The last hallmark they enumerate is a readiness to deal with areas and fields which normally would not be regarded as the terrain of sexuality, and to perform queer “readings” of heterosexual and non-sexualised texts. Moreover, Stein and Plummer provide two functions of Queer theory (134). On the one hand, in its widest sense, Queer theory

appeals to a vast transgression of all conventional categorisations and a breaking of boundaries in terms of gender, the interpersonal, the erotic, and a plea for resistance. On the other hand, in its narrow sense, Queer theory uses the term ‘queer’, which has been associated with “homosexuality”, as a political tool through which the constructed categories are turned against themselves by means of medicalisation. Often, these two functions intersect.

In order to demonstrate why identity is a problematic notion for Queer theorists, Seidman draws on the concept of silencing and exclusion when he points out that the construction of an identity is, on the one hand, a process of inclusion for people who identify with others in terms of the mentioned ‘identity-components’. On the other hand, however, any identity construction involves the exclusion and the silencing of individuals who do not identify with certain kinds of identities. For instance, as Seidman demonstrates (12),

[A]sserting a black, middle-class, American lesbian identity silences differences that relate to religion, regional location, subcultural identification, relation to feminism, age, or education. Identity constructs are necessarily unstable since they elicit opposition or resistance by people whose experiences or interests are submerged by a particular assertion of identity.

Consequently, everyone who is not a black, middle-class American lesbian woman is excluded from this kind of identity construction. Thus, people are silenced in terms of gender, sexual orientation, origin, ethnicity, and class. At the same time, opposition or even resistance may arise on behalf of those who feel excluded by certain kinds of identities. Owing to these exclusionary and silencing processes the notion of identity entails, Queer theorists regard identities as regulatory and disciplining constructions. Seidman asserts that identity constructions simply function as templates where certain behaviours are predefined that exclude “a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations” (12).

Although Queer theorists suggest a disruption of lesbian and gay studies, since they promote anti-identity politics, Seidman emphasises that this new way of thought opens up innovative ways for the formation of novel identity constructions. Thus, “[t]he aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role” (12). Thus, descriptions and designations of identity categories become more pragmatic and general, to aim for situational and political advantages, and for conceptual utility. On this basis, Queer theorists seek to encourage a public awareness of difference

and diversity, and to promote a culture which recognises this multifacetedness and the multiple voices and interests by queer people in order to shape Queer politics and life.

Moreover, Queer theory intends to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, “the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of sexual selves” (Seidman 12). So, this modern regime of sexuality does not only consist of the concept of sexuality as such, but of other structures, like various institutions, for instance, politics, medicine, law, education, etc., through which cultural norms and values are conveyed. Hence, Queer theorists do not consider categories like homosexuality and heterosexuality simply as sexual constructions, but as categories of knowledge that shape our awareness of bodies, desires, identities, sexualities, etc. These knowledges, or even discourses, create moral boundaries and political hierarchies. One major difference between gay theorists and Queer theorists is that the latter shift their focus from an exclusive preoccupation of liberating oppressed homosexuals to an investigation of, “the institutional practices and discourses producing sexual knowledges and the ways they organize social life, attending in particular to the way these knowledges and social practices repress differences” (Seidman 13). Accordingly, Queer theory rejects a representation of homosexual people as a minority. Rather, it suggests an analysis of the knowledges and discourses produced about sexual categories and practices, desires, identities, bodies, social relations, etc. To put it in another way, “queer work has reconceptualized sexual identities as shifting and unstable, as positions offered by discursive structures rather than properties of individuals” (Eves 481-482). So, there is more emphasis on the shifting, changing, social, and discursive aspect of identity than on the individual. Given these facts, Queer theory strives to transform gay and lesbian theory into a social theory that analyses various, collaborating social factors. One of these social factors is the dominant, existing assumption of a binary system, where so-called “zebra thinking” is prevalent, which will be explained in the following chapter. Concerning my analysis in the second part of this thesis, I will read the cultural representations in the films “through queer lens”, meaning I intend to reveal seemingly essential sexual identities as cultural constructions, thereby making their artificiality visible. In doing so, it is important to challenge the binary, heteronormative, hierarchical system by



concentrating on gender performances and stereotypes, and to expose the non-originality and constructiveness of those “essential” concepts.

### **2.2.2. *Resisting Heteronormativity and the Heterosexual Matrix***

Another point of criticism Queer theory entails, as already mentioned by Stein and Plummer, is the hetero/homosexual binary, because this ideology maintains the heterosexualisation of society. As Seidman convincingly states (11-12), the recognition of a homosexual subject admittedly contributes to social liberation and a greater acceptance of gay people, but, simultaneously, it establishes a hetero/homosexual binary, where heterosexuality and homosexuality are defined as master categories of social and sexual identities. This reinforcement of a prescribed sexual regime has the effect of excluding and silencing sexual identities that cannot be classified according to the ‘heterosexual’-‘homosexual’-divide. In the early twentieth century, as Gayle Rubin convincingly states, sexuality became “a vector of oppression” (qtd. in Cranny-Francis 18), in which human beings were classified as either normal or abnormal, part of society or on the margin of it, acceptable or unacceptable. Teresa de Lauretis also decides against the binary system in which either homosexuality or heterosexuality exists (qtd. in Stein; Plummer 134),

Homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined [...] it is no longer to be seen as transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality (i.e. institutionalized reproductive sexuality) according to the older, pathological model, or as just another, optional “lifestyle,” according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism.

Although the hetero/homo divide has been imposed upon Western societies by means of various discursive institutions, Queer theorists and scholars from different academic fields have investigated that heterosexuality is a highly unstable system. Judith Butler also suggested that (qtd. in Stein; Plummer 135), “heterosexuality [being] always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it “knows” its own possibility of being undone“. Thus, through constantly defining and deliberating the concept of heterosexuality, it is at risk of being dissolved. Furthermore, heterosexuality is contingent on painstakingly constructed categories of identity and individual performances, and dependent “upon the exclusion of homosexuality for its very identity” (Stein; Plummer 135). So, in terms of binary oppositions, the notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are

interdependent. By means of the exclusion and negation of homosexuality, heterosexuality is able to define itself, since heterosexuality is everything homosexuality is not. Thereby, homosexuality is the marked category, the one that is “highlighted“, whereas heterosexuality is the unmarked category, receding into the background because it is normalised and naturalised (Stein; Plummer 138). The notion of binary oppositions will be explained concerning the aspect of gender in greater detail later on.

Another example, which shows that heterosexuality is regarded as the “normal“, unmarked position can be found in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (SOED) when searching for the term ‘heterosexuality’. It says, “pertaining to or characterized by the normal relations between the sexes“ (qtd. in Cranny-Francis 17). The dictionary, however, does not give any definition of the term ‘normal’ in this context. The meaning of ‘normal’ seems to be so apparent and logical that it does not need to be defined. Thus, the dictionary implies that heterosexual relations are the only normal ones and heterosexuality is a transhistorical, natural, and universal concept.

As already stated in this subchapter, the binary system of heterosexuality and homosexuality serves to maintain the heterosexualisation of society. However, this hetero/homo divide establishes hierarchies, because one concept (heterosexuality) is privileged over the other (homosexuality), which results in inequalities. The system, which has been created by such disparities, is called ‘heteronormativity’, or ‘heterosexism’. It is an ideology which prevails in Western society, underlying institutionalised heterosexuality that forces people into two, complementary genders (man and woman) by means of a binary system. Furthermore, Chrys Ingraham explains that, “[Heteronormativity] secures a division of labor and distribution of wealth and power that requires gender, racial categories, class, and sexual hierarchies as well as ideological struggles for meaning and value“ (307). As Ott and Mack claim, heteronormativity is not only a diverse set of social practices that aims at maintaining the heterosexual/homosexual binary, but, what is even more striking, it seeks to privilege heterosexuality. In Western society, there exists the general assumption that heterosexuality is the “normal“, conventional sexual orientation and that everybody, or at least the majority of people, is heterosexual and desires the opposite sex. Heteronormativity emphasises binary thinking and dichotomies, which is the idea of people being divided according to two distinct categories: male and female. Biological components like sex and physical features, such as sex-specific

parts of the body, support the belief that people can *only* [my emphasis] be categorised as either male or female. Also, it is assumed that their sexual desire is of “heterosexual character“, meaning they are feeling sexually attracted to the opposite sex. Judith Butler has observed that, due to the assumed, naturalised coherence between sex, gender, and desire, heterosexuality is the general standard. Figure 1 (Gauntlett 148) demonstrates Butler's finding,

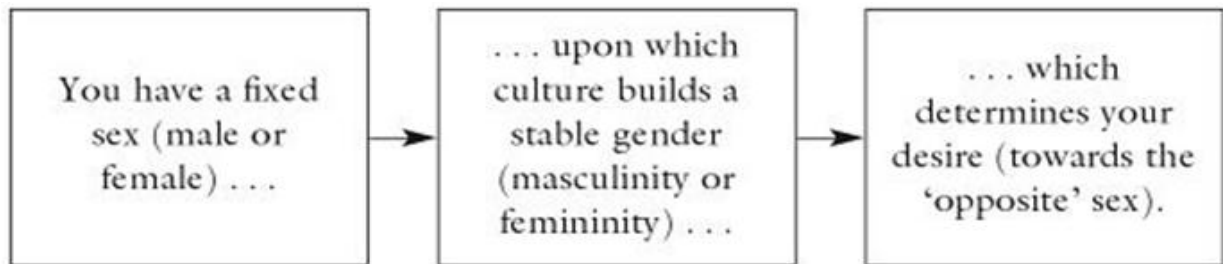


Figure 1

This alleged, “natural“ coherence between sex, gender and desire produces “intelligible genders“ (Butler 1990, 23). As Figure 1 shows that the sex-gender-desire triad presumes this normative coherence,

‘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 constructed genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (Butler 23).

These intelligible genders, whose “state of being“ is premised on the sex-gender-desire triad, are placed in the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Butler has introduced this phenomenon of ‘heterosexual matrix’ and explains it as follows,

The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, [...] requires both stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire (*Gender Trouble* 30).

Butler makes clear that the binary gender system restricts gendered possibilities and that gender and desire work in reciprocal, oppositional terms, reflecting and affirming heterosexuality. The heterosexual matrix provides a framework, which categorises

individuals as either “gender-appropriate“ or “gender-inappropriate“, thereby rendering such categorisations normative. Those individuals *must* [my emphasis] be legible and visible as either masculine or feminine.

Michael Warner has also made a very convincing observation, when he stated, that some, or most people tend to think that only their own way of living is the right and “normal“ one, and it should be “everyone else’s moral standard as well“ (4). Consequently, heteronormativity arrogates an alignment of biological sex, sexuality, traditional gender identity, and gender roles (Jenkins; Karens 2006). Also, heterosexuality is installed as the undeniable norm, which is a crucial component of the ‘heterosexual matrix‘, as it is called by Butler.

The common belief that heterosexuality is a natural, biological concept, has been contested in the 1970s by second-wave feminists. One of the earliest examples, as Ingraham points out, is an essay by a Dutch group, titled *The Normative Status of Heterosexuality* (1975). They argue that, “[H]eterosexuality is a normalized power arrangement that limits options, privileges men over women, and reinforces and naturalizes men’s dominance“ (qtd. in Ingraham 313). Many other (feminist) scholars share this view by asserting that heterosexuality is an institution that exerts domination and ideological control over the heterosexist society. Charlotte Bunch (1975), who is an American activist, points out (34),

Heterosexuality – as an ideology and an institution – upholds all those aspects of female oppression. [...] For example, heterosexuality is basic to our oppression in the workplace. When we look at how women are defined and exploited as secondary, marginal workers, we recognize that this definition assumes that all women are tied to men. [...] It is obvious that heterosexuality upholds the home, housework, the family as both a personal and economic unit.

Furthermore, feminist scholar Adrienne Rich has come up with the concept of ‘compulsive heterosexuality‘ in her work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980). Thereby, she refers to the fact that people, in particular women, are compelled to identify with the social conventions and norms associated with heterosexuality from birth onwards (qtd. in Ott; Mack 198). This essay criticises heterosexuality as an institution, in which women are prevented from playing out their sexual phantasies and drives, which do not involve men. Also, institutionalised heterosexuality only serves the interests of men’s dominance (Ingraham 313). Rich further asserts that women may benefit more from relationships with other women than from relationships with men. Men, on the other hand, very well benefit from

relationships with women. Therefore, patriarchal men-dominated society insists on compulsory heterosexuality. Moreover, Rich claims that heterosexuality and male-female relationships are romanticised by society (also by the media) in order to perpetuate the myth that homosexual, or any other sexual relationships are deviant<sup>12</sup>. By regarding heterosexuality as an institution that enforces certain notions and beliefs upon citizens, Rich made a groundbreaking contribution to Queer theory.

In her essay *Thinking Sex* (1984), Gender theorist and American cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin has coined another term describing this notion of institutionalised heterosexuality. I am going to deal briefly with Rubin's essay, since she has contributed significantly to Gender theory. The concept is called 'sexual essentialism' and describes that it, "is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical" (9). Rubin has come up with a telling diagram she names 'Charmed Circle' (13). It serves as a significant example in order to show, according to Rubin, what kinds of sexual relationships and activities are regarded as being deviant and abnormal. In this circle, she includes binary pairs that stand in opposition to each other.

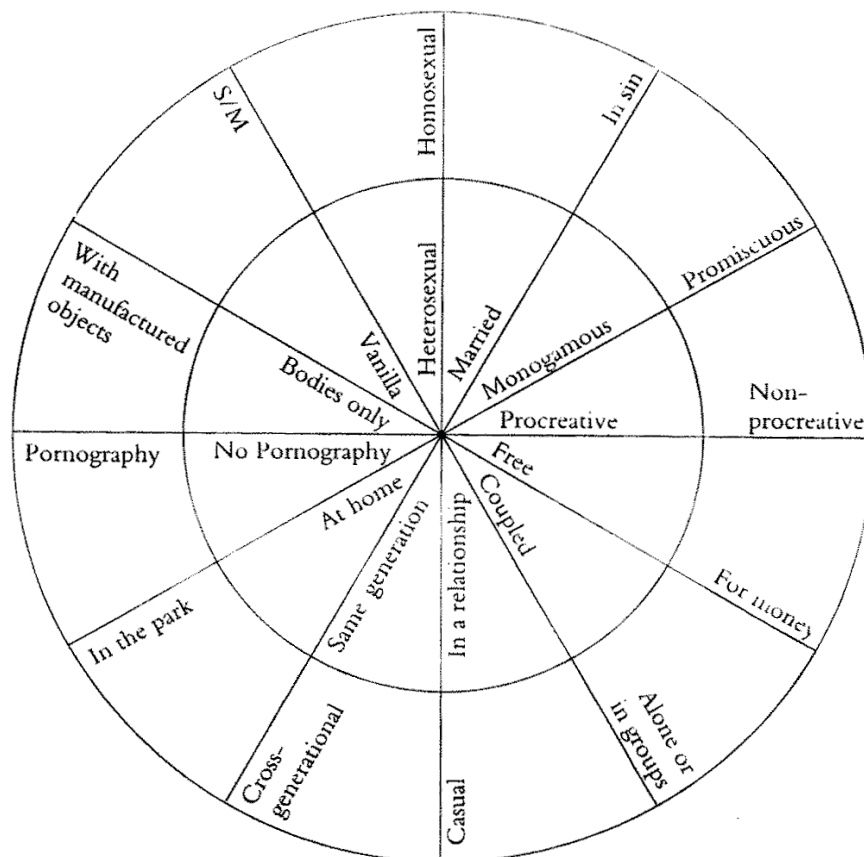


Figure 2: The Sex Hierarchy: The Charmed Circle vs. The Outer Limits

<sup>12</sup> [http://womenshistory.about.com/od/feminism/a/compulsory\\_hetero.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/feminism/a/compulsory_hetero.htm)

**The Charmed Circle:**

Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

Heterosexual, Married, Monogamous, Procreative, Non-Commercial, In Pairs, In a Relationship, Same Generation, In Private, No Pornography, Bodies Only, Vanilla

**The Outer Limits:**

Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality

Homosexual, Unmarried, Promiscuous, Non-procreative, Commercial, Alone or in Groups, Casual, Cross-generational, in Public, Pornography, With Manufactured Objects, Sadomasochistic

Rubin names five ideological formations that coexist with sexual essentialism and are strongly connected to prevalent sexual thinking. These are sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation (11). Unfortunately, it is not possible to discuss all five aspects, since this would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, let us concentrate on the most important approach. Rubin appraises sex negativity as the most significant aspect, since Western cultures generally regard sex to be a negative, destructive force, that should be treated with suspicion (Weeks 22). This, among other aspects, has also to do with religious beliefs, as Rubin observes,

Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful. It may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much. In turn, this idea rests on the assumption that the genitalia are an intrinsically inferior part of the body, much lower and less holy than the mind, the "soul," the "heart," or even the upper part of the digestive system (the status of the excretory organs is close to that of the genitalia) (11).

She continues by stating that there is a general, sceptical attitude towards sexuality and that sexual practices are assumed guilty until proven innocent. Sexuality is regarded as something bad, something to be ashamed of, unless there are passable reasons/excuses for it. For example, marriage, reproduction, and love. "Sometimes scientific curiosity, aesthetic experience, or a long-term intimate relationship may serve" (Rubin 11). Or, as Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* has pointed out (154; qtd. in Butler 524),

[T]he association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests.

Thus, Foucault implies that sexuality is supposed to serve only reproductive interests.

Susan Sontag once asserted that since Christianity focused "on sexual behavior as the root of virtue, everything pertaining to sex has been a 'special case' in our culture" (46). It has been established a particular kind of 'sex law' which contains certain rules, instructions, and beliefs. One of the most important dogmas this law brings along is that, "heretical sex is an especially heinous sin that deserves the harshest punishments" (11),

Throughout much of European and American history, a single act of consensual anal penetration was grounds for execution. In some states, sodomy still carries twenty year prison sentences. Outside the law, sex is also a marked category. Small differences in value or behavior are often experienced as cosmic threats. [...] Sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance.

Thus, as already stated, sexual behaviour is not a private business anymore, happening in the sheltered atmosphere of the home, but it is afflicted with stigmas happening in the public realm which should be taken seriously. These stigmas bring along severe consequences that result in hierarchical systems of sexual values in an "erotic pyramid" (Rubin 11-12),

Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamoring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously. The powerful nineteenth century stigma on masturbation lingers in less potent, modified forms, such as the idea that masturbation is an inferior substitute for partnered encounters. Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries.

Such consequences for those standing on "the outer limits", metaphorically speaking on the fringes of society, can be devastating. Unmarried people, prostitutes, homosexuals, transsexuals, perverts, may be punished by disrespect, violence and shall be viewed as mentally ill, criminal, socially restricted, and economically inferior. Those who are standing high in this hierarchy, on the other hand, "get rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits" (12). Moreover, Rubin blames popular culture and the mass media for nourishing the general public by means of propaganda with distorted representations of how sexuality should be practiced and

how it should be not. She states that, “Popular sexual ideology is a noxious stew made up of ideas of sexual sin, concepts of psychological inferiority, anti-communism, mob hysteria, accusations of witchcraft, and xenophobia” (12). The point is that such hierarchical classifications operate in the same way as ideological systems of racism, religious extremisms, and ethnocentrism do. “They rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble” (13). To summarise the main message of the diagram (Figure 2): It shows that sexuality is either “good”, “normal”, “natural”, and “blessed”, which comprises the inner, “blessed, charmed circle”. It contains “heterosexual”, “married”, “monogamous”, “procreative”, “free”, “coupled”, “in a relationship”, and “at home” sexual activities. Such practices must happen within one generation and there must neither pornographic materials, nor “manufactured objects” being used. Sexual activities shall only be practised with other bodies. “The outer limits” contains “bad”, “abnormal”, “unnatural”, “damned sexuality”, which includes “homosexual”, “unmarried”, “promiscuous”, “non-procreative”, “commercial”, meaning for money, “alone or in groups”, “casual”, meaning outside a relationship, “cross-generational”, “somasochistic”, “in public” and “with manufactured objects” sexual activities (Figure 2). According to this ideology, sexuality on the outer limits usually includes pornography. It frequently does not occur at home, but in public places and involves “fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female” (Rubin 14). The graph clearly shows that there is a strict line between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sex drawn. This harsh division indicates that people feel the need to differentiate between natural and unnatural sexual activities in order to feel safe and accepted, and to condemn those who do not fit into the inner, “normal” circle.

As elaborated by means of Rubin’s ‘Charmed Circle’, the assumed essential character of heterosexuality has severe consequences for individuals who refuse to practice it and decide, for instance, to enter a same-sex relationship. Those people will be stigmatised as deviant and aberrant because they do not possess “the innate or essential capacity to be viable human beings, and [are] non-essential to human society” (Cranny-Francis 19). So, in Western society, a naturally assumed heterosexual ideology is maintained, which has been termed by feminist theorist Monique Wittig as ‘heterosexual contract’. She states, “[t]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality. [...] Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought of differences) as its



main category“ (40, 43). Thus, Wittig argues that being part of society implies being aware of heterosexuality and participating in heteronormative life.

Given these facts, it is apparently assumed that a person desires the opposite sex until proven otherwise. Since desiring the opposite sex is taken for granted in society, heterosexuality becomes naturalised. Thus, many people believe that the only kind of “natural“, or “normal“ sexual orientation is heterosexuality. Consequently, when a woman comes out and decides to reveal her lesbian identity, she rejects the compulsion of being naturally heterosexual. As already stated, the automatic assumption of heterosexuality being inherent and natural stigmatises homosexuals as deviant and abnormal. Also, it devalues every practice that is regarded as being not heterosexual. Furthermore, this supposition simulates a universal and fixed phenomenon, as Ingraham shows (311),

By treating heterosexuality as normative (heteronormative) or taken for granted, we participate in establishing heterosexuality – not sexual orientation or sexual behavior, but the way it is organized, secured, and ritualized – as the standard for legitimate and prescriptive socio-sexual behavior, as though it were fixed in time and space and universally occurring. Even given the recent emergence of critical heterosexual studies, gender and sexuality scholars from across the disciplines continue to pursue the study of heterosexuality as either a natural form of sexual or relationship behavior or as the default category for institutions such as marriage and family.

Thus, Ingraham emphasises that even in academia, among scholars and theorists of various fields, the study of heterosexuality is either naturalised, as a form of lifestyle, or it is regarded as the preset condition for raising a family or getting married. Thereby, heterosexuality is investigated from a heteronormative point of view. Heteronormativity is also imposed by law and immigration politics, which will be demonstrated by the following example. In Australia, Carl Stychin asserts, queer migrants are incorporated into the nation through self-cultivation and disciplinary regulation, and are encouraged to mimic marriage as a prerequisite for immigration approval (105). I argue that the term ‘encouraged’, in this context, is an euphemistic expression of ‘forced’ because people who are unwilling to obey this “ecouragement“ are not allowed to enter the country. Otherwise, the mimicry of heterosexual marriage would not be a requirement for immigration approval. Thus, queer immigrants are forced to adapt to the heteronormative tradition of marriage in order to enter Australia. Stychin states that this regulation through immigration policies contributes to the building of the nation (184; qtd. In Leckey; Brooks),

The production of domesticated (same sex) relationships is as necessary to inclusion in the current project of nation building through immigration as it was at the height of the British Empire; configurations of empire are produced with the difference that the couples may be same sex.

The power of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity should not be underestimated. It works as an ongoing reinforcement and regulatory framework, producing compliant recipients as functioning subjects. Thereby, thoughts and beliefs are regulated with the result that subjects cannot even think of alternative sexual practices or identities (Cranny-Francis 19). Or, as Judith Butler emphasises (524),

My point is simply that one way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions.

If those subjects think of other sexual practices, which are not regarded as heterosexual, they are classified as deviant, unnatural, and odd.

As already mentioned, the binary system of hetero- and homosexuality serves for heterosexuality to define itself against the ‘Other’. The Other, which is a key concept derived from continental philosophy, opposes the Same, which is, in this case, heterosexuality. Thus, heterosexuals can only define themselves by comparing “their” sexual practices and behaviours to the sexuality lived out by gays, queers and lesbians. Consequently, heterosexuality is everything homosexuality is not. This binaristic thinking conveys narrow-minded notions, because it does not leave any space for ‘betweenness’, meaning so-called ‘grey-areas’. Regarding the process of definition by contrasting, Sedgwick accurately puts it, “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people” (68). As Ott and Mack continue, “the assumed norm of heterosexuality could not exist as a coherent category without homosexuality as its “abnormal” opposite” (199). This process of “branding” that marks homosexuals as abnormal, is called ‘sexual othering’. When people are asked what they consider the “normal” nuclear family, most of them will answer that it involves a married, heterosexual couple, man and woman, and two or three children. Certainly, such answers may vary as some interviewees will add a grandparent or a pet to the imagined, ideal constitution of a nuclear family, however “the core image is almost always exclusively heterosexual” (Ott; Mack 199). From a juridical perspective, people who identify as heterosexual are able to enjoy far more advantages than homosexuals. They are granted easy access to various social practices and legal regulations, for instance, marriage, military service, insurance benefits, medical

visitation rights, etc. (199). Michael Warner underlines this fact by stating that there are both direct and indirect ways of controlling people’s sex life, “We do this directly, through prohibition and regulation, and indirectly, by embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be” (2000: 1). Even from a linguistic perspective, it becomes obvious, that homosexual people often suffer from devaluation and discrimination. Terms and phrases like, ‘faggot’, ‘dyke’, ‘gaylord’, or ‘sissy’ support this observation.

Although Queer theorists seek to subvert the binary system and expose heterosexual privilege, this does not imply that Queer theory disapproves sexual practices or feelings that are considered as heterosexual. It is important to notice that Queer theory contests the patriarchal oriented, heteronormative system, but not individual heterosexuals. Neither does it denounce heterosexuality as such, meaning as sexual yearning. This can be compared to feminism, since feminist theorists do not attack men as individuals, but the hierarchic system of patriarchy (Ott; Mack 199).

### **2.3. Queerness Represented in the American Media**

Since this thesis is greatly influenced by media and film studies and deals with stereotypical representations, I will provide a brief overview of how queerness is frequently represented in the American media. As Ott and Mack observe, the notion of queerness is not only “there“, meaning present in the media, but it offers a way of looking at films, TV series, shows, generally at the media, beyond cultural discourses thereby queerness becomes “a powerful way to refuse this structured understanding“ (197). Consequently, this rejection contests dominant cultural norms and the power relations that they reinforce.

As already indicated, in the second part of my thesis, I will analyse stereotypical gender roles in American Queer Cinema. However, first of all, general, sexual stereotypes, illustrated in different movies and TV series, will be introduced. Owing to the assumed binary system and prevailing heteronormative notions and beliefs, we, as viewers, are indirectly compelled to classify sexual practices and behaviours into either one category or the other. Again, these two categories, either of heterosexual quality, or of homosexual one, stand in opposition to each other. Thereby, stereotypes are culturally and through the media constructed. To many people, these media stereotypes appear to be “normal“, or ordinary. Thus, by fostering such stereotypical representations again and again, they become naturalised and appear to be normal (the same process happens with naturalised heterosexual love, as

discussed before). This is where Queer theory comes in, since it challenges any conception of sexuality. Before introducing sexual stereotypes, however, the concept of 'stereotype' first needs to be described.

### **2.3.1. Stereotypes**

The term 'stereotype' is derived from the field of technology and refers to metal plates of the printing presses which were used to produce several and exact copies (Cranny-Francis 140). Thus, a stereotype is a "poured metal plate, and once the metal is poured, the plate can't be changed" (140). When looking at the term's origin, it becomes obvious why stereotypes are ascribed to certain types or groups of people. Stereotypes are fixed beliefs and thoughts about individuals, groups, or even certain ways of performing things. As Cranny-Francis notices, "Stereotypes function by simplifying, by reducing classes of people to a few characteristics by which they are generally said to be identifiable" (140). From a neutral point of view, stereotypes can be denoted as 'rules of thumb'. However, they are often connoted negatively and associated with prejudice and discrimination, since the generalisations and assumptions being made about members of a particular group, often do not reflect people's genuine character traits. For example, many people assume that, generally, Americans are friendly, outgoing, and generous, which certainly does not apply to all of them. Cranny-Francis has come up with another example, which describes stereotypes from a gender perspective. When looking at the icons on public toilet doors, which may alter slightly, but mostly show a woman in a skirt and a man wearing trousers, it is implied that all women typically wear skirts, whereas all men conventionally wear trousers. Moreover, the icons suggest that there is a "visible and identifiable difference between men and women" (140). In this example, the skirt symbolises the visible secondary sex characteristics, like breasts, which are commonly regarded as the unambiguous indicators of differences between men and women. Again, by establishing a cultural norm, which is in this case the skirt associated with women, traditional gender roles are confirmed. Although not all women wear skirts, the little figure on the door, which is represented with the skirt, is automatically associated with the female sex. This is due to the fact that such stereotypical representations have been imposed on our minds so many times, that such a representation seems to be normal and nobody actually scrutinises this seemingly "normal" portrayal. Consequently, visible differences like gender or race, appear to be natural, and members of a gendered group or particular ethnic group,

are reduced, owing to their visible features, to a few simple characteristics or certain types of behaviour (140). In an extreme case, those visual differences serve as a proof for people’s undesirable character traits. As Cranny-Francis summarises (141),

A stereotype is a radically reductive way of representing whole communities of people by identifying them with a few key characteristics. Individuals from the group who don’t fit that stereotype are then said to be atypical.

Stereotypes function within communities of people as shared knowledge, so to speak, as a kind of cultural databank. However, stereotypes are often very vague or even wrong, which is due to the fact that they are usually produced from outside the group of question (141). Restricted contact with the group and limited knowledge are factors that contribute to the occurrence of inaccurate stereotypes. It is important to consider that stereotypes are usually produced by people who are in a position to circulate their ideas widely. For example, decision makers, politicians, persons in responsible positions or generally influential people.

Stuart Hall has coined the phrase ‘strategy of “splitting”’ (258), since the process of stereotyping does not only reduce groups of people to a few essentials, and thereby cuts down critical thinking, but it also entails a mechanism of separation. Just as the binary system is creating the Self and the Other, where one position is always privileged over the other, as already explained, the process of stereotyping divides the normal from the abnormal, the deviant, “the acceptable from the unacceptable” (Hall qtd. in Cranny-Francis 141). Through this process, stereotypes help to establish symbolic boundaries in order to maintain a social order, however, also to exclude and reject everything/everybody that/who does not meet the group standard. Hall states convincingly (258),

Stereotyping [...] is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Us and Them.

Thus, it is important to consider that stereotypes are not just neutral concepts created by a culture, but, actually, they may lead to severe consequences. They produce expectations and emotions, frequently negative ones, which may result in strong prejudices.

As I have already implied, stereotypes establish certain relations of power. Although they are based on the assumption of a natural and visual difference, it is important to consider that unequal power distributions are hidden. As a matter of fact,

there are considerably less black Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in companies because there exists the stereotype of black men being less intellectually capable. Such mechanisms of exclusion are not perceivable directly, since it is assumed that black men are naturally incapable of doing these jobs. Thus, laws and other institutions foster stereotypes. In turn, stereotypes support laws and institutions and help them to function and maintain themselves (Cranny-Francis 142).

Another important aspect is the general applicability of stereotypes. They do not only pertain to marginalised groups, but to all groups. Moreover, there are negative, as well as, positive stereotypes. Negative stereotypes are mostly ascribed to marginalised groups, whereas powerful communities and groups are frequently associated with positive stereotypes. For instance, women are renowned as being caring, affectionate, fondly, nurturing, sensitive, emotional, etc. The assumption of those characteristics being natural may be due to the fact that women have a womb. Since women have reproductive organs, like a womb, they are automatically endowed with patience, empathy, a sense of responsibility, a natural predisposition towards children etc. (Cranny-Francis 143). If a woman or a mother does not correspond to this stereotypical, and fixed conception, she often gets punished with social disapproval. In this way, positive stereotypes are not so positive at all, since they establish a norm and thereby summon expectations. Again, it can be differentiated between the “normal” and the “abnormal”, those who fulfill the stereotype are included, others who do not meet the expectations of society, are excluded, or receive harsh criticism. A negative stereotype concerning women is the well-known assumption that women are highly emotional, thus, have a predisposition for mental illnesses, especially madness. As Cranny-Francis shows, “[A]ccording to a certain stereotype; to be a woman, visibly, physically, is to be predisposed to a heightened emotional nature which can turn to madness” (144). This stereotype may exist owing to the fact that the word ‘hysteria’, which has been regarded as a woman’s disease by physicians and psychiatrists, is derived from the Greek word for ‘uterus’. This example demonstrates that psychiatric and medical institutions are powerful and therefore capable of maintaining stereotypes.

I would like to give another example, viewed from a queer perspective. There are various positive stereotypes concerning gay men, for instance, gay men are interested in the fine arts, keen on sports, well-dressed, etc. There are many more stereotypes in connection with gay men, however, I would like to concentrate on the

numerated ones. With these stereotypical ideas in mind, people tend to compare and contrast every gay man they meet, always relying on these generalised, mostly visual attributes. Once they encounter a gay man who is not familiar with art at all, who is rather sitting in front of the TV than doing sports, and buying his clothes from the flea market, people's conception of the stereotypical or "ideal" gay man will be destroyed, since he does not meet the "normal" expectations. Or even worse, he will be punished with social disapproval.

### **2.3.2. *Resisting Stereotypes***

Since stereotypes are fixed, naturalised generalisations and ideas, it appears to be a very difficult task to change and resist them. People who are judged by stereotypical assumptions may suffer from various acts of discrimination, for instance, based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, income, disability, or sexual orientation. Acts of assault may result in being physically attacked, being called devaluing names, being ignored or lampooned, being prosecuted and harassed, and so on. One strategy of resisting stereotypes and such acts of violence might be to reverse them, or to adapt the opposite group's positive stereotype. A woman, for example, who is "breaking the glass ceiling", by adopting the stereotype of the independent, handsome, successful, white male who seduces attractive women, would be an example of reversing stereotypes with the exception that the woman seduces submissive men (at least in Hollywood mainstream cinema). Several movies are dealing with this subject. I will demonstrate this by the following example.

*No Strings Attached* is a romantic comedy film, which was released in 2011. It perfectly shows how stereotypical gender roles can be reversed. It is about two friends, Emma and Adam, who are making an arrangement, namely to have "no strings attached", casual sex without any romantic feelings involved. Since this movie features a powerful woman who is deciding for a loose sexual relationship, director Ivan Reitman departs from the conventional "woman-as-object" storyline. Right at the beginning, it is shown that Emma does not really correspond to the traditional image of a woman. When Adam weeps over his parents' divorce, Emma clumsily puts her arm around his shoulders and states, "look, I'm not really an affectionate person"<sup>13</sup>. As I have already mentioned, conventionally, women are regarded as affectionate, kind-hearted, etc. Thereby, a reversal of stereotypical gender roles has already been

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/arts/2011/01/20/movies-no-strings-attached-stereotypes-reverse-are-still-stereotypes>

established at the beginning of the movie. However, this reversal continues the whole movie, as Sarah Heuer observes<sup>13</sup>,

[W]e have Emma wearing long johns to a sexy pajamas party, being chastised for using the overtly politically correct term "lover" to describe someone's boyfriend, and shamelessly bragging about her intelligence and education. On the other hand we have Adam who cries, gives lingering, unsolicited hugs to strangers, and appears incapable of refraining from describing every emotion and feeling he ever has.

With reference to the garment long johns, one may be immediately thinking of men wearing those, rather than women. The same applies for the term ‘lover’. It is frequently used by men in order to denote their sexual partner. Also, men are notorious for boasting to impress women. Adam, on the other hand, behaves rather “unmanly”, as he is weeping over his parents’ divorce, and is embracing strangers. I am not trying to say that all men conceal their feelings, but that there is the general idea that men must be strong and emotionally distant. He shows typical feminine attributes: being emotional, whiny, and affectionate.

However, I can partly agree with Heuer’s critique, “Instead of defying stereotypes, this film actually reinforces them”. It is certainly true that the movie does not do away with stereotypical representations of gender roles, however, they are reversed, which is a way of resisting traditional depictions of stereotypes. Although those stereotypes are reversed, it does not mean that they are reinforced. It rather shows, that seemingly fixed and unalterable gender stereotypes actually are not attached completely to gender. This playing around with stereotypes contributes to a representation of gender roles being less stereotypical than traditional depictions of gendered behaviour, meaning men behaving in a masculine way, and women in a feminine way.

One final way of contesting stereotypes is through parody, or irony. Stuart Hall states that, by playing around with stereotypes new images and contents are created, often from within the context of a social movement (269-73). An interesting example here would be the protagonist Xena and her friend Gabrielle of the popular TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. It has often been analysed from a queer perspective, since it was one of the first TV series in the 1990s, in which a queer subtext could be discerned. Although openly gay producer Liz Friedman once said that she intentionally produced a gay subtext, this series appeals to both homosexual- and heterosexual spectators, “without frying themselves in rating



losses, morality debates, token characterization, or self-absorption with the topic"<sup>14</sup>. It is important to consider that *Xena* was released in the 1990s, in an era of fewer TV productions for a homosexual audience than in present times. Back then, most people were not so open-minded towards homosexuality. Despite this fact, producers managed to convey a queer subtext without showing overt sex scenes. By means of various loving gestures like caressing, hugging, etc., it is implied that Xena and Gabrielle love each other. The loving relationship between the two women is also conveyed through various "campy" elements. First, it needs to be defined what 'camp' actually means. In her essay *Notes on "Camp"*, Susan Sontag writes (275),

A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.

In *Xena: Warrior Princess* there are various campy and parodic elements, for instance, characters wearing clothes resembling garments in comic books, wandering through this timeless fantasy world<sup>15</sup>. The artificial and exaggerated gestures and war cries are other campy aspects. By embodying the tough and brave warrior and performing this role, which is traditionally associated with men, in a very exaggerated manner, Xena parodies the stereotypical gender role of the male warrior. Through the recognition of the various campy elements in the TV series, lesbians and queers have created a new context, from which *Xena* can be viewed. Certainly, the popular TV series could be analysed in greater detail (in terms of performativity, female masquerade, etc.), however, this would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, I argue that *Xena* does not only challenge traditional gender stereotypes, (since Xena is portrayed as a strong and confident warrior princess), but also the prevailing heterosexual matrix because it conveys a queer subtext, which can be deciphered by looking at Xena's subtle relationship with Gabrielle.

### **2.3.3. Sexual Stereotypes in the American Media: Natural/deviant**

Since this thesis provides an interplay between media texts, meaning films, and both Gender and Queer theory, I will now introduce several stereotypes in connection with Queer theory, frequently being represented in American movies and TV series.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://whoosh.org/issue17/meister1.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.whoosh.org/issue35/skelton1.html>

Renownedly, all films and TV series use stereotypes to a certain degree, as Benshoff and Griffin explain (15, 2006),

Unlike a novel, in which an author has hundreds of pages to create psychologically complex characters, most films have 90 to 120 minutes to tell a story in visual shorthand. There is a need for instant characterization, and stereotypes are frequently pressed into service.

The question remains why homosexual characters have been portrayed in a rather stereotypical manner throughout film history (like the sissy stereotype, which will be elaborated in the chapter about the history of queer film). Film theorist Richard Dyer suggests, that stereotypes make something invisible apparent. Consequently, the portrayal of queer people as either masculine women or feminine men (or something in between) serves to show how homosexuality is like in real life<sup>16</sup>. Thus, stereotypes “work to invoke a consensus of opinion and make people think they “know“ a group“ (Benshoff; Griffin 15, 2006). Indeed, they do not know this certain group of people, but the stereotype, which has been created in the media, such as films, TV shows etc. It is important to consider that some subcultures, particularly queer ones, are highly diverse (15, 2006).

As a matter of fact, the number of heterosexual and homosexual characters in American media differs widely (Ott; Mack 200). Since Western society is dominated by heteronormativity, as already discussed, heterosexuality is also the dominant sexual identity in media representations. Thus, heterosexuality is naturalised, since it appears to be the “normal“ form of sexuality. Based on its 1.000<sup>th</sup> publication, the pop culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* dedicated an issue in 2008 to the “new classics“, which is a compilation of the best movies, TV series, albums, and books within the last 25 years. Although, out of the top 50 television shows, twenty of them feature non-heterosexual characters, many of these personalities only play a secondary role (*The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, *Friends*) (200). Other programs, like *South Park*, depict lesbian and gay characters in a stereotypical manner (Ott; Mack 200). Out of the top 50 television shows, only a few can provide the audience with non-heterosexual characters in primary roles, for instance, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This popular TV series was regarded as groundbreaking for featuring Willow and Tara’s romantic relationship as one of the first television show ever. Concerning

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002 [1993], esp. 6-18.

these examples, it is obvious that heterosexuality remains the “normal” sexual identity in the American media landscape (Ott; Mack 200).

Besides the fact that homosexual characters are almost unrepresented in American movies and television shows (compared to heterosexual characters), the point is, however, that Hollywood “has historically used homosexuality as a marker for deviance and criminality” (Ott; Mack 201). Thus, such representations of homosexuals as being deviant and criminal, has promoted an anti-gay notion, which certainly has contributed to a rising tendency of homophobia. Ott and Mack continue by asserting, that homosexuality is linked to abnormal and antisocial behaviour in older films, thereby reinforcing heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation. For instance, “Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) in the noir thriller *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is coded as homosexual with effeminate voice, mannerisms, and impeccable dress” (201). The reason why a man with an “effeminate voice” wearing an “impeccable dress” is considered to be abnormal is because women “naturally” have a female voice and “normally” wear dresses. Thus, he is automatically regarded as dangerous and untrustworthy. Consequently, the movie affirms the stereotype of the dangerous, abnormal, and untrustworthy, homosexual man.

Another example, which confirms the stereotype of the murderous, queer and deviant person is *Basic Instinct* (1992). It clearly links homosexual behaviour with deviance and abnormality, since the main character Catherine Tramell, played by Sharon Stone, is the only suspect in a murder case, in which a retired rock star, called Boz, was stabbed with an ice pick during sex. She is the last person to be seen with the victim in the night he died and it is discovered that Catherine has written a novel about a rock star who was killed in the same way as Boz. The notion of queerness comes into play when the storyline reveals that Catherine has an affair with a woman. This woman is later in the movie killed during a car crash and her death manifests that she also has a murderous past, since she killed her two brothers. On an emotional level, it is striking and indicative that Catherine is a homosexual woman, since she seems to be earnestly saddened by her lover's death. Moreover, Catherine shows little empathy when hearing of Boz's death. Also, in the course of the movie, it turns out that Catherine seemed to have been obsessed with a previous lesbian encounter at college whose husband she had also killed. Considering the physical, sexual level, Catherine's homosexual activities with her female lover underline the movie's hidden notion of queerness. Although the issue of

queerness or homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in the movie, Catherine's sexual behaviour can be regarded as queer. Especially because Catherine does not define herself as homosexual. Thus, she does not categorise herself, which is a basic principle of Queer theory. Again, as in the previous example, by means of the killer's homosexual affection, queerness is indirectly linked with deviance and delinquency.

#### **2.3.4. Sexual Stereotypes in American Media: Monogamous/Promiscuous**

Another differentiation drawn by the American media in terms of heterosexual and homosexual characters concerns sexual behavioural patterns. To be more accurate, in the media, heterosexuality is frequently linked to monogamy and homosexuality is often associated with promiscuity. One has to think about a few American mainstream movies, thereby coming up with a monogamous, heterosexual marriage between the two straight main characters. Owing to the fact that the entire genre of American romantic comedy is aimed at the monogamous coupling of heterosexual characters in the movies, it maintains the fixed stereotype that combines heterosexuality with monogamy (Ott; Mack 202).

However, it is not generally assumed that all heterosexual characters in the American media are monogamous. The famous TV series *Sex and the City* is a convincing example of female promiscuity. Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), who is the oldest of the four main characters, embodies promiscuity, since she calls herself "a try-sexual", which means that she tries anything only once. Samantha has numerous affairs with men (frequently younger ones), and also a sexual relationship with a female artist, which both conveys a queer notion and underlines Samantha's promiscuous nature. It is important to consider that the sexual freedom, this open-minded character imparts and endorses, entails a positive sentiment, not a negative one, which invites the viewer to share and support Samantha's attitude. Through her sexual behaviour, Samantha communicates that promiscuity is something to be proud of, not ashamed<sup>17</sup>.

Although promiscuous heterosexual characters certainly persist in the media, this is not the only way of presenting heterosexual ways of living. It is only one of the many varied ways of enjoying one's sex life. The problem is that homosexual characters are by far less presented in the media. In former times, homosexuals

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<sup>17</sup><http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1093279/Why-educated-middle-class-women-proud-members-One-Night-Stand-Generation.html>

actually were non-present in the media. According to the American executive director of the *Center for the Study of Women in TV and Film*, Martha Lauzen, this phenomenon is called ‘symbolic alienation’. In the documentary *Miss Representation* (2011) common, negative gender stereotypes, portrayed in the media, are revealed. Lauzen explains, “When any group is not featured in the media they have to wonder, “What part do I play in this culture?”. There is actually an academic term for that; it is called ‘symbolic alienation’<sup>18</sup>. However, if homosexual characters do show up in television shows and movies, they frequently display a “hyper-sexual” drive, which means having a strong desire to sexual activity. These sexual drives often cannot be satisfied by only one person, which, in turn, fosters coupling with various partners (Ott; Mack 202). In contrast to the previous example, this promiscuous attitude mediated by homosexuals in the media does not convey a positive notion. Quite the opposite, such representations reflect discredit on homosexuals. As a result, most people believe that (all) homosexual people advocate this promiscuous attitude, not only in television series and films, but also in real life. In turn, such misconceptions foster damaging, stereotypical images (202). It is also striking that this promiscuous attitude is frequently represented in gay movies and series. The AIDS activist and blogger Zach Stafford comments on the issue aptly<sup>19</sup>,

In the gay world, I feel that no matter how committed a couple is when I meet them, or how beautiful their life is together, or even, how perfect they seem, there always seems to be infidelity hiding behind those 1000-count sheets. The countless dinner parties, nights at bars, Pride events, and everything in between keep proving one thing to me over and over again that most men seem not to really be interested in just one person, but rather lots of different people. [...] Growing up I was always bombarded with images of gay men as hypersexual and really promiscuous. From TV shows like *Will & Grace* with Jack’s countless partners to *Queer as Folk* with Brian’s countless partners too... well you get the point, gay men were constantly shoved into the light of always looking for the next great fuck.

Even though Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* focuses on various, complex, gay and lesbian characters, thereby emphasising the wide, queer spectrum of human sexuality, the show has been criticised for its continual representation of anonymous sex, which is particularly illustrated by the character of Brian Kinney (Gale Harold), as already addressed. Kinney is one of the various main characters of *QAF* and leads a noble and hedonistic lifestyle. He regards himself as the most desirable gay man in

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.alluc.to/documentaries/watch-miss-representation-2011-online/331844.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://thoughtcatalog.com/zach-stafford/2013/02/monogam-ish-two-is-company-but-is-three-really-a-crowd/>

Pittsburgh and is represented as extremely promiscuous. Another noteworthy television series produced by Showtime, involving many promiscuous characters and elements, is *The L-Word*. It can be regarded as *Queer as Folk*'s 'lesbian equivalent' since the show also deals with disparate characters, both lesbian and gay. One central element being featured in the show, is 'The Chart', which is a graph showing the various, cross-linked sexual affairs between the characters (Ott; Mack 202). At the 'heart' of this diagram is Alice (Leisha Hailey), who is one of the protagonists and is responsible for the creation of the chart. Due to the fact that 'The Chart' is a recurring element in the show's storyline, it becomes a central feature and symbol in connection with promiscuity, since it illustrates the various sexual affairs within the lesbian community. Another main character fostering the stereotype of the hypersexual, promiscuous homosexual is Shane McCutcheon (Katherine Sian Moennig). She can be regarded as the lesbian pendant to Brian Kinney for having several affairs and denying a monogamous relationship. Thus, Shane McCutcheon, being represented as a reckless, promiscuous, lustful seductress, and the 'informative', meaning telling its own story, chart, encourage stereotypes of promiscuity in combination with homosexuality (202).

### **2.3.5. Sexual Stereotypes in American Media: Gender Clarity/ Gender Ambiguity – Subverting Gender**

One of the most striking stereotypes in terms of sexuality and the American media is gender in combination with sexual norms. If the characters do not exhibit traditional, normative gendered behaviour, in the sense of, a woman needs to behave in a feminine way, a man needs to behave in a masculine way, discomfort and confusion is created. Although there is no natural connection between a person's biological sex and their gender (which will be discussed in the following chapter), it is frequently assumed that men and women need to behave according to particular norms. If this is not the case, they may be treated with disrespect, violence and even social exclusion.

In the media, Ott and Mack observe a difference with regard to heterosexual and homosexual characters in terms of gender performance. According to society's expectations, heterosexual male and female characters predominantly perform traditional masculine and feminine gender roles, whereas "[h]omosexual characters tend to shift unpredictably between classic and opposite gender roles, or they blend

aspects of masculinity and femininity in original ways“ (Ott, Mack 203). Although this mixing of masculine and feminine gender traits is positive, according to Queer theorists, since it enables gender fluidity, it frequently causes repulsion, as already stated. This is owing to the fact that Hollywood has created myths, which influence people's views on sexuality and gender until present days. The American movie industry rarely featured a film with subverted gender roles, for example, women behaving in a masculine way, and men displaying feminine traits. One of the few movies challenging traditional gender roles is *Thelma and Louise* (1991). It defies the 'classical paradigm', which comprises society's values that are shaped by culture and history (Man 38). Hayward refers to gender's ideological function, which implies that people are categorised as either male or female, where nothing else exists between the two conceptions (Hayward 179). Unfortunately, these socially constructed assumptions are misrepresented as given, natural facts, which leads to essentialist misinterpretations. As a result, this essentialist approach creates a binary system in which men and women are characterised according to seemingly natural character traits. Since women are regarded as the 'weak sex', due to less muscle mass, consequently less muscle power, they are "economically inferior to the male, [they are] associated more with the domestic than the public sphere, and [are] more emotional (Hayward 179). Thus, women are regarded as passive, whereas men are seen as active.

The British film theorist Laura Mulvey states that this binary division of labour has influenced the narrative structure in the American media<sup>20</sup>. Mulvey's assumption becomes obvious when looking at the portrayal of gender in the majority of movies and TV series. Women are predominantly represented as passive matrons and baby producers, whose mere function is to serve the needs of their husbands, whereas men are depicted as the active, strong agents who are responsible for bringing home enough money. Consequently, women are in a subservient, inferior position, while men are in a powerful, superior position. In the classical Hollywood paradigm, Mulvey introduced the concept of the 'male gaze', which means that women are objectified and serve as erotic objects for male viewers. In *Thelma and Louise*, however, the male gaze is subverted, especially through Louise, since she does not wear provocative attire (her blouse is buttoned up to the top and her T-shirts do not reveal too much skin).

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<sup>20</sup> <http://asecretpublicdiary.blogspot.co.at/2011/02/critically-consider-interplay-of-gender.html>

The movie does not only challenge the male gaze but traditional gender roles in general. The two women desert their men for a weekend in an attempt to go fishing in the mountains. Although a first subversion happens when Thelma and Louise leave their men at home, which is originally the private sphere, equating the ‘woman’s sphere’, Man argues that the women’s leaving “reflect[s] not so much their independence as their ties to a system in which marriage plays an essential role” (Man 40). However, when Thelma nearly gets raped in a bar by a stranger, everything gets out of control. According to the motto, “violence breeds violence”, Louise kills the stranger and thereby rescues Thelma. Afraid of getting caught by the police, the two attempt to flee to Mexico, striving for a new beginning. During their trip, particularly Thelma changes from the subservient ‘Angel of the House’ to the independent, sexually liberated vamp regardless of the consequences, whereas both Thelma’s oppressive husband and Louise’s lover stay in the domestic sphere. Louise can be regarded as being more independent from the outset, because she is living alone and has a job. Since Louise does not comply with the traditional conception of how a woman should be, Thelma tells Louise at the beginning of the movie that Darryl, Thelma’s husband, already thought Louise was a man.

In the course of their roadtrip, the two women meet a young student called ‘J.D.’. He turns out to be a criminal on probation because he robs Thelma and Louise. At first, J.D. seems to serve “as a tool of classical narration that must punish female agency<sup>21</sup>”, however, he actually empowers and encourages the women to abandon female passivity and strive after male activity and agency. Thanks to J.D., as already mentioned, Thelma obtains sexual freedom and adopts a male role as she robs a liquor store in order to get money. This movie shows how a character is able to develop from a shy, oppressed housewife to an independent, self-confident woman. As Chumo convincingly states, “The freedom of the open road allows ‘a playing out of different roles, and ultimately shedding one’s old identity for a new one’ (24). This new attained identity and masculine behaviour is particularly expressed in the scene when the two women are stopped by a state trooper. Thelma holds the trooper at gunpoint who is reduced to tears. The policeman desperately cries out that he has a wife and kids and she warns him, “You be sweet to them, especially your wife. My husband wasn’t sweet to me. Look how I turned out”. When looking at the gendered behaviour of the characters, traditional stereotypes are reversed, since women are

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<sup>21</sup> <http://asecretpublicdiary.blogspot.co.at/2011/02/critically-consider-interplay-of-gender.html>



regarded as being emotional and weepy, whereas men are strong and clinical. This scene perfectly shows how gender roles are subverted and how women adopt masculine behaviour, and thereby defy normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, it indicates that Thelma’s cold bloodedness is a consequence of suffering from her husband’s oppression.

At the end of the movie, the two runaways, encircled by the police, decide to commit suicide and Louise drives full speed ahead. The car flies off a cliff into the depths of the Grand Canyon. Their death can be interpreted as a final way out of patriarchal society, through which they achieve full freedom. Returning to their former lives and being oppressed by men does not seem to be an option for Thelma and Louise. Also, the photograph which is seen at the end of the movie, can be regarded as a redundant remnant of the women’s former identity, because it flits away when the car flies off the cliff.

As already mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter, Ott and Mack state that homosexual characters frequently express gender ambiguity, which results in discomfort, even threatening, and conveys a sense of, “things are not quite right with queer characters and personalities” (203). In the media, there are numerous instances of gender performances that blend traditional norms, thereby causing discomfort among audiences. When looking at various stage performances and her outward appearance, Lady Gaga is a very good example of ‘gender-bending’. In 2011, when she dressed up as a man for her performance at the VMA’s (Video Music Awards), she shocked her fans. The term ‘performance’, in this example, is very accurate, since it perfectly shows how gender is performed. Dressed in a white, wide T-shirt, slacks, and a black blazer, combined with typical manly gestures, underlined Gaga’s masculine physique. The short, black hair, and the smoking of a cigarette demonstrated her masculine attitude. Moreover, Gaga attempted to kiss Britney Spears on stage, which bestows the performance a queer touch.

However, people exhibiting gender ambiguity are not only met with discomfort, but are frequently punished for “improper” gender performances. In the case of Brandon Teena, a teenager having lived in Nebraska, her gender ambiguity and transsexuality was her death sentence. She was murdered because she passed as a man, but was, biologically, a woman. Her story has been turned into a film called *Boys Don’t Cry*, which will be analysed in great detail in the second part of this thesis. The mentioned examples of gender ambiguity show that viewers tend to get

confused and antipathetic if a character, regardless of their sexual orientation, does not correspond with accepted gender norms. Since this thesis is predominantly influenced by Gender theory, as mentioned, this crucial interdisciplinary academic field will be analysed in great detail in the subsequent chapter.

### 3. GENDER THEORY

When discussing gender representations in American Queer Cinema, an introduction to Gender theory is vital. There are many different accounts on gender, since Gender studies provides a vast field of research. Famous philosopher Simone de Beauvoir certainly presented one of the most important views on gender, as already stated in the introduction, namely that, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman“ (*The Second Sex* 301). In other words, nobody embodies a stable gender category, but rather defines him- or herself according to the social world he or she lives in. Thereby, it becomes obvious that the term ‘gender’ is a cultural and social construction, and not an inherent notion. This assertion is also true for men: one is not born as a man but becomes one in the course of his life (Connell 4). Becoming a man or a woman, as the term ‘becoming’ signifies, is a process, not a fixed state of being. By applying this central thought to the selected cultural representations (for example, images and descriptions of film scenes), it will become clear that the assumed inherent concept of gender is only a product of cultural and social practices.

#### 3.1. Origin and Meaning

From a linguistic perspective, ‘gender’ comprises a grammatical category in English (masculine/feminine/neuter) (Connell 7). Gender is directly indicated by pronouns (‘he’ is a masculine pronoun, ‘she’ is a feminine pronoun, ‘it’ is a neuter pronoun). Originally, the term emerged from the ancient Indo-European word-root, “‘to produce’ (cf. ‘generate’), which gave rise to words in many languages meaning ‘kind’ or ‘class’ (e.g. ‘genus’)“ (Connell 7). In grammar, gender was used to differentiate between classes of nouns, “corresponding more or less to distinctions of sex (and absence of sex) in the objects denoted“ (19<sup>th</sup>-century Oxford English Dictionary; qtd. in Connell 8). Grammar specifies how far such distinctions influence and permeate human conceptions of people, objects, concepts, and states of mind (8). Due to the fact that grammatical constructions vary from language to language, concepts are gendered in distinct ways. Just to give one example, ‘die Hoffnung’ is feminine in German,

masculine in French ('espoir'), and neuter in English ('hope'). The prevailing belief that there exist only two sexes is therefore anchored in language, which brings along different kinds of restrictions. For example, it seems to be rather difficult to write a novel that deals with ungendered characters because it is tricky to refer to them, in terms of pronouns, if they are neither female, nor male, or both.

However, in her novel *Written on the Body* (1992), the British writer Jeanette Winterson has managed to do so. The following short analysis, concerning the aspect of gender, is the first example showing how the prevalent binary system can be challenged. The narrator of the story is not only unnamed but also ungendered. The fact that the narrator's gender is unrevealed seems to be the most striking and interesting one. Some critics argue that Winterson's novel is "full of lost opportunities" and that she "refuses to write an 'out' lesbian story", thereby "losing more than she gains" (Duncker 85). However, this lack of information concerning the narrator's sex can also have advantageous effects, since it enriches the novel and opens it to a great variety of different readings and audiences. Winterson refuses to use personal pronouns like 'he' or 'she', distracting the reader's assumptions concerning gender. Thereby, she manages to deconstruct the binary system of gender by means of language, or rather by avoiding particular words. In doing so, Winterson conveys the notion of androgyny since the ungendered narrator exhibits both female and masculine ways of behaviour throughout the story. Due to the fact that he/she is genderless Winterson conveys the crucial idea of open-mindedness, and intends to question common beliefs about identity and stereotypical, narrow-minded presumptions concerning sex and gender. Her assertion, "When people fall in love they experience the same kind of tremors, fears, a rush of blood to the head, regardless of their sex, race, class, or sexual orientation" (qtd. in Marvel 165) supports the notion of frankness<sup>22</sup>. She has managed to challenge the binary system of gender by creating an ungendered character who is distanced from sexual difference and sexual orientation. Thus, *Written on the Body* can be read from a queer perspective and conveys a queer notion, because, in the course of the novel, the narrator unfolds that he/she has been in relationships with both men and women. Winterson clearly highlights that emotions and experiences like loss, desire, love and passion are universal phenomena, being neither limited nor controlled by gender, nor

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/winterson.html>

solely provided in a heterosexual context. Or, as Rubin convincingly states (10), thereby underlining the constructivist aspect of sexuality,

[N]o examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it.

The last sentence from this quotation indicates that the body conveys certain meanings within a culture. It does not exist outside the realm of culture, otherwise, if the body would exist beyond the cultural framework, it would be a 'tabula rasa', since it would not display any meanings. Or, as Connell emphasises, "[T]he body is involved in every kind of social practice" (77; qtd. in Harrison;lood-Williams 97, emphasis in original).

Winterson's novel demonstrates that it is rather difficult to create an ungendered character. This suggests that, in modern Western societies, gender is everywhere. Therefore, people take gender for granted. Mostly, we immediately recognise a person as a man OR *[my emphasis]* a woman. If a man does not look clearly like a man, meaning if he exhibits feminine signifiers, like long hair, feminine facial features, no beard growth, and wears women's clothing, we promptly tend to speculate why this man appears like a woman. This categorisation, which is happening immediately, implies, although this man may just walk by and we do not even know him, that we seem to have an urgent need to classify people as either masculine or feminine, otherwise we feel uncomfortable, as I already stressed. Or, as Cranny-Francis convincingly elaborates when she states that it is impossible to escape the binary system of gender, "[W]ithout the birth certificate which records our gender, we could not get a passport, or driver's licence which also record our gender" (1). Let us thrust aside the magisterial paperwork and consider another example. Every trip to a public toilet displays our gender by the door we choose (1). Modern Western societies, we are part of, seem to have created an exact binary system into which everyone is forced indirectly, meaning through respected norms and beliefs. If people do not comply with such values, severe consequences will arise, which will be demonstrated by means of the selected movies *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Boys Don't Cry*. These films convey different levels of aftermath, whereby the latter ends with death.

However, the category of gender has not always been there. As the American sociologist Michael Kimmel observes (5),

Until the 1970s, social scientists would have listed only class and race as the master statuses that defined and proscribed social life. [...] But today, gender has joined race and class in our understanding of the foundations of an individual's identity. Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences.

It is also important to consider that gender is not something that is 'at a standstill', but something, which is constantly developing by different kinds of people through interrelated processes (Flax 40),

Gender is a category meant to capture a complex set of social relations. Gender is not one or many things, but refers to a changing set of historically social processes. Gender both as an analytical category and social processes is relational. That is, gender is a complex whole constituted by and through interrelated processes.

The major problem is, as already indicated, that there is the ongoing debate between biological determinism and cultural constructionism. Many people believe that biological, physical differences lead to distinct behavioural and cognitive patterns due to differing anatomical factors, whereby particular social and political structures and constitutions are created<sup>23</sup>. Following Freud's famous slogan, "[A]natomy is destiny" (qtd. in Kimmel 21), biological determinists expect men to behave in a masculine way, and women in a feminine way (owing to their anatomy). Kimmel, however, argues that gendered behaviour does not only depend on a person's anatomy, but that it varies in cultural, historical, and social contexts (3),

What it means to possess the anatomical configuration of male or female means very different things depending on where you are, who you are and when you are living.

Thus, it is also important to consider that gender categories like 'masculine' and 'feminine' may vary greatly in different cultures, at distinct moments of time, and by various kinds of people who may perceive gendered behaviour in different ways. For example, the way women and men are perceived in Europe in terms of behaving in a feminine/masculine way may be entirely different in Asian countries.

One of the major aims of this thesis is to show that gender is not naturally given, or something that is inherent, but a cultural construction. It will be demonstrated how gender is represented in the selected movies and in what ways its constructiveness and artificiality can be revealed. Although a comparison of how men and/or women

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Kimmel, Michael S. *The Gendered Society*, 21-22.

from various cultures are represented in queer cinema would be very useful as well, such an analysis would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

### **3.2. The Power of Gender**

By questioning what it means to be a woman, feminist theorists, like Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, have differentiated between 'sex' and 'gender', which is still the case in English speaking countries (German has only one term, namely 'Geschlecht'). In contrast to gender, the concept of 'sex' refers to the biological categories of 'male' and 'female', through which 'men' and 'women' are defined (anatomical, genital differences). At the same time, this definition of two sexes, divides them into two categories, which creates this binary system. The striking aspect is that these binary oppositions, like male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, etc., where nothing exists between those two terms, create hierarchies. Feminist theorists criticise that patriarchal society, which empowers men over women<sup>24</sup>, conceptualises gender traits in opposition. Thus, men have come to identify as dominating, strong, active, adventurous, rational, creative, and so on, whereas women are regarded as weak, passive, timid, and emotional. It is important to consider, however, that the fundamental problem results from the false assumption that gender is the consequence of sex, which is the case in patriarchal societies. Thus, if a person has a womb, breasts, and a vagina, she automatically is supposed to act like a woman, whereas if a person has a penis and testicles, he automatically needs to act like a man. Such "guidelines" of gender-appropriate behaviour are being propagated again and again by teachers, parents, priests, advertisers, heads of state, and so on. Thus, ideas and beliefs of how gender should be and how it should not be performed, are imposed on each of us.

However, it is important to consider that gender is not only imposed on us from outside, meaning by accepted norms or from authorities (Connell 4). Certainly, there are exceptions (for example dress codes for students like school uniform), but adolescents and adults mostly are able to choose freely how they present themselves in terms of gender appearance (during their leisure time). For example, by means of clothing and haircut, one can either underline gender stereotypes or subvert them. A woman with long hair, wearing a short skirt, a tight blouse underlining her feminine physique, and high heels conveys that she wants to be regarded as feminine and is proud of her femininity. If the same woman is having her

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<sup>24</sup> <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/feminism/a/patriarchal.htm>

hair cropped and wearing a wide shirt, baggy pants, a leather jacket and engineer boots, she indirectly conveys through her outward appearance: I do not want to be considered as feminine, but rather as masculine. Due to the fact that the woman's biological sex does not correspond with her style and outward appearance, she subverts "normal", meaning accepted gender norms. By dressing in a feminine way, men are also able to subvert gender norms. Additionally, each choice of gesture and facial expression, each garment we select or avoid, signifies a step towards or away from traditional expectations of what a man or a woman should be like<sup>25</sup>.

An extreme example of challenging the binary system of gender is drag queens. The term 'drag' can be regarded as an acronym for "DRessed as A Girl"<sup>26</sup>. The *Collins English Dictionary* gives a rather straight forward definition of 'drag queen', "a male who dresses as a woman and impersonates female characteristics for public entertainment" (420). Although drag queens are performing on stage, not in everyday life, they are a representative example of parody, and thereby defy the gender binary. Interestingly, the critic Nelson argues that drag queens are neither feminine, nor masculine (274),

Neither feminine nor masculine, drag queens complicate binary sexuality. This destabilization begins in the dressing rooms, where the queens' show preparations mimic the construction of gender roles. After applying dramatic makeup, they pad and cinch themselves into exaggerated female silhouettes by donning layers of undergarments [creating] the illusion [...] [of] [...] breasts and women's waists and hips. Next comes the gaff, a contraption which holds male genitalia between the legs, heavy pantyhose, laced corsets, waist-cinchers, and brassieres padded with assorted materials.

At this point, it is necessary to refer to Judith Butler, since she has made some important observations on gender and drag. I will refer to Butler in great detail in the next chapter, however, it should be emphasised that Butler does not regard drag performances as being subversive completely. She views drag only as potentially subversive because such performances, or other forms of parody, may promote heterosexuality, or even ridicule behaviour that is regarded as 'homosexual' by society, or, in the worst case, encourage homophobia. Butler explains (86, 1993),

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender\\_b\\_1291390.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-dolan/best-performance-gender_b_1291390.html)

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Drag\\_queen.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Drag_queen.html)

[T]here are forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself – we might think of Julie Andrews in *Victor, Victoria* or Dustin Hoffmann in *Tootsie* or Jack Lemmon in *Some Like it Hot*. [...] This is drag as high het entertainment, and though these films are surely important to read as cultural texts in which homophobia and homosexual panic are negotiated, I would be reticent to call them subversive.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler deals, among other aspects, with parody and drag, revealing various crucial thoughts on gender and drag, which will be discussed in the next chapter(s).

### 3.3. Judith Butler on Sex and Gender

Since post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler is a very influential theorist who has contributed to the fields of both Gender studies and Queer theory, as already indicated, this chapter is dedicated to the important scientific results she has come up with. In fact, Butler is sometimes referred to as “The Queen of Queer” because of her contributions in Queer academia (Asop et al., 2002). She has established a similar notion of gender as Beauvoir did. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler claims that gender is performative and not really a set of concrete identities, but always reproduced through the body again and again. Therefore, Butler is often regarded as the catalyst being responsible for new views on sex and gender.

It is important to consider that gender is not expressive; in order to be expressive, the body would have to create gender internally by the “I” and present it externally as a possibility. Butler conveys, as Beauvoir did, that there is no essential core of a body’s being and that gender is performative. Thus, no inherent ideas of an essential sex are displayed, nor declared. The notion of gender is not a fixed category, but is always moving and shifting. She makes clear that gender is not a stable category, but a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519). Thereby, the body is constantly doing new ‘acts’, and, theoretically, gender is in an ongoing flux.

Butler even goes further. She disassociates herself from the traditional, feminist perception that the term ‘sex’ strictly comprises natural, unchanging and innate bodily features, whereas ‘gender’ used to be regarded as something that is socio-culturally, politically constructed. In contrast to other Gender theorists, like Gayle Rubin, she believes that both sex and gender are cultural constructions. Rubin states that sex is biologically determined by anatomical differences<sup>27</sup>, whereas Butler claims that sex does not require gender, since it is, like gender, an artefact created by culture. In

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Rubin, Gayle. “The Traffic of Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex”.



order to grasp both the relieving and restricting effects of gender performance, Butler's scientific ideas and contributions need to be considered in greater detail.

### **3.3.1. *Gender as a Stylised Repetition of Acts***

When reading Butler, one of the first assertions that immediately catches one's attention, is that gender is a "stylized repetition of acts" (519), as I already mentioned. This means that gender is based on the "stylization of the body" and must be regarded as the trivial way in which a mirage of gender is created that makes it look like an enduring gendered stability. Butler explains, "[Gender] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519). In other words, through bodily gestures, movements, and so on, there is the semblance of a steady self created. However, there is neither facticity in terms of the body, nor in gender. The term 'facticity' derives from the philosophical field of existential phenomenology and describes the "necessary connection between consciousness and the world of inert matter and the past" (Tidd 30). According to Simone de Beauvoir, as Tidd explains, the concept of 'facticity' comprises aspects of one's life which cannot be chosen freely. For example, facts of one's birth, one's body, the existence of other people, or one's death. People tend to believe that the body and gender are certain kinds of facticity, namely the fact that one is born either male or female. However, Butler argues that both gender and the body are produced by discourses (Salih 55), based on Beauvoir's groundbreaking assertion that woman, and in a broader sense, any gender, is a historical situation rather than a natural fact (Beauvoir 38). In terms of the body, Butler continues by stating that it actively represents "certain cultural and historical possibilities" (521). She compares gender acts to performative acts within theatrical contexts (521), however, emphasises that gender performances happen unconsciously, in contrast to theatrical performances. By stating that the body is a "historical situation" or "idea", Merleau-Ponty claims that the body "gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world". Thus, the body is not a "self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning" (qtd. in Butler, 521). However, only through people's understanding and meaning making, the materiality (of the body) makes sense. To underline the performative aspect, Butler emphasises,

One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well (521).

From this quotation it becomes obvious that gender is performed diversely at different periods of time.

### **3.3.2. Performativity**

As already indicated, for Butler, gender is not something one *is*, but rather one *does* (Salih 55). There is an emphasis on the “doing”, on the act, on the performative aspect of the doing. Therefore, Butler coined the term ‘performativity’. The concept of performativity has proven to be valuable for the academic field of Queer theory and will be therefore elaborated in this chapter.

As previously mentioned, gender is something one does. Arising from this “doing”, performances evolve, whereby meanings of masculine and feminine identities are constituted. However, it is important to consider that behind the doing is no subject “who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler 25). In *Gender Trouble*, she then refers to Nietzsche's work *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “[T]here is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything” (29, qtd. in Salih 56). The crucial aspect is that Butler claims that there is/exists no gender identity unless gender is performed. She clearly differentiates between ‘expressing’ and ‘performing’. In expressing gender by various behaviours, gestures, etc., an identity is formed in the act of doing so, “[T]hat identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). However, she claims that those gender acts and attributes are performative, not only expressive (528). Hence, identity does not exist a priori. Butler also draws on J. L. Austin's ‘Speech Act theory’ by stating that gender implements what it names. This means that gender identities are created by means of language, for example a man being denoted as masculine, whereas a woman as feminine (Salih 56). A doctor declaring, “It's a girl!”, respectively, “It's a boy!” is not only a descriptive utterance but rather a prescriptive one, since through language, it creates the subject (the baby) as either masculine or feminine. Or, from an “Athusserian”, linguistic perspective, this speech act can be denoted

as ‘interpellation’<sup>28</sup>. Those linguistic utterances that have various effects, for example, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”, are called ‘performative speech acts’ (Bublitz 23). Consequently, as Salih paraphrases, identity is a signifying, performative practice,

[T]here is no gender identity that precedes language. If you like, it is not that an identity “does” discourse or language, but the other way around—language and discourse “do” gender. There is no “I” outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings (Gender Trouble 145; qtd. in Salih 56).

The significant aspect is that, contrary to Rubin, Butler claims that both sex and gender are performatively constructed. According to this belief, sex is not a biological fact, but it is, like the body and gender, performatively reinscribed, since there is no body “prior to cultural inscription” (Salih 55). This aspect underlines the “factitiousness (i.e. its constructedness)”, of sex and gender, “rather than its facticity (i.e. the fact of its existence)” (Salih 55). Thus, there is no “natural body” that exists outside the realm of culture since every body is culturally inscribed from the beginning onwards. According to her, sex is not undoubtedly bound to nature but depends on a cultural framework as well. Critics have tried to comprehend Butler’s notion on sex being also performatively constructed by observing, “[T]he truth of sex, along with the suggestion that such a thing exists, is produced via the same regulatory practices that produce the norms of gender” (Brady, Schirato 32). In order to underpin her line of argument, Butler clearly states in *Gender Trouble* (10),

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.

This quotation implies that sex is a discursively produced concept, like gender. Only through discourse and the cultural framework, sex becomes meaningful.

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Interpellation’ is a term which was coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. He popularised it in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards Investigation)” in 1972. It describes the process through which an individual is “hailed” into a certain subject position, by being addressed. For example, a policeman shouting in public, “Hey, you!”. In doing so, an individual turns around, thereby becoming a subject. The process of turning around, of feeling addressed implies a fear of having done something wrong on behalf of the subject. Simultaneously, the addressee acknowledges the policeman as representative of the executive force. Although the individual is recognised as a subject, he or she is “overmastered” by law because he/she is “interpellated into the system (Cranny-Francis 47). This example suggests that we have no choice concerning interpellation, since we cannot ignore the policeman’s call, as it would be regarded as non-compliance. Thus, the vision of an independent subject is an illusion because it serves the interests of ideology and capitalism.

Moreover, Butler comes up with “the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Salih 520). This assertion conveys a certain kind of freedom concerning gender performance, where one is not forced to stay in a specific, mandatory framework. However, this liberty only happens theoretically, because “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (520). That gender appearance is regulated within a rigid regulatory frame becomes clear from Butler’s following assertion (25; qtd. in Salih 55-56),

[Gender is] a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, it will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

This quotation indicates that, in practice, individuals are not free to choose which gender they are going to exhibit. As Salih observes, “The script”, if you like, is always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of “costumes” from which to make a constrained choice of gender style” (56). Butler also describes gender as a “strategy of survival [...] with clearly punitive consequences” (522). As I have already explained, those who step out of this rigid regulatory gendered frame are punished. Since gender performances happen within certain sanctions and proscriptions, gender is not a “fully individual matter” (525). In the course of this thesis it will be shown what kind of fatal effects deviant gender performances may have. In former times, for example, in the Victorian era, women wearing trousers were disapproved of, whereas, nowadays, such a style of clothing is fully tolerated within Western societies. However, the very same style of dress may be condemned in other cultures. This fact proves that gender appearance is discursively constructed and that it depends on time, culture, and place.

Butler does not only state that gender is performative, but also implies that there is no original, true gender. Without those performative acts, gender would not exist at all. She explains how the concept of gender appears to be natural and denotes it as a ‘cultural fiction’ (522),

Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender created the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness.

In other words, Butler states that through the production and "maintenance" of certain kinds of gender performances, people actually created cultural fictions, however, they believe those fictions to be natural and necessary, since they are entranced by them. She finishes her line of argument by claiming that various "corporeal styles", meaning that gender is expressed through the body (since it is considered as a fixed indicator of sexual difference), which have been created throughout history, are nothing other than those "punitively regulated cultural fictions" that are disparately embodied and concealed under compulsion (522). She justifies her assertion that there is no original gender by saying (*Gender Trouble* 136),

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.

Besides the fact that there is no original gender, and its performative quality, it is important to consider that performative acts are public. As already stated, since nobody exists outside the realm of culture, every gendered performance is social. These performances are repeated, as I explained, whereby socially established meanings are enacted again and again. At this point, Butler refers to the anthropologist Victor Turner, who focuses on the notion of social drama as a means of solving internal conflicts within a culture<sup>29</sup>. She states, "[I]t is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is immediately public as well" (526). She also refers to the consequences of those actions being public, namely to pursue the strategic aim of preserving gender within its binary frame.

However, Butler emphasises that gender is neither "a radical choice [...] that reflects a merely individual choice" (526), nor it is prescribed on the individual's body in advance, as already discussed. Hence, embodied selves do not pre-exist the

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1974).

cultural conventions which signify bodies (526). She explains, “[G]ender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (528). She compares the gendered body to an actor on the stage, where the script may be performed in distinct ways, just as gendered performances may be “acted out” differently, however those acts are still controlled within a regulatory framework,

Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives (526).

In terms of punitive consequences, however, deviant gender performances are met with severe ramifications, whereas theatrical performances may be heavily criticised, or, in the last resort, governed by political censorship. Butler underlines this assertion by stating, “Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence” (527). Thus, it depends on context and situation, if, in this case, a transvestite is discriminated against. This is owing to the fact, that a theatrical performance is a fictive act, whereas gender performances happen in real life. Thereby, strict lines are drawn between the performance and life (527). In fact, as Butler convincingly explains, the transvestite does more than simply proving that there is a difference between sex and gender. It is essential to consider that he/she “challenges [...] the distinction between appearance and reality” (527). Since the transvestite obviously does not only exist onstage, as Butler’s example shows, he/she persists in real life,

If the ‘reality’ of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ which gender performances ostensibly express (527).

She underlines her claim that there is no essential sex nor gender because gender is only to the extent “real” that it is performed. Hence, the transvestite’s gender is as “real” as anyone whose gender performance does conform to society’s gender norms (527) (*My use of inverted commas is on purpose, since it is debatable whether there exists an objective reality*).

### 3.3.3. *Gender as an Imitation Without an Original*

Another perfect example, I already addressed, showing that there is no natural cohesion between sex, gender, and gender performance is drag. Butler convincingly states that all gender is a form of parody, however, some gender performances are more parodic than others (Salih 57). She points out the disconnection between the gender that is being performed and the body of the performer, whereby drag unfolds the imitative and performative “nature” of gender, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (*Gender Trouble* 137). Thus, drag is another instance showing that gender does not need to be fixed to a person’s biological sex.

Furthermore, Butler asserts that gender is a copy of a copy. In the article *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (2004), she is conveying this thought as follows (313),

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself.

Hence, Butler implies that any gender performance is an imitation without an original, that has become naturalised through its imitation and repetition. Since there is no original gender, Butler asserts that, “Genders, then, can be neither true nor false” (qtd. in Salih 528). She argues that both heterosexual identities and imitations of those are unoriginal and constructed. She designates those imitations as “phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity” (Butler 378, 2003). Butler continues this thought by stating that “heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmic idealization of itself– *and failing*” (378). This results into “an endless repetition of itself” (378). Butler draws on Esther Newton, who claimed in her work *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* that “drag is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender, but enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed” (qtd. in Seidman; Alexander 339). Thus, drag queens, for example, are not trying to imitate the real, the original woman, since the notion of the “real”, authentic woman is a cultural construction, in fact it does not exist. As a consequence, they are imitating the copy of a copy. As I have already stated, the effect of “natural genders” is attained by imitative strategies,

whereby gender does not always happen in exactly the same ways. As a consequence, it is possible to “repeat one’s gender differently, as drag artists do” (Salih 58) – maybe in provoking and unexpected ways, since men “are supposed” to behave in a manlike manner, and should not dress in women’s clothing. Another possibility of deconstructing, and even subverting fixed gender categories provides the concept of androgyny, which will be analysed in detail in the following chapter.

### **3.4. How Androgyny Subverts the Gender Binary**

The concept of androgyny is a perfect example that challenges the binary system of gender. It refers to individuals being “neither specifically feminine nor masculine, as in dress, appearance, or behavior”<sup>30</sup>. Since some characters in the selected movies exhibit androgynous gender behaviour, and this concept is a crucial component of Gender theory, it seems worthwhile to include a chapter on androgyny in this thesis. Due to the fact that androgyny rejects the gender binary, it has become a queer signifier<sup>31</sup>.

As I have already explained in the course of this thesis, we are living in a world of binary oppositions: black and white, West and East, male and female, left and right, young and old, active and passive, normal and anormal, good and bad, heterosexual and homosexual, body and soul, center and margin, self and other, inside and outside, sex and gender, culture and nature, and so on. This list could be continued endlessly, and it is important to consider that, concerning these binary pairs, one of them is always privileged over the other. For instance, many people believe that men are superior to women, as it is written in the Bible that man was created first and that woman was created out of man’s rib. Another example is the West, which is constructed as superior, civilised and progressive, in contrast to the East, which is believed to be savage, uncivilised and static. This has been criticised by literary theorist Edward Said in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978), since there are not only different categories and dichotomies created, but, as a consequence, hierarchies are established. Such hierarchies, in turn, encourage black and white thinking, which is prevalent in today’s Western society, and contribute to the misbelief that binary oppositions are inherent, or natural, as already discussed in previous chapters. The reason for introducing the concept of binary opposition is that it excludes issues, categories and notions that are in between those two antitheses.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/androgyny>

<sup>31</sup> <http://blog.yupnet.org/2013/11/08/a-queer-history-of-fashion-what-does-gay-look-like/>



This means that beliefs, people, identities, ideals, etc. that cannot be classified according to either the superior or the inferior position, are automatically excluded from and/or stigmatised by society. In other words, society does not show complete acceptance towards people, manners, notions, etc. that do not fit fully into either one or the other term.

### **3.4.1. *Binary Oppositions***

Since Queer theorists strive after a deconstruction of binary oppositions and many of them appear in the chosen films, it is necessary to analyse this concept within the scope of this thesis. Binary oppositions provide similar functions to stereotypes. They help to reduce insecurities, by assuming fixed, essential identities and notions. It always seems to be easier to categorise a person, or a concept according to either the one or the other opposition, than to admit that something, or somebody may belong neither to the first category, nor to the second one, or in some way to both. Sadly, as I already indicated, people often tend to take the “path” of least resistance, which is, from a gender perspective, assuming that, there only exist two sexes, and that gender is primarily determined according to “the physical characteristics of the external genitalia” (qtd. in Bolin 36).

Originally, the concept of binary opposition derives from Structuralism and “is the theoretical model on which language makes its sense: black/white, male/female, left/right, dark/light, night/day and so on” (Tauchert 181). Thus, every signifying term defines itself against the opposite term. This means that, according to the Swiss Structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure, “the word ‘up’ cannot function without conjuring and cancelling out the properties of its opposite, ‘down’” (181). All binary oppositions are based on a chain of “negated differences to maintain its claim to meaning” (181). Consequently, as Tauchert continues, the concept of ‘up’ cannot exist without a concept of ‘down’. Hence, these notions are interdependent, since the first term can be defined by means of negating the other term. So, the first is everything the other term is not. The same is true for the binary pair man/woman. Man is everything woman is not. As Tauchert explains (182),

[A]ny textual or visual reference to the concept of ‘man’ always necessarily conjures and negates the concept of ‘woman’, and the qualities of ‘masculinity’ are necessarily dependent on the negated presence of ‘femininity’.

Although binary oppositions help to create categories and establish boundaries, this is not always advantageous. It limits further categories and, consequently, prevents an establishment and development of other concepts and identities. As Tauchert puts it convincingly (182),

This model of language and concepts exposes a tendency to polarize categories in order to separate and clarify our objects and position-ality, and ultimately our identities: oppositionality demands that we identify ourselves with one category or another; there is no orthodox space for between-ness.

In order to create space for 'betweenness', so-called 'grey-areas', or in other words, for individuals and notions that do not fit into the binary models in thought and language, Tauchert introduces three ways in an attempt to overcome binary oppositions (182),

- (1) To invert binary weightings and values (displace currently over-valorized terms with currently under-valorized terms);
- (2) To disturb the binary process by introducing a third term, or by circumlocuting the binary terms in language that has become known as "politically correct"; or
- (3) To undermine the binary as an illusion imposed on a more general and de-hierarchized web of "difference" between a whole range of embodiments and identities, and replace it with the floating free-play of the signifier that is the hallmark of postmodernism

In terms of gender, Tauchert adopts the introduced positions as follows (182-183),

- (1) To valorize the previously repressed and eclipsed feminine at the expense of the historical dominance of the masculine
- (2) To deploy a gender-free language that challenges binary modes of thinking [...]
- (3) To speak of gender as a localized and fallacious symptom of language systems, which is what we find in many postmodern or poststructuralist responses to the question of gender.

The first position may be the basic principle of a Feminist theorist whose aim is to deconstruct prevalent patriarchal notions, whereas the third position can be characterised according to postmodernist analyses, as Tauchert already stated.

The French feminist writer Hélène Cixous convincingly argues that all binaries are derived from and return to the original pair, namely 'male/female' (qtd. in Tauchert 181),

Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Day/Night, Father/Mother, Head/Emotions, Intelligible/Sensitive, Logos/Pathos, Man/Woman.

In order to provide a relevant example of how society makes up notions and concepts, which are, as a logical consequence, socially and culturally constructed, I would like to point out Cixous' example of the binary pair 'day and night' being portrayed as distinct, independent concepts. The problem is that such oppositions are fictional concepts, however, not an illusion, but "in the sense in which days of the week and months of the year are necessary fictions" (184). This means that the assumption of Day and Night being an opposition, where Day cannot equal Night and Day cannot be Night at the same time, is not true. Cixous supports her assertion by stating that, "there are moments in the Day/Night when it *is* both Day and Night at the same time (conceptualized as Dawn and Dusk – the equinoxes of the Day/Night; the 50% points that approximate neither to Day nor to Night, but which contain, equally, aspects of both)" (184). By means of this example, Cixous intends to convey the problematic practices of conceptualizing the world as such, of establishing universals and essentialist notions, that actually are not essentially true. As Tauchert continues (184),

Our concepts of Day and Night as discrete entities – and by implication opposing entities – influence the way we experience the Day/Night. But there is no exact and definite moment at which 'it' stops being Day and starts being Night. Day and Night exist on a continuum that can be more accurately conceptualized as a circle.

When drawing an analogy between Day and Night being rather a continuum than two discrete entities and one of the main issue of this thesis, I argue that gender, meaning constructed notions of masculinity and femininity, are also a continuum, rather than independent entities. Connell, for example, emphasises, through classifying individuals as either male or female, that a whole spectrum of gender variety is disregarded (80-81, qtd. in Harrison;lood-Williams),

Social practices that construct women and men as distinct categories by converting an average difference into a categorial difference – "men are stronger than women" – negate the major pattern of difference that occurs within sexes rather than between them. Gender, in short, actually contradicts sex: it represents a paradox. What sociality constructs is a new fact, in no way implied by the biological condition.

Only the disparities *between* sexes, rather than *within* (my emphasis) sexes are considered, which may lead to the fallacy that all women are completely different than all men. This, in turn, confirms the binary system of sex and gender. Moreover, Connell states that gender is a paradox, which has nothing, or little, to do with

biological preconditions, as it contradicts sex, since not all men are stronger than women. Certainly, there are women who are stronger than some men, which indicates a pattern of difference occurring *within* the sexes, not *between* them. These examples imply that binary oppositions like male and female are socially constructed phantasms, since there is no actual line or boundary of “terminating” being male or female. This assertion will be underlined by the transsexual protagonist Brandon Teena in the analysis of the movie *Boys Don't Cry*.

### **3.4.2. Thinking beyond the binary system – Androgyny**

Since the binary system of gender influences Western societies and contributes to prevalent black and white thinking, there is no “space” for so-called ‘grey-areas’, as already mentioned. This means, if one does not look and feel like a woman, then *HE* [my emphasis] must be a man. However, there are many people who do not identify themselves as either female or male, but as both male and female, like hermaphrodites, intersexuals, as in-between, like transsexuals, or even as ‘non-gendered’. What about these individuals? Since Virginia Woolf’s masterpiece *Orlando* (1928) has contributed significantly to both Literary and Gender Studies, I am going to refer briefly to a relevant passage from the book,

And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censoring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed; for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman (113).

*Orlando* tells the story of a young man, living in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since Queen Elizabeth I grants him eternal life, the narrative extends over a period of 300 years. The remarkable fact is that Orlando changes his sex from male to female and appears as a woman after returning to England from an ambassadorship in Constantinople. The quotation already includes the term ‘ambiguity’, which indicates a certain insecurity concerning Orlando’s gender. Accordingly, he/she could be categorised as neither male nor female, however, Orlando also might belong to “both sexes equally”, which underlines the androgynous element the novel comprises. *Orlando* serves as a pioneering example of how the gender binary has been challenged through the representation of an androgynous character in a novel.

It is important to consider that gender is not only a theoretical term in order to differentiate between the biological term ‘sex’ and the culturally constructed notion of ‘gender’, but it is also a political concept which “determines what is possible in the

social and material world“ (Tauchert 183). It is a sad fact that, in today's Western society, one is either male or female, everyone who is not able to categorise him- or herself according to these parameters, gets marginalised from normative humanity. As Tauchert explains (183),

If gender is only a symptom of discourse, the suffering of the subject that does not fit the binary gender model is as real as any suffering, and the pains caused directly and indirectly through the discourses of binary gender are insupportable.

Thus, when deconstructing these binary oppositions, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' gender appearance. Consequently, people do not feel the need of conform to either one or the other opposition anymore.

When speaking of overcoming the binary system, I would like to return to Tauchert's second position, “[t]o disturb the binary process by introducing a third [concept]“, which is 'androgyny'. The term 'androgyny' derives from the Greek words *άνήρ* (*anér*, *andr-* meaning 'man') and *γυνή* (*gyné* meaning 'woman') and refers to a combination of both male and female characteristics in terms of fashion, sexual identity, or sexual lifestyle<sup>32</sup>. It may also refer to intersex people and transsexuals. From a psychological point of view, Bem, Spencer, and Berzins developed a two-dimensional model of sex roles, which conceives of masculinity and femininity as separately distributed, whereby persons of either gender can be high or low on each dimension because “they are independent domains, and an individual is considered sex typed to the degree that the person endorses sex-stereotyped characteristics of one variety to the relative exclusion of sex-stereotyped characteristics of the other variety” (Kelly; Worell 1102). This means that 'androgynous' can be classified as being equipped with both, relatively balanced proportions of masculine- and feminine-typed characteristics. There are many other ways of measuring, or describing androgyny from a psychological point of view, however, further elaborations would go beyond the scope of this discussion.

Androgynous individuals, however, cannot be easily categorised according to the typical masculine and feminine gender roles imposed by society. “Many androgynes identify as being mentally "between" woman and man, or as entirely genderless. They may identify as non-gendered, gender-neutral, agendered, between genders, genderqueer, multigendered, intergendered, pangender or gender

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<sup>32</sup> Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 48.

fluid”<sup>33</sup>. As already indicated at the beginning of this subchapter, the refusal of identifying oneself in terms of gender is one crucial hallmark of Queer theory. The scholar Fritz John Porter Poole states that androgyny can be confusing for dualistically oriented societies (197),

Images of androgyny are often an epistemological puzzle for societies in which a cultural dichotomy of male and female seems altogether “natural” and anchored to the very foundations of human reality in which a duality of gender is firmly inscribed in culture, nature, and society.

Consequently, the notion of androgyny provides a crucial way of overcoming the prevalent binary system, since it blurs, transcends, mixes, etc. the distinct boundaries of maleness and femaleness. As the internet blogger Thomas Gramstad states, “We must thus move beyond androgyny, in order to overcome the cultural and social schizophrenia of gender dualism”<sup>34</sup>. Consequently, androgyny supports the refusal of essentialised gender categories and strives for a postmodern, fluid, and multi-faceted account of gender. Or, as Poole puts it convincingly (198-201),

Thus, constructs of gender, constituted through cultural representations or schemas in their social instantiations, are complex, polyvalent signifiers without a singular, inevitable, and essential link to a fixed referent. Particular gender constructions become momentarily crystallized in their contexts of social embeddedness, only to be disarticulated and rearticulated in kaleidoscopic patterns as they are refracted through the lenses of new discursive figurations of different cultural images under other social circumstances. [...] The notion of androgyny evokes a relaxation of the rigidities of gender stereotypes, an opening of gender boundaries, a fusion or reconnection of gender attributes, and, thus, an enablement of some genre of appropriation by one gender of an ‘other’.

Poole designates gender as a “*combinatoire* of profound, multifaceted, polysemic, and often elusive complexity – neither monolithic, nor fixed, nor stable, and immutable” (198). From this quotation it is obvious, that Poole argues for a kaleidoscopic, meaning multi-faceted, multiple, varying, and especially anti-essentialist conception of gender. According to him, constructs of gender do not rely on one fixed referent, but they get rearticulated again and again, depending on various social circumstances and new discursive formations. Androgyny, however, does not only promote an anti-essentialist view of gender, but, as already mentioned, strives for an escape out of the prevalent gender duality. Poole describes androgyny as a “chiaroscuro of foregrounded and backgrounded imagery” and believes that

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<sup>33</sup> <http://androgynous.askdefine.com/>

<sup>34</sup> <http://folk.uio.no/thomas/gnd/androgyny.html>

androgyny is able to “open an imaginative path“ (201) towards overcoming gender binaries. Many films, frequently belonging to the genre of Queer Cinema, illustrate how rigid conceptions of gender can be challenged. Therefore, the fourth chapter provides an historical overview of significant queer movies.

## 4. THE HISTORY OF QUEER CINEMA

In order to support the theoretical framework in the first part of the thesis, appropriate examples will illustrate how gender is performed, to what extent gender binaries are challenged or even subverted, and in what ways gender roles are being represented (among other aspects). In doing so, exemplary movie scenes and sequences will be taken from three significant films originating from the field of Queer Cinema. First of all, I am going to give an historical account of the development of Queer Cinema, focussing on America, for the purpose of providing the reader with background information.

As a starting point, it needs to be clarified why critics do not use the designation 'Lesbian and Gay cinema' instead of 'Queer Cinema'. Sean Griffin and Harry Benshoff explain that they rather use the latter denotation because the former would be too excluding. It does not cover other non-straight sexualities, such as transsexuals, bisexuals, asexuals, drags, transvestites, and so on. The term "Queer Film Study" comprises all non-straight individuals and "refers to a mode of cultural analysis derived from queer theory" (Griffin; Benshoff 1), which will also be my tool for the analysis. Moreover, Benshoff and Griffin ascribe 'queer' a subversive meaning, namely "[it] should be understood as a theoretical approach to rethinking human sexuality" (1), which may lead to candour, an open mindset, more tolerance and respect for individuals who do not fit into the 'heterosexual matrix', as Butler would call it. Moreover, queer has a cross-cultural function because it also describes non-heteronormative sexualities that exist in other cultures throughout the world (2). To put it in a nutshell, as Griffin and Benshoff point out, "Queer is descriptive of the textual (and extra-textual) spaces wherein normative heterosexuality is threatened, critiqued, camped up, or shown to be an unstable performative identity" (2).

For the purpose of showing how contemporary queer films differ from former movies, for example, produced in the 1960s, I will give a brief historical account of queer cinema. Certainly, this elucidation could be expanded endlessly, for instance, by considering aspects like geography (e.g., What are the differences between American, Asian, and European queer cinema?), or distinctions in genre (e.g. Queer Noir, New Queer Cinema, Physique Cinema, Lesbian Independent Film, and so on. Or can be a particular film genre considered as queer because of monstrous sexualities, or new types of sexual identities?), or variations in terms of actors (e.g.



Does it make any difference in terms of “authentic homosexual behaviour” if the actor is homosexual in real life, or not?). One could extend this “possible field of analysis” infinitely, however, such an expanded film analysis would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Another reason why there will be a focus on American Queer Cinema, is that the selected movies have been produced and released in the United States. For further information concerning non-Western queer cinematic productions, see Greyson and Parmar (1993), Jackson and Tapp (1997), and Dyer (2003) (2).

As already stated, when motion picture technology emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, terms like ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’ have been coined as well. Consequently, film can be regarded as a suitable medium to look at how sexuality and sexual identities have been represented over 100 years (Benshoff; Griffin 6). Surprisingly, one of the oldest movies ever been produced, can be read in a queer way. *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894) is a film directed by William Dickson, which shows two men dancing intimately together (6). Although there is no direct evidence that these two men are homosexual, this scene conveys a queer notion, since two men are dancing together, contrary to heteronormative expectations.

Speaking of heteronormativity, the display of heterosexuality became essential with regard to the movies’ storyline. When films developed into “mass-produced studio-based productions” (6), at least one relationship or romance between a man and a woman was included, which is still the case today. On the contrary, queer characters were either extremely rare featured, or not at all. If a movie depicted one or more queer character(s), it was usually done in a ridiculous, or degrading way at the cost of the presented queer character. As Benshoff and Griffin underline, “[T]hey were usually relegated to minor parts and/or were the butt of jokes, by contrast reinforcing the central and socially appropriate nature of the heterosexual love story” (6). Thus, this way of representation did not only have the effect of degrading the queer character(s), but it also reinforced heterosexuality as the “norm”, since queerness was/is regarded as deviant, weird, and odd.

In addition, Benshoff and Griffin observe that queer characters frequently have been represented according to the 20<sup>th</sup> century model of homosexuality as gender inversion. This means that lesbians were often displayed in a rather masculine manner, for example, wearing men’s clothes, having professions that are associated with men, exhibiting masculine behaviour, and so on. They were given names like

'butch' or 'bull dykes', which are slang words designating women who behave and act in a very masculine way<sup>35</sup>. Outward appearance, bodily movements and language also plays a role. Gay men, on the other hand, were depicted in the exact opposite way: effeminate, emotional, vulnerable, whiny, commonly referred to as 'sissies' or 'pansies' (6). Early films featuring effeminate men are *Algie the Miner* (1912), *The Soilers* (1923), and *Wanderer of the West* (1927). They were tolerated by the film industry since they had no sexuality, at least, did not live it, and were not addressed as homosexuals (Jay Presson Allen, qtd. in *The Celluloid Closet* 08:29). Butches and dykes represented in early cinema were relatively rare. *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) is one example, which shows female actors wearing pants and turning into women-chasing danglers after eating magical sex-changing seeds.

There are also some instances of queer characters represented in early films which have been produced outside of Hollywood. I am going to refer to a few examples very briefly, since my focus is on the United States, as I have stated. *Vingarne* (*The Wings* 1916, directed by homosexual, Swedish filmmaker Mauritz Stiller) and *Michael* (1924, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, filmed in Germany) are both based on the novel *Mikaël* written by Herman Bang (Dyer 8-22, qtd. in Benshoff; Griffin 6). One of the first movies portraying homosexual characters in sympathetic terms, rather than in a negative way, is the German film *Anders als die Anderen* (*Different From the Others* 1919). It was produced and directed by Richard Oswald together with the early gay rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld during the Weimar Republic. Another very famous German film dealing with the topic of homosexuality is Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform* 1931). As the title indicates, it features a schoolgirl who has a crush on her teacher (6). One of the major differences concerning European and American queer films is that the former would have been censored "in ways that elided their homosexual content" (6).

From 1930 onwards, films made by the 'dream factory' have been heavily censored. This was due to the fact that the Hollywood Production Code, which was a set of moral guidelines, has been written in 1930 and enforced in 1934. It regulated the content of Hollywood films from 1934 to the mid-1960s (Benshoff; Griffin 9, 2006). Homosexuality, among revenge (since it was regarded as glorification of violence), interracial relationships and marriage, open mouthed kissing, lustful embraces, seduction, rape, abortion, prostitution, bestiality, blasphemy, and many other

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/butch>

“perverse and deviant” occurrences, or ways of life were censored or completely banned<sup>36</sup>. However, Hollywood found a way “to suggest that certain characters might be queer” (Benshoff; Griffin 9, 2006). Thus, one possibility of showing, or rather “indicating” homosexual behaviour/relationships was by means of the “gender-inversion stereotype”, meaning to depict “butches” and “pansies” (Benshoff; Griffin 7). Actors like Edward Everett Horton (*The Gay Divorce* 1934), Franklin Pangborn (*Easy Living* 1937), or Grady Sutton (*Anchors Aweigh* 1945) played these caricatures. Frequently, such censored films included roles, also minor roles, which were “quasi-lesbian”. Examples of such roles are prison matron, elderly, single women who have never been married, for instance, spinsters (since a spinster is an unmarried woman, she could be a lesbian, according to the stereotype), or aunts (Benshoff; Griffin 7). Thereby, the Hollywood Production Code could have been evaded because no obvious marker of homosexual desire was shown. Hence, “Hollywood had learned to write movies between the lines and some members of the audience had learned to watch it that way” (*The Celluloid Closet* 31:33-31:43). As Benshoff and Griffin explain convincingly, “[C]lassical Hollywood films used connotation rather than denotation when dealing with onscreen homosexuality, and thus created moments and characters that were more queer than specifically homosexual” (7). In order to grasp this assertion, the meaning of both ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’ needs to be clarified. Generally, it can be said that denotation refers to the term’s literal meaning, whereas connotation describes it in associative terms. From a linguistic perspective, denotation refers to the relationship between a linguistic sign and its referent (Jackson; Amvela 57). Hence, denotations are similar to dictionary entries (Kim 24). Concerning connotation, Jackson and Amvela elaborate, “[C]onnotations constitute additional properties of lexemes<sup>37</sup>, e.g. poetic, slang, baby language, biblical, casual, colloquial, formal, humorous, legal, literary, rhetorical” (Jackson; Amvela 57). Moreover, connotation is closely linked to synonymy (57). A synonym is a term which is tightly connected with another word. For example, “Nixon’s name has become synonymous with political scandal”<sup>38</sup>. Basically, two terms that are synonymous have the same meaning. Thus, connotations can be compared with synonyms. It is important to consider, as Jackson and Amvela state, “[S]ynonyms may have the same denotation, i.e. cognitive, or conceptual meaning, but differ in connotation”

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<sup>36</sup> <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/UsefulNotes/TheHaysCode?from=Main.HaysCode>

<sup>37</sup> A ‘lexeme’ is a “minimal meaningful unit of language” (<http://www.wordreference.com/definition/lexeme>).

<sup>38</sup> Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, “synonymous” 1685.

(57), because denotation refers to a term's literal/actual meaning, as I already explained, and synonyms are different terms which have the same meaning. However, a term's connotative meaning(s) may differ from its denotative meaning(s), since it may convey different associations and even feelings (positive and negative). Thus, connotations are subjective meanings and may vary from person to person. They "stem from the interpreter's cultural experiences with a referent represented by the sign" (Kim 24). For example, everyone knows that 'home' is a shelter, or a place to live. 'Shelter' and 'a place to live' are two denotative meanings of 'home'. On a connotative level, 'home' means for most people 'safety', 'paradise', whereas it may mean to other people 'instability', or even 'hell' (Kim 24). By referring back to Benshoff and Griffin's quotation, this means that directors did not describe or refer to homosexuality in explicit terms (denotative level), but they used connotative signifiers (for example by means of the spinster, who may be connoted with a lesbian) in order to convey a queer notion. Thus, the characters in the censored films were not described as openly homosexual, which bestows them a queer undertone, as they were not ascribed to any sexual orientation. This way of suggesting homosexuality is often called 'connotative homosexuality' (Benshoff; Griffin 9, 2006).

Additionally, such 'gender-benders' (persons who subvert and challenge gender cues) (Goldie 270) frequently signified evil and played villains, heretics, monsters, etc. For example, in "suspense thrillers (as in *Rebecca* [1940] and *Laura* [1944]), in horror films (as in *The Bride of Frankenstein* [1935] and *Dracula's Daughter* [1936]), or in World War II films (as in *Saboteur* [1942])" (Benshoff; Griffin 7). Unfortunately, such villainous, filmic representations of queer characters certainly promote negative stereotypes.

In the second chapter, I briefly referred to a particular decoding strategy called 'camp'. It was often used by Queer theorists and other scholars because it "[revealed queer aspects] in ways that often went beyond (and sometimes against) what their makers explicitly intended" (Benshoff, Griffin 7). Hence, camp provides a possibility to read a cultural text against the grain. It challenges heterocentrist film culture and, on the one hand, celebrates larger than life Hollywood characters and their exaggeratedness, and, on the other hand, it satirises them. As Susan Sontag claims, "Camp taste loves the unnatural, the exaggerated and the artificial" (qtd. In Everett 96). Genres like the musical and the melodrama, including actors such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Lana Turner, Judy Garland, and

Maria Montez were favoured by queer moviegoers because of the “visual and stylistic excess” displayed in the genres by the movie stars (Benshoff; Griffin 7). Also, the musical genre creates a hyperreal world in which almost anything is possible<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, Benshoff and Griffin state,

The overly mannered performances of “natural femininity” by these (and other) stars, and the overwrought flair of these (and other) genres in depicting heterosexual romance, allowed some audiences the opportunity to view gender and sexuality as performative, unnatural, and queer (7).

Furthermore, camp provided a way to escape the hostile, homophobic world by functioning as a secret code among queers. For instance, many gay men referred to each other as “friends of Dorothy”, which is an allusion to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), containing many campy elements (7).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Production Code was amended, which resulted in allowing topics to reach the screen having been prohibited before. In 1961, homosexuality was allowed onscreen on condition that it was done with, “care, discretion, and restraint” (Benshoff; Griffin 8). This reformation of the Production Code seemed to be beneficial for the lesbian and gay community, however, only at a first glance. Films, such as *Victim* (1961), which presented prejudices against homosexuals as morally questionable, were rejected by the representatives of the Production Code. On the other hand, movies suggesting that homosexuality would lead to tragedy and disaster were approved by the Code. In *The Children’s Hour* (1962), for example, a young woman commits suicide after confessing that she is a lesbian (8). As Benshoff and Griffin convincingly state, “Steeped within the era’s medical discourse of “homosexuality-as-disease”, such films routinely implied that queer lives were empty, lonely, pitiful, and all too often deadly” (8).

Unfortunately, queer characters continued to be regarded as either ridiculous subjects, or dangerous villains. Homosexual innuendo became an established feature of 1960s sex comedies, such as *That Touch of Mink* (1962), *A Very Special Favor* (1965), and *The Gay Deceivers* (1969). Rock Hudson, who played Paul Chadwick in *A Very Special Favor*, once stated<sup>40</sup>,

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> “Bed Scenes Aren’t Fun Says Actor Rock Hudson”, *Daily Record*, March 31, 1965. p. 4

I think the public is weary. The cycle has been pushed about as far as it can go, and I think light comedy is on the wane. The boundaries have been extended almost to the limit, with producers trying to see how dirty it can get. [A *Very Special Favor*] was filthy. I thought it was filthy when I read the script, and I still think it's filthy.

In action and adventure films, queer characters were depicted in villainous roles, for example, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *From Russia with Love* (1963), and *Caprice* (1967). Two of the most renowned Hollywood films dealing with homosexuality in least insulting ways than the previous mentioned ones are *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *The Boys in the Band* (1970). What differentiates those films from others during this era, is that they deal with “issues of romance, the closet, the possibility of blackmail and job loss, internalized homophobia, and the burgeoning (but still mostly underground) gay and lesbian culture of many cities” (Benshoff; Griffin 8). Although these films promoted certain negative stereotypes of queers, they, at least, represented some aspects occurring in real life situations homosexuals had to face. Also, no one of the characters died at the end.

When in 1968 the Hollywood Production Code was replaced by the MPAA Ratings System, a soft-core sexploitation emerged in cinemas (Benshoff; Griffin 9). Even though such soft-core films aimed at heterosexual, male spectators, sometimes, “female same-sex or gender-bending moments” were included (9). Around 1970, physique films (which were made by men for men and revolve around the objectification of male bodies, showing them in homoerotic poses) became available via mail order and developed into “feature-length hard-core gay-male pornographic films” (9).

Avant-garde or experimental filmmaking can also be considered as queer, since it frequently challenges monogamous heteronormativity depicted in Hollywood films. Such movies often explored polymorphous sexual desires and were considered to be open to various interpretations (since they did not tell explicit stories, contrary to mainstream Hollywood films) and to promoted “queer border-crossing possibilities” (9). One of the first experimental avant-garde films dealing with homosexuality was the surreal psychodrama *Fireworks* (1947) by Kenneth Anger. It is about a young man's homosexual desires and caught the audience's attention because of its explicit treatment of homosexuality and sado-masochism (Hoberman et. al. 55). According to Ruby Rich, *Fireworks* is not that far from a physique film. She describes the film as a “precursor to an American Arts tradition [...] and as a bridge film for a gay sensibility”.

(qtd. in *Fabulous!* 03:47-04:10). It is notable that many experimental avant-garde films were related to the Underground Film movement. Avant-garde filmmakers like Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, or the Kuchar Brothers produced films that were queer in content and style, leaving the storyline open for various interpretations, including campy elements, playing around with gender representations, in short, parodying style and conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. Andy Warhol provides significant examples of such underground movies (*Haircut* [1963], *Couch* [1964], and *Lonesome Cowboys* [1967]), since his actors (many of them were drag queens or hustlers who just posed for the camera and did not do anything more) called themselves 'Superstars' and "behaved as if they were Hollywood royalty" (Benshoff; Griffin 9). Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1962) is another example of how avant-garde filmmakers satirised the 'dream factory' because it features characters like slave girls, vampires, Roman guards, and so on, "and overly dramatic music drawn from exotic Hollywood melodramas; it too was queer in content and style, campily framing gender and sexuality as nothing but performative parodies" (9).

Independent and experimental lesbian filmmaking came to be known a few years later than underground movies directed at gay men. Directors like Jan Oxenbergh (*Home Movie* [1973]) and Greta Schiller (*Greta's Girls* [1978]) were one of the pioneering filmmakers that focused on the growing lesbian feminist communities of the 1970s. Barbara Hammer, however, is regarded as the most successful lesbian movie maker from the seventies (Benshoff; Griffin 9). Since she provides the spectator with various elements and techniques that are perfect examples of queer cinematic practices, Hammer can look back on a prolific career,

[Hammer's films] cross borders (between documentary, fiction, and experimental filmmaking), and focus on the complexities of human sexuality – especially the ways in which those sexualities have been socially constructed across time and place. Her early work, including *Superdyke* (1975), *Women I Love* (1976), and *Sync Touch* (1981) explores issues of love, sex, identity, humor, community, relationships, nature, and spirituality (9-10).

Thereby, Hammer includes many features and issues in her films, which bestows them a queer notion, or, in fact, makes them queer. Being one of the first documentary about North American queers, *Word is Out* (1977) is noteworthy, as it "remains a fascinating time-capsule of the nascent gay liberation movement" (10). The directors of *Word is Out* strove for an authentic representation of lesbian and gay lives (Arthur Dong; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 08:52). The documentary is in accordance with

the 'time spirit' of the 1970s, conveying that homosexual people should be open and proud about who they are, which was a dramatic shift (Michelangelo Signorile; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 10:11). Thus, documentaries have played an important role in the political movement of the queer community.

From the 1970s onwards, there was a growing awareness that queer people and 'queerness' needs to be represented in academic, literary discourses. Feminist and leftist film journals, like *Women in Film* and *Jump Cut* started to have a critical look at the filmic representation of lesbians and gay men. Moreover, "for the first time in history, queers began to lobby the entertainment industries for better, more well-rounded representations of themselves" (Benshoff; Griffin 10). One of the first books published, addressing onscreen homosexuality was Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1972). Another well known book dealing with cinematic representations of homosexuality is Vito Russo's groundbreaking *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, which was published in 1981 and revised in 1987. One reason why this book has received so many positive reviews is because it surveys over 80 years of film history, analysing how lesbians and gay men had been depicted in the movies (Benshoff; Griffin 10).

Although homosexuality was presented more frequent and positive in film journals and books, and experimental filmmaking portrayed myriad sexual forms and desires, it still had a marginal position in Hollywood. Overtly queer Hollywood films, such as *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) or *Something for Everyone* (1970) even "became the targets of homophobic critical backlash" (10). Besides Bob Fosse, who directed the musical film *Cabaret* (1972) and presented heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual central characters, other filmmakers avoided the issue of homosexuality (Benshoff; Griffin 10).

In the 1980s, the stereotype of the 'queer psycho/villain' experiences a 'remake'. Movies like *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Cruising* (1980), and *The Fan* (1981) again featured queers as psycho-killers and villains. In contrast, however, Hollywood published a few films featuring likeable queer characters, maybe in order to compensate for the "old queer psycho-killer stereotype" (10). *The World According to Garp* (1982) narrates the story of a male-to-female transsexual, or *Personal Best* (1982) deals with a lesbian relationship and issues of bisexuality in sympathetic ways. As author Susie Bright states with regard to *Personal Best*, "There's a comfort with female nudity, female girlishness and kind of girly bonding, that, it can be sexy, it



can be [...] even erotic" (*The Celluloid Closet* 01:21:06-01:21:13). Benshoff and Griffin, however, regard the old-fashioned musical sex farce *Victor/Victoria* (1982) as the most successful movie addressing queer issues, of this era (10). It presented Julie Andrews as a cross-dressing night club dancer and Robert Preston as her extravagant, blazingly gay best friend. With the advent of 'gender-bending' bands and musicians, like Eurythmics and Prince, it appeared as if Western culture was ready for new, queer forms of sexual desire. However, the emerging AIDS crisis was changing the new positive sentiment concerning homosexuality. As Benshoff and Griffin state (11),

[T]he growing AIDS crisis had the opposite effect on mainstream heterosexual culture, producing a hysteria around homosexuality and causing a backlash to the idea of gay and lesbian rights.

How Hollywood was dealing with this "hysteria around homosexuality" owing to the AIDS crisis will be elaborated in the following chapter.

#### **4.1. New Queer Cinema**

All through the winter, spring, summer, and autumn, the message was loud and clear: queer is hot. [...] At Sundance, in the heart of Utah's Mormon country, there was even a panel dedicated to the queer subject, hosted by yours truly (Ruby Rich 53).

In contrast to Hollywood (which ignored the AIDS crisis except within the metaphoric spaces of the horror and slasher film), independent filmmakers were showing great interest in the issue of AIDS. Rich states that the AIDS crisis has led to a new kind of film practice, "one which takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. It's art for our sake, and it's powerful" (55). In fact, Aaron states that "NQC cannot be removed from the context of the AIDS epidemic" (6). She regards New Queer Cinema as an "art-full manifestation", which has resulted from the AIDS activism (6).

Producers were developing various new images of queer lives and the complications involved therein. Examples are *Buddies* (1985) directed by Arthur J. Bressan, *Parting Glances* (1986), directed by Bill Sherwood (the central character is living with AIDS), and *Desert Hearts* (1985), directed by Donna Deitch (She intended to create a love story that reflected lesbians' experiences, "I was looking for reality and authenticity", qtd. in *Fabulous!* 23:16-23:25). Also, numerous documentaries and video work, done by AIDS activists, emerged, for instance, *Common Threads: Stories*

*from the Quilt* (1989), *Before Stonewall* (1989), *Silent Pioneers* (1985), and *Silverlake Life* (1993). This footage served educational and informative purposes and resurfaced “forgotten aspects of lesbian and gay history” (Benshoff; Griffin 11). The documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) is particularly noteworthy because it shows how the United States’ first openly gay City Supervisor came to power and was eventually murdered by a right-wing politician. Remarkably, this documentary was awarded an Oscar. A last video documentary, which is worth to mention, is *Tongues United* (1989) by Marlon Riggs because it contains many queer elements in terms of form. With regard to its content, the documentary tells the story of a black gay man in America in the 1980s (Benshoff; Griffin 11). Concerning form, *Tongues United* combines various factors, for example, “personal history, fictional vignettes, and cinéma-vérité documentary footage with dance, poetry, and music” (11).

The films and documentaries I briefly discussed in the first paragraph led the basis for the formation of a new genre: The New Queer Cinema (the term was coined by Ruby Rich, Aaron 3). Many filmmakers were inspired by the AIDS crisis and concentrated on aspects examined by Queer theorists. Particularly at the beginning of the 1990s, to be precise, in 1991 and 1992, activists and/or directors like Todd Haynes, Tom Kalin, Jennie Livingston, Gregg Araki, Derek Jarman, Laurie Lynd, and Gus Van Sant produced movies like *Poison*, *Swoon*, *Paris is Burning*, *The Living End*, *Edward II*, *R.S.V.P.*, and *My Own Private Idaho* (11). Several queer films were introduced at Toronto’s Festival of Festivals (Rich 53). Owing to the fact that Christine Vachon made significant New Queer films, she has become one of the leading figures in the movement and has been termed “Godmother of New Queer Cinema” (11).

Since New Queer Cinema comprises “postmodern ideas and aesthetic styles”, it contains the term ‘queer’ in its designation, as Queer theory does so itself (Benshoff; Griffin 11). Rich states that those films were doing something new, “renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image” (53). Just as they frequently challenge essentialist models of sexual identity and show that labels like ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ are insufficient when it comes to describe specific sexual identities being in between those two terms. Moreover, Benshoff and Griffin state,

The films also regularly explore sexuality in relation to gender, race, class, age, etc. – In order to show how other discourses of social difference inflect our understanding of sexuality (11).

Mostly, New Queer Cinema films are characteristic of blending styles and genres, which means that they transcend conventions by including both minimalism and excess, appropriation and pastiche, combining Hollywood and avant-garde styles, and even mingling fictional and documentary style. Or, as Rich explains new queer films, or “Homo Pomo”, as she calls it,

Yet they [new queer films] are [...] united by a common style. Call it “Homo Pomo”: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. [...] Above all, they’re full of pleasure (54).

Thereby, the designation ‘queer’ is totally appropriate because of the mentioned features. Examples of typical New Queer movies are *Zero Patience* (1993, directed by John Greyson), which is a ghost story musical about AIDS, or *Watermelon Woman* (1995, directed by Cheryl Dunye), because it fluctuates between queer visibility and historical erasure. “[It] is a mock documentary about an African American lesbian actress who played “Mammy” roles in 1930s Hollywood” (Benshoff; Griffin 12). There appeared two types of the mammy icon in Hollywood film (Sims 35). First, there was “the strong-willed, vocally assertive African-American woman who openly voiced displeasure with her employer’s judgement” (Sims 35). The second type was the calm, submissive one who “did not engage her employer in conversation and willingly performed her duties in the employer’s household” (35). Significantly, a mammy should never be confused with a nanny. A mammy was supposed to be always available for her employer, even at the expense of her own family and life. A nanny, on the contrary, is/was regarded as a more prestigious and dignified position, predominantly for whites (37).

Michele Aaron, who also examined New Queer Cinema, identified one characteristic all these new queer films have in common: defiance. She justifies the concept of defiance by giving five examples. First of all, she states that queer films do not only incorporate and give voice to marginalised groups like lesbians and gays, but also to other sub-groups, for instance black people, transsexuals, or prostitutes (3-4). *Tongues United*, for example, deals with black gay male experience and features an interracial couple. *Punks*, directed by Patrik-Ian Polk, also features gay African American men. *My Own Private Idaho* shows male prostitutes playing the leading roles and *Paris is Burning* “attends to the gay and transsexual Hispanic and Latino youth of the New York drag ball scene” (4). Secondly, the characters behave in rather insolent and unapologetic ways. The films even avoid positive imagery, like

in *Swoon*, *Poison* and *The Living End*. The gay male couples at the centre of the films' storyline, who carry out murders and other brutal acts, are glorified (4). *Swoon* was criticised because of a non-positive representation, and there was the sense that lesbians and gays had to show the world that they were as good as straight people (Christine Vachon; qtd. in Fabulous! 38:19-38:29). Third, Aaron states that New Queer Cinema movies breast the sanctity of the past, "especially the homophobic past" (4). She continues by stating that *Edward II*, or *Swoon* revisit historical, homosexual relationships, which did not have been considered by other producers. *Swoon*, for instance, recounts the Leopold and Loeb murder case and *Edward II* retells King Edward's homosexual relationship with Gaveston (4). The fourth aspect concerns the defiance of cinematic conventions in terms of form, content and genre, which, however, I already discussed. Therefore, I will not enter into detail. The last issue Aaron describes in combination with the characteristic facet of defiance and New Queer Cinema is death. She states that there is one strategy to defy death, namely through AIDS. Aaron explains (5),

Death is defied as the life-sentence passed by the disease: the HIV+ leads of *The Living End* instead find the 'time-bomb' to be 'totally' liberating. It is even defied as final: in *Zero Patience* the first victim of AIDS comes back to life.

To conclude her elaboration on queer films and the concept of defiance, Aaron emphasises that defiance is not solely a feature of New Queer Cinema, but it marks those movies as queer.

New Queer Cinema does not only comprise films transgressing assumed essentialist notions of sexuality and identity, but also movies which can be regarded as queer in terms of transgressing formal boundaries and "simple-minded classificatory schemata" (Benshoff; Griffin 12). These include *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Happiness* (1998), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Chuck and Buck* (2000), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). In the late 1990s, some independent films have reached a broader audience than before. The drama *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which features the transgendered Brandon Teena, who was murdered due to his transsexuality, is based on a real story. Owing to the authenticity and brutality the movie shows, it affected many people. It was nominated for several Oscars and Hilary Swank, who was playing Brandon Teena, has won the Oscar for Best Actress (Benshoff, Griffin 12). *Boys Don't Cry* will be analysed in great detail in the following chapter. Other examples are *Far From Heaven* (2002, directed by Todd

Haynes) and *The Hours* (2004). The former was also nominated for several Oscars (12) and the latter “explored the boundaries of female desire and sexual identity across three different historical periods” (12).

Although, Queer Cinema certainly encourages more acceptance and tolerance for ‘the queer community’, some people regard such films more a curse than a blessing. As Benshoff and Griffin state, “The films often anger conservative filmgoers who feel such subjects should remain unspoken” (12). Frequently, critics fear that negative stereotypes, for example, the queer psycho-killer, are rather reinforced than eradicated through queer movies. Moreover, “New Queer Cinema has also been charged with elitism, since it is frequently engaged with issues of queer and postmodern theory” (12). Thus, New Queer films may be difficult to categorise, which is one maxim of Queer theory, as I explained, and many spectators may feel uncomfortable due to the genre’s “squishiness”. As a result, such people prefer “feel good” Hollywood-style movies with happy endings” (12). Consequently, films with a typical “feel good Hollywood ending” are also being made by lesbian and gay independent filmmakers. For example, movies like *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Edge of Seventeen* (1998), and *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998) affirm the conventions of Hollywood narrative form and the genre of the romantic comedy (12). Thereby, lesbian and gay actors are “forced” into heterosexual roles. This, in turn, reinforces the heterosexual matrix. Although, New Queer Cinema films certainly have contributed to foster more tolerance and acceptance for queer people, they have also been criticised by many film and queer theorists because of their exclusivity and their unwarranted optimism. Harry Benshoff continues,

[I]n heralding a minor revolution when a few films do not a movement make; in promoting queer villainy while homophobic violence rages; and in suggesting a queer-friendliness of mass culture when the majority of the audience [...] remain unaltered (qtd. In Aaron 8).

Moreover, as Rich declares, by the end of the 1990s, New Queer Cinema had “drifted” from “radical impulse to niche market with its range of fairly innocuous and often unremarkable films targeting a narrow, rather than all-inclusive, new queer audience” (qtd. In Aaron 8). In fact, it is not until *Boys Don’t Cry* that queerness ‘is in the limelight’ again. Nevertheless, it must be considered that New Queer Cinema “kick-started Hollywood’s awareness of a queerer audience [...] and its appropriation

and dilution of queer matters” (8). The following chapter will illustrate in which ways the ‘dream factory’ has been dealing with queer matters so far.

## 4.2. Queer Hollywood

Particularly from the late 1990s onwards, queer characters and themes were represented in the mainstream in multiple ways. In contrast to former times, they were “no longer consigned to the sole role of gay neighbour (who meets untimely death)” (Aaron 9), nor were they solely featured in secondary roles, but in 1990s Hollywood, homosexuals lived multi-faceted and accomplished lives (9). Moreover, drag queens were pivotal characters in Hollywood comedies, such as, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) and *The Birdcage* (1996) (Benshoff; Griffin 13). Although these movies rather served an entertaining purpose, than a deconstructivist, queering one (for example subverting traditional gender roles), it is important to consider that drag conveys a powerful political statement. Drag queens go out and say, “Go ahead and judge me, I don’t care!” (Randy Barbato; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 14:20-14:28).

In 1993, the drama film *Philadelphia* became a major box-office hit, being one of the first mainstream Hollywood films that deals with AIDS and other taboo issues like homosexuality and homophobia. Although the lesbian noir thriller *Bound* (1996) achieved a success among mainstream audiences, it was criticised for reinforcing the harmful stereotype of the queer person being a devious criminal, just as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Basic Instinct* (1992) did (13). Or, as columnist Michael Musto states, “Hollywood has a way of falling back on its own clichés because they are comfortable, it works for them” (*Fabulous!* 39:34-39:43).

In the late 1990s occurred another new trend. Benshoff and Griffin describe this new trend as a “reworking of the Hollywood buddy film formula” (13), which means that the narrative revolves around a heterosexual female main character accompanied by her gay male best friend. Thus, both women and homosexual men were lured to cinemas. Movies like *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), and *The Next Best Thing* (2000) deal with friendships between straight women and gay men. However, these films tend to concentrate on the female characters being happily married at the end of the movie, rather than on the gay men, which, again reinforces heteronormativity and confirms the typical Hollywood ending (13). Aaron calls such films “queer experiment” because the characters explore their sexuality (9).

Another popular topic in some Hollywood films is repressed homosexuality. *American Beauty* (1999, directed by Sam Mendes) has won five Oscars and portrays how repressed homosexual desires lead to unhappiness, homophobia and even murder (13). This negative representation of homosexual desire is also a topic in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), as Mr. Ripley is smitten with his acquaintance Dickie Greenleaf. The latter is engaged and Ripley is jealous of his fiancée, even fantasises about hitting her. Although these Hollywood mainstream productions finally addressed a broader audience, included a broad range of queer characters, and such queer issues were more common, many moviegoers argued that such representations, as I explained beforehand, are only “new versions of the old killer-queer stereotype” (13).

Despite the fact that Hollywood filmmakers implied more and more the ‘notion of queerness’, they failed to represent explicitly lesbian and gay lives. However, as Benshoff and Griffin state, some movies can be described as queer to the extent that cinematic techniques have been blended, or identities are portrayed as being fluid, or personal difference is celebrated over mindless conformation (Benshoff; Griffin 13). Also, in contrast to the films I mentioned, in which queer characters are portrayed as being evil and hideous, movies like *Addams Family Values* (1993), Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Ed Wood* (1994) turn around the “ordinary” (as it is considered) presentation of the ‘queer killers and heterosexual victims’. They “posit more or less overt queers as heroic and their straight counterparts as villainous or banal” (13). Other films, having been released at the beginning of the 2000s, contain many campy elements, which also conveys a queer notion. Famous for artificial and exaggerated poses, clothes, movements, etc. is *Moulin Rouge* (2001), which was directed by Baz Luhrmann. *Down With Love* (2003, directed by Peyton Reed) is also well known for camp aesthetics. Although Hollywood has become far more comfortable in terms of presenting ‘queerness’ at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (in any way whatsoever) than in former times, it did not include storylines which evolve around the lives of lesbian and gay characters, openly admitting their homo-, bi-, inter-, transsexuality, and so on. This was due to the fact that many producers, actors, and directors were not openly gay and feared homophobic reactions, discrimination, and violence. Unfortunately, these fears reinforced the general attitude that homosexuality is something bad (Benshoff; Griffin 14). Yet, there were a few Hollywood stars, for example, Ellen Degeneres, Nathan Lane, Rupert Everett,

Rosie O'Donnell, and Sir Ian McKellan, who came out of the closet, conveying that being gay or lesbian is nothing to be ashamed of, thereby contributing to a more positive attitude towards homosexuality (14).

Many of these entertainers and actors predominantly work or have worked in theatre or television, "two venues that arguably do a much better job depicting queer lives and issues than does Hollywood film" (14). While some television outlets in various Western countries (Great Britain's Channel Four or Germany's ZDF and RTL) have produced various shows, including either queer characters, or thematising queer issues in order to present a minority and to enable gay and lesbian filmmakers doing projects they can identify with, even American television included queer characters and topics. Paramount examples of American TV series showing lesbian and gay lives certainly are *The L-Word* (Showtime-TV, 2004-2009)<sup>41</sup> and *Queer as Folk* (Showtime-TV, 2000-2005)<sup>42</sup>. To name a few examples, both dramas and comedies like *Roseanne* (ABC-TV, 1988-99), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB-TV, 1997-2003)<sup>43</sup>, *How I met your Mother* (CBS-TV, 2005-)<sup>44</sup>, *Two and A Half Men* (CBS-TV, 2003-)<sup>45</sup>, *Grey's Anatomy* (ABS-TV, 2005-)<sup>46</sup>, and many more feature queer characters. Already in the 80s and 90s, few American TV series included lesbian or gay characters. The comedy *Ellen* (ABC-TV, 1994-1998) set a milestone for the lesbian and gay community when the lead character Ellen Morgan, played by Ellen DeGeneres, came out as lesbian (Benshoff; Griffin 14). The comedy-drama *The Education of Max Bickford* (CBS-TV, 2001-2002) even tells the story about a transgendered character (14). The present hype about reality-shows did not entirely leave lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters unaffected. When looking at the majority of reality shows, it seems to be a new trend to feature one, or more lesbian or gay character(s), at least one who identifies as bisexual. MTV's *The Real World* (2009-) (14) revolves around a group of strangers who are living together in a house for a certain period of time (several months). It depicted various queer individuals, not to forget one of the first homosexual men suffering from AIDS, Pedro Zamora, being portrayed in the media (Benshoff; Griffin 14). Another example is *Survivor* (CBS-TV, 2000-), which featured Richard Hatch, who "proved that a gay man could outwit and outmaneuver an entire cast of heterosexuals" (14). *The Real L-Word* (Showtime-TV,

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0330251/>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0262985/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.allmovie.com/movie/buffy-the-vampire-slayer-tv-series-v174873>

<sup>44</sup> <http://epguides.com/HowIMetYourMother/>

<sup>45</sup> <http://epguides.com/TwoandaHalfMen/>

<sup>46</sup> <http://epguides.com/GreysAnatomy/>



2010-2012) is considered as “real life” counterpart of the TV series *The L-Word* because it is, as the title indicates, a reality show. It was produced by Ilene Chaiken, who is also the director of *The L-Word*<sup>47</sup>. The series follows a group of homosexual and bisexual women in Los Angeles, being described in a promising, exciting way on the show’s homepage<sup>47</sup>,

Smart, gorgeous, and fiercely successful, this fascinating group of ladies is ready to make the scene with their uniquely captivating stories and sizzling drama. From love and lust to family and career, these women know what they want and just how to get it.

Another reality show featuring queer characters produced by MTV is *A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila*. It was aired for the first time in 2007, and the main focus is on the bisexual identified model and television personality Tila Tequila. The peculiar fact about the series is that it can be described as a ‘dating game show’, in which 16 straight men and 16 homosexual women live together in a huge villa, as in *The Real World*, and compete for Tila’s attention and affection<sup>48</sup>. It was followed by the second season called *A Shot at Love II With Tila Tequila* in April 2008<sup>49</sup>. Further reality shows presenting gay characters have been released by the cable network Bravo, including *Gay Weddings* (2002), *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-) (Benshoff; Griffin 14). One last American reality show I would like to refer to briefly is *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-). The show is presented by the famous drag queen RuPaul, as its title indicates, in which he searches for the next American top drag queen<sup>50</sup>. Since the series deals with drag queens, and drag discloses the performative aspect of gender, as already explained, this reality show is a good example, which demonstrates that American reality television programming definitely includes queer individuals. If all these characters in reality shows still identify themselves as homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, etc., when the camera is turned off, or if they only perform a certain role, is a separate question.

Despite the fact that heteronormative imperatives are still in control of the present media landscape, queer movies, TV series, reality shows, blogs, videos, YouTube Channels etc. dealing with queer issues accelerate in number and popularity. Technological advances and developments, such as global satellite networks, have certainly contributed to a global distribution of all kinds of media

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.sho.com/sho/the-real-l-word/about>

<sup>48</sup> <http://realitytv.about.com/od/mtvrealityshows/p/TilaMTV.htm>

<sup>49</sup> [www.mtv.com/shows/tila\\_tequila/season\\_2/series.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/shows/tila_tequila/season_2/series.jhtml)

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1353056/>

content, as Benshoff and Griffin state, “This development (along with the rise of video cassettes, DVDs, and the Internet) has made queer film work much more widely accessible” (14). Cable channels like IFC (the Independent Film Channel) and the Sundance Channel regularly broadcast queer films and documentaries (14). There has been produced a wide range of different types of films, series, programs, shows, and formats thematising queer lives and/or other aspects. Such include miniseries, original series, made-for-television-movies, and theatrical adaptations (for example, *More Tales of the City* [1998], *Common Ground* [2000], *If These Walls Could Talk 2* [2003], *The Laramie Project* [2002], *Normal* [2003], *Soldier’s Girl* [2003], and *Angels in America* [2003]) (14). By now, there are even YouTube channels, for example, *Queer Cinema* (Pro-Fun Media)<sup>51</sup>, or *Queer as a Cat*<sup>52</sup>, which offer selected queer films for free, the latest movie trailers and show videos that critically deal with notions like asexuality, gender neutrality, gender ambiguity, coming out, and so on. Computer games like *The SIMS* can also be considered as queer, as one is free to create a fictional character of any colour, sexuality, and gender (Benshoff; Griffin 11, 2006). In contrast to former times, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, asexual, etc. identified people are provided with multiple opportunities to watch queer films of different kinds, which is a major step forward for the queer community. One perfect example showing that, nowadays, there are many opportunities to tell one’s story, in manners whatsoever, has provided Jonathan Caouette with his self-made, autobiographical documentary film *Tarnation* (2003). It gives a detailed and precise insight into Caouette’s life, growing up with his mentally ill mother and comprises over 20 years of lifetime video material: old home films, answering machine tapes, telegrams and letters, photographs, clippings, recent video footage, a video diary and printed titles that summarise and explain his situation<sup>53</sup>. With a video camera, Caouette filmed himself, dressed up and played various characters. As Roger Ebert elaborates, “[W]e see him at 11, dressed as a woman, performing an extraordinary monologue of madness and obsession. [...] We see Jonathan not only raising himself, but essentially inventing himself”<sup>53</sup>. He once stated, “I think filmmaking literally saved my life because the camera for me became the sort of weapon or shield, in a way that I could sort of make sense of my own life” (Jonathan Caouette; qtd. in *Fabulous!* 01:13:00-01:13:08). He denotes the documentary as an “expression

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDqglvEvPsWp5n859Sa7xcQ>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoV4vbrQOeuR6dKi0FgZgeQ>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tarnation-2004>

of queer human condition“ (*Fabulous!* 01:14:04). *Tarnation* was made at a budget of \$218 and edited with the free iMovie software on Caouette’s computer. The fact that he came out as gay is not the only reason why I consider it as an example of contemporary queer documentary film. It can also be classified as queer because of Caouette’s exceptional filming methods and techniques. He used overlapping wipes, dissolves, saturation, split screens, multiple panes, graphics, and complex montages<sup>53</sup>. Thus, it is hard to classify. Through this experimentation and mixing of techniques, styles, and methods, queerness is conveyed. *Tarnation* achieved considerable mainstream success, as it has won eight awards and received five nominations<sup>54</sup>.

However, we must take into account ‘the other side of the coin’. Many critics argue that pushing Queer Cinema from the margin into the centre, meaning into the mainstream, will have retrogressive consequences (Aaron 198),

What we must not forget [...] is that the critical power of queerness, its sheer force, is not to do with content so much as its stance. [...] Queer demands a rethink. [...] As queerness moves into the centre of mainstream production, it inevitably loses its edge. As long as this edge — this critical questioning, this anti-conservatism, this antagonistic impulse — exists and thrives elsewhere, then all manifestations of a (new) queer culture can be welcomed unhesitatingly.

Thus, Aaron claims that queerness needs to maintain its critical edge and emphasises the rebellious attitude queer entails. In what ways queerness, its critical edge and power is portrayed, will be illustrated in the following chapter.

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390538/awards>

## 5. ANALYSIS OF FILMS – METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

There are two ways to dismiss gay film: one is to say, “Oh, it’s just a gay film”; the other, to proclaim, “Oh, it’s a great film, it just happens to be gay” (Richard Dyer, qtd. in Rich 58).

After the theoretical introduction into the history of Queer Cinema, an analysis of the selected movies will follow. In order to do so, useful theoretical methods, tools, and techniques must be introduced. Certainly, there are various approaches and theories concerning film studies, due to the prescribed, limited scope of this thesis, however, I will only apply the most useful method(s). Film theorist Michele Aaron convincingly argues that queer film theory has become indispensable because of the emergence of Queer Cinema. She has identified three levels or techniques on which film theorists are able to analyse their queer text(s).

First, as the critical exploration of queer imagery and directors: in other words, the wave of films provided a focus for those cinema scholars among the expanding audience. Second, as a rereading and reclaiming of classical texts: a retrospective queering of film history. Third, as a discussion of queer spectatorship: what these queer texts reveal about the spectator’s experience of cinema (10).

As already indicated, I will concentrate on the queer imagery, meaning on significant scenes and sequences I selected from the movies. Besides the filmic, analytical aspects and techniques, I will read the three selected movies from a queer perspective, or viewing position (Which is not so surprising, since they belong to the genre of Queer Cinema). That is to say, “[a perspective] that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality” (Benshoff; Griffin 10, 2006). Thus, I will analyse how gender is presented in terms of outward appearance, like clothes, style and behaviour, for instance, gestures, bodily and facial expressions. Hair design, costume, and makeup can also typify a character as a ‘gender’ bender and/or queer. Benshoff and Griffin argue that male characters are frequently represented in frilly clothing, obvious makeup, and noticeable hair cuts, whereas queer women are often retrenched in costume, makeup, and hair design. As they continue more precisely, “In many films, they reject traditionally feminine fashion for a sparse, harsh look of plain gray dresses, sensible shoes, and short or pulled-back hair” (15, 2006). Queer characters are also often portrayed having particular objects, “props that seem to define something about their sexuality” (15-16, 2006), or items that are regarded as

usually belonging to the opposite sex. Those are, for example, handbags carried by men, or women with a baseball bat (2006, 16). One final characteristic of suggesting queerness is music. In *The Maltese Falcon*, “funny, almost feminine-sounding music is heard in conjunction with the onscreen appearance of an effeminate fop” (Richard Dyer; qtd. in *The Celluloid Closet* 41:05). Frequently, male characters who are presented in conjunction with music of Madonna, Lady Gaga, Gloria Gaynor, and Cher are associated with male homosexuality, as female characters are linked to “feminist folk singers or certain alternative rockers” (Benshoff; Griffin 15, 2006).

In combination with gender and film, stereotypes play a crucial role, as already implied. I will pay attention to the representation of gender stereotypes in the movies and whether the depicted gendered behaviour confirms or undermines any kind of alleged “norm”. Are they being revised or rejected? Thereby, I will show whether heteronormativity is challenged or reinforced. If the former scenario happens, it will be of interest to what extent compulsory heterosexuality is subverted in the movies. Moreover, another aspect of interest is queerness. Is queerness only implied, for example, in a dialogue when a male character is described as being interested in the latest fashion and beauty trends, or is it expressed directly, for instance, “I am queer/gay/bi- or homosexual”? Another subtle way of hinting at queerness is “by delivery” (Benshoff; Griffin 15, 2006). This means that a description (for instance a man likes flowers, or a woman is interested in typically male activities like repairing cars) is uttered with “a lisp, a smirk, or a flip of the wrist” (15, 2006). Additionally, queer characters are sometimes given queer names, meaning queer women have male names and vice versa. For example, Frankie Alan is the female philanderer and one of the leading characters in the British TV series *Lip Service* (BBC Three, 2010-) <sup>55</sup>. She is frequently considered the British equivalent to the American, female womaniser Shane McCutcheon (*The L-Word*).

Generally, queer readings reveal the constructiveness and contingencies of hegemonic ideologies/meanings generated by heteronormative power structures. The advantages and profits one gains out of a queer reading of (a) text(s) are not only the detection of normative power structures represented in the chosen text(s), but, more importantly, the realisation that gender, for example, is also in real life socially constructed, not only in the analysed text(s). Cranny Francis continues this

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1533010/>

thought by explaining the importance of the “queering gaze” and what kinds of enriching opportunities it opens up (175),

The value of the queering gaze, as of queer itself, is that it works to destabilise divisive regimes based on binaristic thinking and perception; the thinking that constructs male and female as oppositions, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. Instead it opens up the possibilities that texts can tell us what we may find difficult to acknowledge; that gender is not a natural given but performative process. [...] By reading these textual performances as ambiguous, open to interpretation, not confined within normative constraints, we challenge (the performance of) gender itself.

Thus, reading texts from a queer perspective is crucial in order to reveal power mechanisms (gender being forced in a binary system) that are regarded as naturally given. Giffney also summarises the act of queer reading very accurately (366),

Queer theoretical engagements with film studies include a number of different approaches: the discursive examination of the representation of sexual and gender identity categories and those who sport them across a range of films [...], as well as how gender and sexuality intersect with other forms of identification such as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, religion and dis/ability [...]. There is a concerted effort to attend to heteronormativity by discussing how particular films promote, make visible, challenge and subvert – sometimes simultaneously – compulsory heterosexuality [...]. These analyses treat films – either singly or in more broad-based studies – as texts and undertake close readings of, for example, characters, dialogue, particular scenes, intertextual elements as cues to latent themes and diegetic elements such as light and sound.

Certainly, it would be vital taking into account aspects like race, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, and religion, especially in a cultural context, however, this would go beyond the scope of this thesis. I will focus on gender and stereotypes. As Giffney states, a detailed reading of particular scenes and sequences, or dialogues will be most useful for my analysis. If relevant, I will take into consideration filmic aspects like camera shots, camera movement, camera angle, camera lenses, and/or special effects such as lighting, sound, colours and their meanings (particularly in *But I'm a Cheerleader*), costumes, symbolic and/or recurring objects, setting and location.

## 5.1. Boys Don't Cry

“There may not be a better acted film this year. Every inch of the character exudes a male sensibility so powerfully, and at times so vulnerably, that Swank's performance crosses into a realm of veracity rare in any film acting“ (Peter Stack, *The San Francisco Chronicle*)<sup>56</sup>.

When the American independent romantic drama film (directed by Kimberly Peirce, produced by Christine Vachon, set in Falls City, Nebraska) *Boys Don't Cry* was released in 1999 (distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures), it caused a great uproar. Not solely because it thematises the taboo subject of transsexuality, but, also owing to the fact, that it is based on a true story. The movie was inspired by the murder case of Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old transgendered man disguising herself as a male, who was raped and beaten to death in 1993<sup>57</sup> by two men after having found out about his biological sex. Director Kimberly Peirce was immediately fascinated by this tragic story and it took her almost four years to find somebody who was suitable for playing the leading character Brandon Teena. She was mainly looking for masculine lesbians (Vaughan 8). Some well known actors did not go to auditions, following the advice of their agents, because of the stigma associated with transsexuals<sup>58</sup>. In 1996, Hilary Swank, who was relatively unknown at this moment, was cast for the leading role of Brandon Teena, since, among other things, Peirce did not want a famous actor to portray Teena<sup>59</sup>. For the sake of authenticity, Swank underwent remarkable preparation for the embodiment of Brandon Teena, as she was living as a man for approximately a month, concealing her breasts by means of wrapping them in bandages and putting socks into her trousers, just as Teena had done. “Her masquerade became [quite] convincing [as] Swank's neighbors believed the “young man” coming and going from her home was Swank's visiting brother“<sup>60</sup>. She even reduced her body fat in order to accentuate her facial features<sup>58</sup>. For this great performance, as many critics acknowledged, Swank was awarded the Oscar for *Best Actress*. Overall, the film has won 48 awards (including a Golden Globe for *Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture – Drama*, and the Critics Choice

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/A-Heartland-Tragedy-Swank-s-superb-acting-at-2901346.php>.

<sup>57</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/27/john-lotter-appeal-boys-dont-cry-killer-supreme-court\\_n\\_1382442.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/27/john-lotter-appeal-boys-dont-cry-killer-supreme-court_n_1382442.html)

<sup>58</sup> Loos, Ted (October 3, 1999), "A Role Within a Role: A Girl Who Became a Boy", *The New York Times*, retrieved October 7, 2010

<sup>59</sup> Werner, Erica (March 29, 2000), "Swank's Hard Work Pays Off", *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (Philippine Daily Inquirer, Inc.), retrieved October 7, 2010

<sup>60</sup> <https://michaelsmoviemania.wordpress.com/category/actresses/>

Award for *Best Actress*) and was nominated 27 times<sup>61</sup>. As Benshoff and Griffin declare, “[T]he success of *Boys Don’t Cry* undoubtedly helped to spread understanding about transgendered people to middle America” (2006, 281). Jenni Olson describes it as “the most exciting film in terms of transgender film history” (qtd. in *Fabulous!* 01:00:10-01:00:50). There has been produced a documentary version of the movie (by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir) called *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998). It contains interviews with friends, relatives, and even with the two perpetrators John Lotter and Tom Nissen, as well as private photos, and court records (Benshoff; Griffin 281, 2006). In order to make the analysed scenes and sequences from the film comprehensible, I will provide a short plot analysis.

### **5.1.1. Plot**

As already mentioned, the plot revolves around the transsexual, preoperative, 21-year-old Brandon Teena, who suffers from physical threats and homophobic insults, as he has been discovered as biologically female by his ex-girlfriend’s brother. Shortly thereafter, Brandon gets involved in a bar brawl, when a tall man is hitting on a girl named Candace (Alicia Goranson), he has been flirting with before. The ex-convict John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard), a friend of Candace, joins the fight. Brandon leaves his cousin Lonny (Matt McGrath), who has told Brandon to find a place to stay somewhere else, and goes together with John and Candace to Falls City, Nebraska. There, he meets Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III) and Lana Tisdel (Chloë Sevigny), Candace’s sister. Brandon falls in love with Lana, who does not know anything about his biological sex and returns his love. The two lovers plan to go to Memphis, where Brandon intends to manage Lana in a karaoke career. However, the former gets imprisoned for charges he has committed before he had moved to Falls City, as he failed to show up on an important court date. It is noteworthy that Teena, due to his anatomical sex, is placed in the women’s section of the prison, which gets him into trouble in explaining, when Lana bails him out. He lies to her by saying that he was born a hermaphrodite and that he would undergo a sex change. Lana avows her love for Brandon, no matter what he is (*BDC* 01:09:34). Everything seems to be perfect, however, Tom and John become suspicious, as a newspaper article catches their attention because it talks about Brandon’s detention and contains his birth name, Teena Brandon (heretofore he has called himself just ‘Brandon’). Moreover, Candace

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171804/awards>



also finds clues that refer to Brandon's "true" sex, since she detects a used tampon and Brandon's pants speckled with blood in the crutch and, more significantly, the citation with Brandon's birth name on it. In a violent way, the two ex-convicts force Brandon to pull his trousers down in order to convince themselves, by means of looking at his genitals, that he is a biological woman. They also compel Lana to look at her boyfriend's exposed genitals but she turns away. In their opinion, she is a lesbian. Afterwards, John and Tom drive out with Brandon in tow to a deserted area, where they violently beat and rape him. Thereupon, they take him captive in Tom's house, however, Brandon manages to escape through the bathroom window. Traumatized by the tremendous events, Teena reports the attack to the police (although he had been warned and threatened by Lotter and Nissen to remain silent). In a thirst for revenge, John and Tom decide to kill Brandon. Despite Lana's efforts to prevent them in doing so, they continue, find him in a hut, and kill him. Candace is also shot to death and Tom even tries to murder Lana, however, he is hindered by John. While the two slayers flee, Lana lies next to Brandon's body, desperately crying. The next morning, Lana is woken up by her mother, who tries to console her and takes her away. This terrifying scene ends with a fade-out and the final sequence shows Lana leaving Falls City while a letter by Brandon is read in a voice-over.

### **5.1.2. Gender Performativity, Identity and Disguise in *Boys Don't Cry***

Besides telling a story about love, respect, and murder, *Boys Don't Cry* deals with issues regarding gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and, in particular, transsexuality. A very crucial element of the protagonist's storyline is that of the complete misconception of his masculinity, as he/she is female. In order to show that gender and sex are not related, and gender is a performance, as Butler has claimed, I will analyse significant scenes and sequences from the movie. I will also pay attention to the possible presentation of gender roles, gender ambiguity, and cross-dressing. I am going to include images (in the form of screenshots) for illustrative and explanatory purposes.

In terms of gender ambiguity, *Boys Don't Cry* convincingly demonstrates what may happen (or already has happened, as this film is based on a true story), if a person does not fit into the normalised gender binary. At this point, I would like to

refer back to Judith Butler, who convincingly describes gender as a “strategy of survival [...] with clearly punitive consequences” (522). As the provided synopsis implies, this exemplary film suggests that a deviance in terms of gender norms may not only have punitive consequences but even a fatal aftermath.

Yet in the first scene, following the opening credits, Brandon’s transsexuality and the concealment of his biological sex become an issue. It shows Brandon Teena getting cut his hair by his cousin, while the former commands the latter to cut it even shorter. Afterwards, Brandon looks at himself scrutinising in the mirror, while his cousin asserts, “That is the most frightenin’ thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Looks like a deformity” (01:59). Through this statement, Lonny refers to the socks, Brandon stuffs in his trousers, in order to give the impression of a penis. Thus, the audience is immediately faced with Teena’s transsexuality, which is conveyed via the dialogue between Brandon and Lonny. The fact that the former obviously needs to put object(s) into his pants implies that, for him, there is something missing. Moreover, the haircutting at the beginning of the scene contributes to Brandon’s implied transsexuality, as he demands to cut it shorter, presumably in order to pass as a man. Her cousin’s assertion, however, connotes a negative stance, since terms like ‘frightening’ and ‘deformity’ are not associated positively. Furthermore, Lonny hints at being gay, as he remarks, “Now if you was a guy, I might even wanna fuck you” (02:10). This assertion again emphasises that Brandon is a woman, at least from a biological point of view. Teena retorts in a striking way, smirking to his reflection, “You mean if *you* [emphasis added] was a guy you might even fuck me” (02:12). In responding, “if you was a guy”, Brandon stresses the word ‘you’, which is notable, as he actually seems to doubt his maleness, although Lonny is biologically male. Towards the end of the scene, he asks Brandon, “So you’re a boy. Now what?” (02:17). Owing to the fact that Brandon questions, or rather ridicules seemingly fixed categories like maleness, this scene already conveys a queer notion. With a burning cigarette in his mouth and a cowboy hat on his head (both cigarettes and cowboys are associated with strength and masculinity) underlining his male physique, Brandon replies, “Come on” (02:21), as Figure 3 shows,



Figure 3

The presented imagery, including the cowboy hat, the cigarette, and the blue plaid shirt signify masculinity, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of maleness. In this example the blue colour underlines this observation because blue is frequently preferred by men<sup>62</sup>.

As already indicated in the plot summary, homophobia and violence are major themes recurring in the film. Within the first six minutes, Brandon Teena is persecuted by his ex-girlfriend's brother who is shouting, "You're not goin' anywhere! Fucker! Get back here, you fucker! You fuckin' dyke! You freak! You fucked my sister! Open the fuckin' door, you fuckin' faggot!" (04:53-05:10). Needless to say that 'fucker' and 'fucking' are abusive words anyway. 'Dyke' and 'faggot', however, are clearly directed to homosexuals in order to insult lesbians and gays. Although 'dyke' is not always used in an insulting way, because it also describes masculine lesbians, *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* says, "taboo, informal, an offensive word for a LESBIAN. [...] Do not use this word" (491). The fact that Brandon is both denoted as 'dyke' and 'faggot' (derogatory term for gay men, as I already explained) hints at his gender ambiguity and identity crisis. In the same scene, Brandon's cousin angrily asks him, "What is the matter with you?" (05:28), to which he responds, "I don't know! I don't know what went wrong" (05:32). The cousin replies furiously, "You are not a boy! That is what went wrong! You are not a boy!" (05:34). By saying twice that Brandon *is not* [emphasis added] a boy, his cousin reinforces the essentialist notion that, in order to be a boy, one must have a penis, testicles, etc. Brandon smirks at him saying, "They say I'm the best boyfriend they

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<sup>62</sup> "A study by Jastrow (1897) found men preferred blue to red and women red to blue", qtd. in <http://www.colormatters.com/color-symbolism/gender-differences>

ever had" (05:38). "They" refers to his ex-girlfriends and implies that, for Brandon, gender is not directly connected with anatomical factors. The cousin continues in a harsh way, "[W]hy don't you just admit that you're a dyke?" (05:47). Through this question, he intends to push Brandon into one category, namely that of a masculine lesbian, which, again, promotes essentialist, anti-queer notions. Brandon confidently responds, "Because I'm not a dyke!" (05:48). The scene ends with Teena getting kicked out of his cousin's trailer.

Later on the same evening, Brandon is sitting in a bar, drinking one shot after another, where he meets a girl called Candace. She tells Brandon that she does not like her name and adds, "I'm thinkin' of changin' it" (07:05). Teena replies, "Sometimes that helps" (07:09), which hints at his transsexuality, Candace is (still) unaware of. When Brandon leaves Candace briefly by herself, since he is getting a package of cigarettes, a stranger is suddenly sitting on Brandon's seat next to Candace. As he returns, he utters chivalrously, "Excuse me. Why don't you leave the lady alone? I don't want any trouble here" (07:45). Thus, Brandon intends to protect Candace and even gets into a fight in order to do so. It is implied that Teena attempts to demonstrate his manhood and courage, since fighting is regarded as a male activity. (Besides, the foreign man also calls him a 'fag', which is an abbreviation for 'faggot' and motivates him even more to participate in the brawl). Another time Teena is trying to prove his manliness is, when John and Tom persuade him to take part in so called 'Bumper-skiing', in which participants grab onto the back of a vehicle's bumper and "let it pull [them] down the street as [they] ski behind it crouching down low to keep [their] balance"<sup>63</sup>. Despite the fact Teena falls several times off the car, and almost gets run over, he continues in trying (19:37). As the film's title already purports, 'Boys don't cry!'.

Although Brandon seems to pass as a man almost without any doubt, some physical characteristics "put a spoke in his wheel". For example, when Teena encounters John Lotter and gives him a cigarette lighter, the latter notices his tiny hands and states warily, "You have got the tiniest hands" (09:04). Being afraid of further promoting John's suspicion, Brandon instantly replies, "No, they're big" (09:06). Also, biology "knocks him out of the skies", as Teena gets his period one night and tries to scrub the bloodstains out of his pants with a toothbrush (21:06). Moreover, Brandon notices that he has run out of tampons and goes to a gas station

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<sup>63</sup> <https://lotgk.wordpress.com/2007/12/08/bumper-skiing/>

to steal them, as he happens to meet Lana there (22:52). Aaron argues that this encounter rather underlines than undermines queerness, as Lana seems to know the store well (because she is on first-name terms with the teller), thereby she knows best in which shelves products like tampons can be found. Aaron suggests, “The shot of Brandon grappling with a box of tampons [...] is held just too long for the approaching Lana not to see what he’s doing, or, at least, for us to think this is so” (*Pass/Fail* 261), implying that Lana just pretends to overlook that Brandon is buying this box. Another moment of suspicion is initiated when Lana’s mother (Jeanetta Arnette) precisely beholds Brandon’s face and caresses his soft cheek, looking at his facial features. “As she does so, John looks on, squinting with similar suspicions” (Aaron in *Pass/Fail* 262), which is conveyed through the close-up of John’s face (34:05).

In terms of gender roles, *Boys Don’t Cry* reinforces the typical ‘A woman’s place is in the home and men get served by women’ stereotype. This becomes clear in the scene when Brandon is sitting at the table and Candace cooks breakfast for him (28:44). After taking a shower, the audience is confronted once more with Brandon’s transsexuality, as he stretches a towel on his bed with items like socks, men’s underwear, a condom, a fake penis, and a bandage on it, he uses to wrap up his breasts, as Figure 4 (30:49) shows.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Besides the fact that the blue colour of the towel underlines masculinity, as it is connoted with the male sex, non-diegetic sound plays a significant role. While Brandon is unfolding the towel, slow, melancholic music is played, which emphasises his mood when “putting on” these objects because they are principal reminders of his female sex, his identity crisis, and his disguise. The lyrics of the song convey significant meanings. As it can be seen from the screenshot, it says, “You’ll forget you’re a woman“, which emphasises the image’s heavy symbolism. After wrapping up his breasts, Brandon is standing in front of a mirror, putting on men’s underwear and stuffing the artificial penis together with socks into it, thereby accentuating his masculine physique and pretending to be a man (Figure 5). This scene suggests that sex (because of the fake penis) can be put on like a piece of clothing, which avows queerness. It clearly challenges the concept of ‘woman’, underlined by the lyrics of the song, “And it’s real, oh, it’s real” (31:14). Moreover, it obviously demonstrates that gender is something one *does*, not something one *is*. In behaving and acting like a man, Brandon, thus, performs masculinity, as he wraps up his breasts and puts an artificial penis into his pants. This important scene illustrates that gender is rather a *doing* than a *being*, which confirms Butler’s theory.

Another key moment where biology shatters Brandon’s gender identity is when Lana discovers Brandon’s cleavage during sex (Figure 6).



Figure 6

In a fear of getting exposed (in a twofold sense: revealing his female genitals and getting unmasked as a woman), Brandon removes Lana's hand when she tries to undress him. Although Lana seems to be bewildered at the sight of Teena's cleavage, as it is shown by means of the point-of-view shot, which provides Lana's perspective, she continues their love act. Aaron elaborates, "[S]he stares at the impression of his penis in his jeans, touches it gingerly, scrutinizes his hairless chin [...] and then forgets the whole thing and resumes their love-making" (*Pass/Fail* 261). Although not stated explicitly, it is implied that Lana already knows about Brandon's true sexual identity. "As a shift in privileged perspective, this occurs most emphatically when we share Lana's point of view in spying Brandon's breasts" (Aaron, 261 in *Pass/Fail*). After finishing their love act, Brandon immediately buttons his trousers in order to stay cloaked in disguise.

However, Brandon's facade begins to crumble. Because of the missed court date, as mentioned in the plot summary, Brandon is imprisoned. Owing to his biological sex, he is put into the women's section of the jail. When Lana bails Brandon out, she wonders why he is in this section and Brandon falsely tells her that he was born a hermaphrodite (an individual with both male and female genitals)<sup>64</sup>, and soon will undergo a sex change operation. Lana calmly accepts this fact and declares her love for Brandon, caressing his hand, thereby saying, "Look, I don't care if you're half monkey or half ape. I'm gettin' you outta here" (01:09:51). Not only through Lana's unconditional acceptance, and denial of categories, but also by

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Thomas A. Foster, "Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America", 2007.

means of cross-dressing, queerness is underlined, as Aaron observes (qtd. in *Pass/Fail* 262),

[T]he concurrence of the heterosexual and homosexual implications arising from the crossdressed figure is explicitly conveyed here through Lana, who comes to represent the spectator's own inevitably unfixed or queer response to the crossdressed figure in general and to Brandon in particular.

Beforehand, Candace discovered Brandon's used tampon in his room, the blood-stained jeans, and the court summons with his birth name on 'Teena Brandon', proving his female biological identity (01:07:52). Additionally, anger is fuelled when John discovers a newspaper article about the arrest of 'Teena Brandon'. As Tom rifles through Brandon's private things, he finds the fake penis and a leaflet called *Cross-Dressers and Transsexuals: The Uninvited Dilemma* (01:13:40). John freaks out, screaming, "Get this sick shit away from me!" (01:13:51). These findings present the final proof that Brandon is a woman, which has fatal consequences at the end of *Boys Don't Cry*.

The violent scene of rape is only a foretaste of what is to come. When Nisson and Lotter confront Brandon with his lies, he tries to find explanations. John also snarls at Lana, telling her that if she was a lesbian she should have told him. Lana responds, "John, I'm not. Mom, it's not" (01:16:40). The rejection of homosexuality, thus, since it is a category, as I already mentioned, implies queerness (At the beginning of the film, Brandon also declares "I'm not a dyke" [Aaron; qtd. in *Pass/Fail* 262]) as I have stated. Nevertheless, John and Tom are in such a rage, unable to calm down, whereby John snaps at Brandon, "You fuckin' pervert. Are you a girl or are you not? [...] What the fuck are you?!" (01:16:50). Again, Brandon is compelled into either one category, or the other, which underlines the expected fixity of gender. Towards the end of the movie, however, both Lana's mother and John are so shocked and disgusted by Brandon's transsexuality so that they use the pronoun 'it' to address him, which underlines his status as a freak, or a monster, "I don't want *it* [emphasis added] in the house" (01:29:12), "Where the fuck is *it*?!" (01:44:03). Thus, a recurring, central theme of *Boys Don't Cry* is the issue of identity.

In an attempt to make his sexual identity visible, they force Brandon to take off his jeans in order to expose his genitals. This is the moment when *Boys Don't Cry* provides the ultimate "statement on the separation of gender from anatomy" (Aaron; qtd. in *Pass/Fail* 261). At this point, Lana's 'queerness in character' gets underlined when John and Tom force her to look at Brandon's exposed genitals in front of her.



She, however, refuses to confirm Teena's biological identity, which signifies a rejection of essentialism and an affirmation of queerness, and replies to John's command, "Look at your little boyfriend!" (01:20:20) with "Leave him alone!" (01:20:30). The brutality and humiliation this terrible low-key scene involves, is emphasised by the freezing of the frame, which shows the unclothed Brandon staring at himself dressed (01:20:40). In this short scene, there is neither diegetic nor non-diegetic sound, which creates an uncanny atmosphere, underlining the fact that Brandon's gender is held against him. The conveyed silence, also hints at his marginal status in society, or of transsexuals in general. Significantly, the scene symbolises the differentiation between sex and gender (Aaron in *Pass/Fail* 261), since Brandon's clothes help him to perform and signify masculinity, whereas, naked, his *female* genitals are exposed (shown in Figure 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Symbolisation of Gender



Figure 8: Symbolisation of Sex

Moreover, Aaron compares the scene to the martyrdom of Christ, as she states, "The tableau has an eerie but obvious resemblance to the crucifixion of Christ: a semi-clad, brightly lit Brandon has an arm over the shoulders of Tom and John on either side of him; Lana kneels below him looking up; a small audience gazes on" (261).

As I have implied several times during the course of this analysis, Lana can be regarded as the epitome of queerness. Not only because of the mentioned denial of identifying herself as neither heterosexual, nor homosexual, but also as an example of a person falling in love regardless of their sex. In one of the last scenes, she and Brandon are sitting together in a small cabin, where Brandon hides from John and Tom. They kiss and are about to make love when Lana states, "I don't know if I'm gonna know how to do it" (01:38:01). 'It' refers to having sex with a woman, now that

Lana is aware of Brandon still being a biological woman. Thus, Lana illustrates that she has fallen in love with Brandon as a person, irrespective of his biological sex. Moreover, Aaron claims that “Brandon is not the only character straying from the idealization of gender” (*Pass/Fail* 262). She continues by saying that Lana’s “downy fleshiness is in sharp contrast to the lithe hairlessness of Brandon” (262). Xan Brooks even states that gender roles are blurred, “[Lana’s] heavy-jawed beauty contrasts nicely with Swank’s more refined, aquiline looks and further blurs the tale’s gender roles” (qtd. in *Pass/Fail* 262). Thus, *Boys Don’t Cry* provides a vast range of gender expression and queerness, as it is not only shown through Lana and, above all, Brandon, but also through Tom and John (262),

Meanwhile Tom, with his pubescent flourish of facial hair, and John, doe-eyed and long-lashed, cuddly yet sociopathic, further promote the film’s deliberate inscription of a spectrum of gender expression. Neither is Brandon singled out in his irregularity. John’s and Tom’s excited embraces immediately after raping Brandon confirm their homosociality and an alternative network of implicated queerness.

Based on these numerous examples, I have shown that *Boys Don’t Cry* rejects rigid categories, which affirms queerness and emphasises the performative quality of gender. However, many critics argue that movies like *Boys Don’t Cry*, which address topics like transvestism and cross-dressing, do not really challenge essentialist notions. Such films only transgress rigid categories to the extent that they heighten the return to order (Aaron, qtd. in *Pass/Fail* 260). Or, as Annette Kuhn claims, “it [this genre] problematise[s] gender identity and sexual difference [...] only to confirm the absoluteness of both” (57). Thus, scholars like Annette Kuhn argue against the subversive potential of queer films (in terms of sexual identity, gender, etc.) dealing with cross-dressing and disguise. They regard them as affirmative examples that gender identity and sexual difference are indispensable. Others, on the contrary, regard queer movies as “a rare and radical space for gender and sexual ambiguity – that is, for queerness – within the most mainstream of products” (Aaron 260). To what extent other films (from the genre of Queer Cinema) provide such rare spaces for queerness, gender ambiguity, etc., will be discussed in the next chapters.

## 5.2. But I'm A Cheerleader

The romantic satirical comedy *But I'm a Cheerleader* was directed by Jamie Babbit, being her first feature film<sup>65</sup>, and released in 1999. It can also be described as a 'coming of age'-story because it revolves around the teenage cheerleader girl Megan (Natasha Lyonne). As it will be described in the plot summary more precisely, Megan is sent to a homosexual deprogramming camp called 'True Directions' because her parents suspect her of being gay. Babbit once declared in a one-sentence pitch (a compact statement of an idea for a film), "Two high-school girls fall in love at reparative therapy camp"<sup>66</sup>. *But I'm a Cheerleader* "weaves together coming out, first love, and social satire into a candy-coated rainbow tapestry" (Benshoff; Griffin 271, 2006). The reason why the protagonist is a cheerleader explains Babbit as follows,

[It is] [meaning cheerleading] the pinnacle of the American dream, and the American dream of femininity. The idea that girls grow up and they are brainwashed to want to be a cheerleader, you know, while, like, the guys play the aggressive sports and make millions of dollars. The girls cheer them on, you know, and make five cents, and show their legs. We just wanted it to be like this sort of stereotypical, you know, teen, teen — teen dream<sup>67</sup>.

Writer Brian Wayne Peterson adds, "[A cheerleader is] [l]east likely to be a lesbian in the middle-American eye"<sup>65</sup>. The last sentence of Babbit's quotation contains a significant word, which is a key term/concept in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, running like a red thread through the film: 'stereotypical'. As I will show in the analysis, this movie is abundant with (gender) stereotypes. Moreover, the style of the movie is queerly campy, as it contains heavy loaded, colourful imagery, and exaggerated movements in order to parody gender stereotypes. Babbit has created a kind of hyperreal world that allows "the humor and anger in my film touch ground in the real feelings of my characters"<sup>68</sup>. However, the movie was rated by most critics negatively, because of, among other aspects, the stereotypical portrayal of the characters. Many reviewers condemned *But I'm a Cheerleader* as containing "nothing but stereotypes"<sup>69</sup>. In the subsequent analysis of significant film scenes and sequences, I will focus on the ways in which the presented stereotypes operate. One crucial aspect of the analysis will be to show whether this exaggerated display of colours, costume, actions,

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<sup>65</sup> Warn, Sarah (June 2004), "Interview with Jamie Babbit", AfterEllen.com, retrieved April 22, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Gideonse, Ted (July 2000), "The New Girls Of Summer", *Out* (Here Media): 54–61.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.afterellen.com/the-allure-of-the-lesbian-cheerleader/08/2010/3/>

<sup>68</sup> Jamie Babbit quoted in the film's pressbook (on file at AMPAS), source: Benshoff; Griffin 271, 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, Elvis (July 7, 2000), "Don't Worry. Pink Outfits Will Straighten Her Out", *The New York Times* (The New York Times Company), retrieved April 29, 2007

behaviours, etc. reinforces negative stereotypes of gender, or if it subverts them, which, in turn, also challenges heteronormativity and defies the heterosexual matrix. Next, I will outline the events in the plot summary.

### **5.2.1. Plot**

As already mentioned, *But I'm a Cheerleader* narrates the coming out story of a high school cheerleader called Megan, who gets surprised with an intervention by her friends and parents because they believe her to be a lesbian. This fear results from facts, like Megan being a vegetarian, listening to music by the lesbian musician Melissa Etheridge, gazing after her fellow cheerleaders, and finding her boyfriend's kisses disgusting. Thus, Megan is sent to 'True Directions', which is a color-coded rehabilitation camp to help homosexual adolescents "becoming" heterosexual "again". By means of a five-step program, which is similar to the 12-step program used by Alcoholics Anonymous, and traditional gender associated activities, like repairing cars, ironing, and cooking, homosexual youths should learn to rediscover their "true" sexual orientation. Among other aspects, which will be discussed in the analysis, the program forces the campers to admit their homosexuality, to demistify the opposite sex, and to simulate heterosexual coition. In the camp, Megan meets Graham (Clea DuVall), who is also coerced to participate in the program, otherwise being disowned by her parents. Larry (Richard Moll) and Lloyd (Wesley Mann), two former students of Mary Brown (Cathy Moriarty, starring as the camp's founder and strict disciplinarian), incite the participants to rebel against Mary, by taking them to a local gay bar (called "Cocksucker"; it is noticeable that the term 'cock' has two meanings: the animal, signified through a huge plastic rooster placed in front of the bar; importantly, it is also a colloquial expression for 'penis'), where Megan and Graham get closer. One night, the two sneak out and fall in love. When Mary finds out, Megan is impenitent, as she does not fight her homosexuality anymore. Therefore, Megan is thrown out of the camp and seeks shelter at Larry and Lloyd's home. Graham, who is afraid to oppose her dad, stays in the camp. Together with Dolph (Dante Basco), who also lives with Larry and Lloyd and has been excluded from 'True Directions' because of starting an affair with another participant, Megan decides to win back Graham. They worm into the camp's graduation ceremony where Megan tries to persuade Graham to come with her, without success. Megan sees one last opportunity to win her back. She performs a cheer for Graham, telling her that she loves her, "1, 2, 3, 4 - I won't take no anymore! 5, 6, 7, 8 - I want you to be

my mate! 1, 2, 3, 4 - You're the one that I adore! 5, 6, 7, 8 - Don't run from me cause this is fate!" (01:17:34). Megan succeeds and, together with Dolph and Clayton (Kip Pardue), they drive off. The last scene shows Megan's parents attending a meeting of the *Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays organisation (PFLAG)*, which implies that they are willing to accept their daughter's sexuality, no matter whom she loves.

### **5.2.2. Gender Stereotypes, Heteronormativity, and Queerness in *But I'm a Cheerleader***

The film's tagline "A Comedy Of Sexual Disorientation" is, according to some critics, an understatement<sup>70</sup>. It does not only deal with traditional gender stereotypes, but satirises, even ridicules them. It offers a wide range of symbolic imagery expressed through colours, dialogue, costumes and actions. As stated in the plot summary, at the centre of this satirical comedy film, is the five-step program of 'True Directions', which aims at "converting" homosexual adolescents to the "true" sexual orientation: heterosexuality. This undertaking is reminiscent of a deeply religious, conservative faith held by fundamental Christians who believe that homosexuality can be "healed" (since it is frequently regarded as a disease) with the help of so-called "reparative therapies" (Hish 1). Such therapies involve pseudoscientific methods, for instance, "[r]eligious-based treatments [like] reading of the scriptures, morality teachings, prayer, and faith-based activities", in order to treat and cure homosexual people. Also, aversion therapies are considered as useful. Thereby, sexual responses to homoerotic stimuli are "punished through the use of electric shock or powerful emetics" (Hish 2). Such electro shocks are also thematised in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, when Sinead "punishes" herself in the middle of the night when she is having stimulating thoughts of other girls. She declares, "No pain – no gain, baby. You wanna like dick, you better start training yourself" (21:51). The question is whether this is real punishment for Sinead, because when she introduces herself to Megan, she states, "I am Sinead and I like pain" (15:28). Underlining the notion of abnormality and worthlessness, the term 'reparative' conveys that there is something wrong which needs to be fixed (1). Although such treatments and "rehabilitation camps" are parodied and portrayed in an amusing manner in *But I'm a Cheerleader*,

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/polfilms/cheerleader.html>

as it will be shown in the course of this analysis, one must not forget that such programmes and therapies do, in fact, exist.

Right at the beginning of the film, it is implied, through Megan's behaviour, that she does not feel very comfortable in her role as the average adolescent high school cheerleading girl, dating a handsome football player. This is particularly indicated in the second scene, when Megan is kissing her boyfriend Jared (Brandt Wille). Her eyes are open and she looks rather disgusted than smitten. This is underlined by the inserted close-ups, showing Megan's fellow cheerleaders' breasts and bottoms in slow motion, while they are doing their cheers (Figure 10) . Before these close-up shots are presented, the audience views Megan's face (also in form of a close-up). While she is kissing her boyfriend, Megan seems to be woolgathering, as she is looking away, which conveys that she is thinking of her fellow cheerleaders (Figure 9). Megan even interrupts the kissing, which she obviously does not enjoy, by pretending that she must go home for dinner. Her boyfriend, however, ignores her and kisses her again. In this moment, the spectator is provided with a point-of-view close-up shot (obviously from Megan's point of view) showing his huge tongue coming closer and closer (Figure 11, 12). Due to the fact that it is a close-up, the tongue appears to be bigger than usual. Moreover, the size and the movement of the tongue has a frightening effect. This shot underlines Megan's discomfort when she is kissing her boyfriend.



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

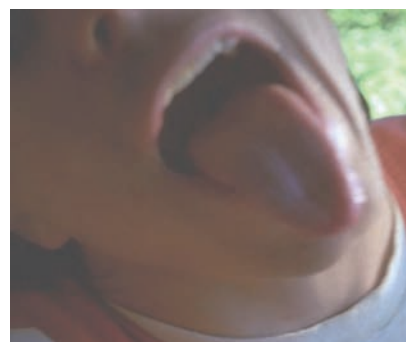


Figure 12

Queerness is not only conveyed through Megan's behaviour, but also by means of the rich imagery, Jamie Babbit provides in the film. When Megan arrives at school and opens up her locker, the audience is able to catch a sight of pictures, being affixed inside the locker, showing half-naked women (Figure 13). In contrast, her friend Kimberly (Michelle Williams) has a picture of a naked man in her locker (Figure 14).



Figure 13



Figure 14

Moreover, Megan asks Kimberly, "Don't you hate it when they do that?" (05:13), referring to the kiss she received from Jared beforehand, which also underlines her reluctance. With regard to the characters' outward appearance, these two screenshots show that Megan completely adheres to the female stereotype, because she is wearing a dress, a headband and has long hair, whereas Kimberly has short hair and rather wears gender-neutral clothes. From this early scene, spectators are able to realise that Babbit is playing around with stereotypes, because Megan, who completely fulfills the "normal" gender stereotype, is homosexual, whereas Kimberly, who contradicts the traditional female image, is heterosexual. Moreover, Babbit conveys that outward appearance has nothing to do with sexual orientation, thereby defying the common stereotype that "manlike women are lesbians, whereas effeminate men are gay".

When Megan arrives home from school in the afternoon, her parents and friends surprise her with an intervention. Together with ex-homosexual, "cured" Mike (RuPaul), who has come directly from 'True Directions', they are trying to persuade Megan that she is suffering from a kind of illness and that she should go with Mike to the camp. The audience is seeing the scene mainly from Megan's point of view (Figure 15).





Figure 15

In this point-of-view shot, the camera angle (the placement of the camera in relation to the subject or object [Hanson 133]) is low, as it is placed below eye-level. It looks up at, in this case, two subjects, Megan's mother and Mike, who are staring at her, which automatically makes them appear more powerful and dominant than herself. On a symbolic level, this shot conveys that Megan (embodying the queer "stance") is oppressed by heteronormative imperatives, as she is rebuked by her parents, her friend, even by her boyfriend, because they want her to become "normal". Since the camp is called 'True Directions', and is fuelled by heteronormative imperatives, it is implied that heterosexuality is the only true sexual orientation. Moreover, Mike is totally dressed in blue (highlighting his masculinity) and his T-shirt says, "straight is great", which clearly promotes heterosexuality and, at the same time, sets up a standard, a norm. It also implies that any other form of sexual orientation, besides straight, is not great. Additionally, Megan's father declares, "Lately, we have become concerned about certain behaviours. We're afraid you being influenced by ...*ah*...a way of thinking...*ah*...unnatural [emphasis added]" (07:40). Her mother suddenly interrupts him, stating nervously, "Honey, we think you are a ...[pause]...lesbian" (07:48). She utters the term 'lesbian' in a pejorative way, as if it was an invective. At this point, her parents and friends confront her with various "evidences" which clearly confirm (according to them) Megan's homosexuality: tofu (kept in a plastic bag, like a corpus delicti, as it is used by forensic experts at a crime scene); Mike explains that one of the first signs of homosexuality is a transition to vegetarianism. This absurd presumption can be interpreted as a parody of other ridiculous stereotypes concerning homosexuals. Additionally, Megan's friend presents her one of the pictures, showing a woman in the bikini, taken from her locker; a poster of the lesbian



singer Melissa Etheridge (“gay iconography” [08:35]) and drawings that show “vaginal motifs in artwork and decorating” (08:33). Such ridiculous stereotypes mock real-life prejudices and stereotypes, people spread about homosexuals. Moreover, this scene is reminiscent of a police interrogation and can be regarded (like the whole film) as a parody of trying to “expel” homosexuality, which does not work anyway as *But I’m a Cheerleader* demonstrates.

Additionally, the whistle carried around Mike’s neck, again, conveys a rebuking, superior, authoritative attitude. The blue colour of his clothes is associated with the masculine sex, while pink and purple is linked to girls and women. Through this strong colour symbolism, (I will include more examples) that extends itself throughout the film, Mike and Mary from ‘True Directions’, intend to maintain an accordance of sex and gender, which means that women should be dressed in pink clothes, underscoring their femininity, whereas men are supposed to wear blue clothes in order to underline their masculinity.

Concerning colours and their strong symbolism in *But I’m a Cheerleader*, another striking aspect needs to be mentioned. Megan’s home signifies the heterosexual realm, from which she is both literally (because she is towed into the camp) and metaphorically excluded, as she is attracted to women, whereas the rehabilitative camp ‘True Directions’ signifies the homosexual, queer realm because gay and lesbian adolescents are put into it. The two realms stand in stark contrast to each other in terms of colour symbolism, as in Megan’s home, everything is grey, dull, brown and rather earth coloured, whereas everything in the camp is painted in either pink or blue (even Mary’s vehicle and the garden fence are painted in pink; the house in both colours). This is also illustrated by the clothes worn by the characters, as already mentioned, because, in accordance with the colours of the house and walls, Megan’s parents wear dull, single-coloured attire. This colour symbolism reinforces the binary system, which is also signified through ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and through ‘girls’ and ‘boys’. I will demonstrate this “colour binary” by the following screenshots:



Figure 16: "The Heterosexual Realm"



Figure 17: "The Queer Realm"

After her arrival at 'True Directions', Megan is shown an introductory video, which represents homosexuality in a very negative light and contains numerous gender stereotypes. It tells the story of an "ex-lesbian" who married a man after participating in 'True Directions' five-step "healing programme". Prior the "healing" the woman is represented in a masculine way, having short hair, smoking, and telling tearfully about her terrible past as a lesbian, "She made me do things with other women, she drove me on the back of her Harley like I was some show piece. Even when she got high and pushed me off the back of the bike [...] [I broke my] ribs. I just kept coming back for more" (11:48). Through telling this in a rather melodramatic, whiny way, it is conveyed that lesbians are destructive, bad people. The utterance, "I just kept coming back for more" implies an addictive, manipulative notion. The voice-over commentary continues, "But Kelly sought help. After just two months in 'True Directions' easy five-step programme, Kelly rediscovered her femininity and embraced her true self. On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1996, Kelly was married" (12:17). The statement "Kelly rediscovered her femininity" suggests that homosexuality leads to a concealment of one's femininity and to a "false masculinity", whereby the "true self" is suppressed. The last scene of the video displays Kelly happily kissing her freshly-baked husband, reinforcing heteronormative notions, for example, a woman's ultimate aim in life should be marrying a man. Additionally, the video shows recordings where Kelly is cooking and putting on make-up, which fosters gender stereotypes, like 'a woman's place is in her home, in the kitchen and in front of the mirror'.

The programme's first step is called, "Admitting You're a Homosexual". Mary attempts to induce Megan to recognise that she is a lesbian by asking her if she has any "unnatural" thoughts when she is thinking of women. Megan responds, "I don't think it's unnatural" (13:09). Mary replies in disgust, describing homosexuality as "sickness", "You see? You don't even think it's wrong!" (13:13). When she is meeting

the rest of the attendees, Megan is sitting in the middle, which is reminiscent of a gathering of the Alcoholics Anonymous (their twelve-step programme, as indicated, is similar to the camp's five-step programme, in order to ridicule the widespread assumption that homosexuality is an illness), getting introduced to them. Megan is asked to tell about the first time when she realised being a lesbian. She states that she has pictures of women around and one participant asks, "Do you think that's normal?" Megan replies without hesitation, "Sure" (16:54), challenging the meaning of the term 'normal', thereby indicating that it is not fixed and may vary from person to person. Furthermore, Megan conveys a queer notion. However, the other members have been manipulated by 'True Directions' so that they talk Megan into believing that she is not normal because she is a lesbian. This scene shows that it is not homosexual people who manipulate others, but such "rehabilitation camps" that manipulate both homosexuals and heterosexuals, by forcing them into sexual categories.

The second step of the programme is called "Rediscovering Your Gender Identity" and includes the performance of tasks and activities which are stereotypically ascribed to gender. Mary claims everyone to be "latent heterosexual" (23:08) and states that, "Now, what we must do is to relearn our masculinity and our femininity" (23:14). She describes this rediscovery as the "only healthy alternative to the gay lifestyle" (23:40). Notions of masculinity and femininity are ascribed to the biological sex, more specifically, the results thereof, conveying an essentialist notion. Tasks are strictly divided according to sex, for example, cooking, putting on make-up (Figure 20), Hoovering, cleaning, watering the flowers, and swaddling babies (Figure 21) are considered as women's tasks, whereas crafting, repairing cars (Figure 18) and roofs, chopping wood, playing football, etc. are regarded as men's tasks/activities, according to the belief to preserve traditional, stereotypical gender roles. However, those tasks do not help the participants to rediscover their masculinity or femininity respectively, but actually stimulate sexual images and thoughts, as the movements of the vacuum cleaner, or Mike's back and forth movements under the car, are reminiscent of sexual intercourse. Mary's instructions, as she is holding the vacuum cleaner ("You go up, you go down. [...] Go in and out" [24:16]), and Mike's directives, "You shove it in and out" (24:30) underline the counterproductive aspects of performing those tasks, since they intensify the participants' suppressed, homoerotic feelings. Furthermore, Mary's "heterosexual"

son Rock (Eddie Cibrian) distracts the boys from playing football, as he imitates sexual movements with a stick. Mike is trying to teach the boys “masculine postures”, which implies, “posing in this way, makes one masculine” (Figure 19). A remarkable visual aspect, in the background of the movie set, is the artificial spanner together with the two car tyres, which signifies male genitals (of course painted in blue) (Figure 18). This rather hidden symbolic imagery, among the other mentioned aspects, again implies queerness.



Figure 18



Figure 19





Figure 20



Figure 21

As it is obvious when looking at the screenshots, everything at 'True Directions' is coded in gender-specific colours (even the car being repaired is painted in blue; and the dressing table and the girls' gowns are colour-matched in purple), which is another way of satirising the gender binary and mocking the assumed essentialist notion of gender. The girls' beds are pink (however, there is no "inappropriate", meaning sexual behaviour allowed), even the walls and toothbrushes are painted in pink, whereas the boys' rooms are decorated in blue. The girls are supposed to wear pink skirts and blouses, while the boys are dressed in blue pants, shirts and a blue tie, highlighting their femininity or masculinity respectively. When Mary is watering the artificial flowers in front of the house her "ex-homosexual" son Rock comes out of the house, drinking a cocktail. Besides the fact that cocktails are frequently associated with the female gender, Rock gets admonished by his mother for "sipping" the cocktail, which she considers feminine. Angrily, Mary shouts, "Not in my presence. I have told you over and over again, no more sipping! Jesus! Drink it like a man! Come

on!“ (20:43). After that, Rock finishes the whole cocktail at once, hissing, “There!“ (20:46). Furthermore, actions like watering artificial flowers, which is totally useless, and Mary’s attempts to dissuade Rock from drinking his cocktail in a feminine way (which, like watering the artificial flowers, appears to be rather absurd and odd) also symbolise the artificiality and constructedness of gender.

The third step of the programme includes a conversation with the teenagers’ parents and is called “Family Therapy“. The adolescents recall their experiences as lesbians and gays when they were younger and try to find the roots, which explain their homosexual behaviour. Megan believes that she has found “her root“ and begins to narrate that her father once used to be unemployed for a while. During that time, she viewed her mother in the paternal role. Owing to that fact, she believes that she has got the wrong idea of the roles of men and women. Mary replies convinced, “Absolutely! [...] Your father was emasculated, your mother was domineering. [...] You wanted to emulate your mother. You have no respect for men because you don’t respect your father!“ (32:17-32:24). Megan, however, responds, “It’s really not like that“ (32:26). Mary ignores Megan’s dissent answer, which can be interpreted as a mirroring of the ignorance on behalf of homophobes. Another example of ignorance and prejudice, in this case on behalf of Mike, is when Jan (Katrina Phillips), another camp participant, suddenly declares during a therapy session, “I’m a heterosexual. [...] I know, I’ve never been gay“ (51:04). Mike responds laughing at her, “I mean, just take a look at yourself“ (51:10). Offended and hurt, Jan replies weeping, “Everyone thinks I’m this big dyke because I wear baggy pants and play softball and I’m not as pretty as other girls, but this doesn’t make me gay. Man, I like guys. I can’t help it“ (51:23). This significant scene wittily conveys that nobody should be judged according to their outward appearance or sexual orientation, and symbolically pillories heterosexuals. Also, Jan’s coming out is represented as something terrible, as she states sobbing, “I can’t help it“, emphasising the scene’s queer notion. Afterwards, she runs away, declaring, “I quit“ (51:36). Because he seems to be so convinced that Jan is a lesbian, Mike still does not take her seriously and states to the other participants, “Who in the hell is she trying to fool?“ (51:42), according to the essentialist motto, “Once a homosexual, always a homosexual“. Additionally, the stereotype of the typical mannish woman (“dyke“, as Jan describes herself) being a lesbian gets subverted, as she comes out as an emotional, heterosexual woman. This ‘queer‘ (odd and surprising), newly-gained self-awareness remarkably

underlines *But I'm a Cheerleader's* queer quality. It also implies that one should think outside the box, which is one basic principle of Queer theory.

Step four is called "Demystifying the Opposite Sex". Mary is showing slides on which the ideal, perfectly "normal", heterosexual couple is portrayed at home: The man is sitting at the table, dinner is served, while the woman is standing in the kitchen, according to Mary's utterance, "It's important to make your man feel at ease when he comes home from a long day at work" (40:33). During this slide presentation, Graham is fondling Megan's forearm, which does not only convey queerness, but also disrupts Mary's heteronormative lecture.

Mary continues enforcing heteronormative imperatives, in this case upon the ex-gays Larry and Lloyd, as she has found out about her students' trip to the 'Cocksucker'. She makes blue and pink signs, with slogans on them, like, "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve", "AIDS is god's message to sodomites", or "Procreate!", "Dicks are for Chicks!" and, most importantly, "We are here, we're not queer, we're not going anywhere". The 'True Directions'-group demonstrates loudly in front of Larry and Lloyd's home. The last slogan is an intertextual adaption of the original "battle cry" (I have already stated), "We're here. We're queer. We're fabulous"; "We're queer. We're here. Get used to it", by the LGBT movement.

The final test involves all previous categories (cooking, cleaning, chopping wood, etc.) and leads to the fifth step of the programme: "Simulated Sexual Lifestyle". When Mike explains the rules of this last examination, the various camera angles (Figure 22 and 23) provide significant information about the power relations going on in *But I'm A Cheerleader*.



Figure 22



Figure 23

Figure 22 shows a low-angle shot, where the camera is looking up at Mike and Mary. Obviously, the audience sees them from below (from the attendees' perspective), which makes them look large. This has the effect that Mary and Mike appear to be powerful and dominant, even threatening, which underlines their characters as being

strict disciplinarians, as they rule the camp. Mike and Mary are in a superior position. The low-angle shot is immediately followed by its direct opposite: the high-angle shot (Figure 23). The camera is looking down on the participants, which lets them appear rather tiny, like dwarfs. It implies that they are inferior, weak, less powerful, or rather having no power at all.

After Megan had been thrown out of 'True Directions', as she spent the night with Graham, she finds shelter at Larry and Lloyd's house. Again, colours play a crucial role because Larry and Lloyd have decorated almost any item in their house (and the house itself) in rainbow colours: the walls, the lamp shade, mugs, candles, napkins, kitchen towels, drip mats, folders, and so on. They placed numerous rainbow flags everywhere in the house, which is the most important icon of the LGBT community and symbolises gay pride. Dolph, who is also a former member of 'True Directions', appears in a garb, which is painted fully in rainbow colours (Figure 24).



Figure 24

The final step of 'True Directions' programme involves a simulation of coitus between a man and a woman, as I already stated. In order to have sexual intercourse with the opposite sex in real life, Mary intends to help her students by means of this simulation. When her son Rock is kissing Graham, under the watchful eye of Mary, the latter states, "Now Graham, let him take the lead. [...] He loves you. He wants to be with you. The way god intended. To be inside you. His love muscle thrusting..." (01:09:47). This assertion implies two essentialising aspects. The first aspect deals with traditional gender stereotypes, which promote that man is the active part, the "aggressor", underlined by Mary's demand, "[L]et him take the lead". The second aspect conveys the well known fundamentalist, religious belief, that god



only wants man and woman to have sexual intercourse and to start a family ("The way god intended. To be inside you. His love muscle thrusting ..."). When one student asks, "Ah...Mrs. Brown?! What about foreplay?" (01:11:48), Mary responds outraged, "No! Foreplay is for sissies! Real men go in, unload and pull out!" (01:11:53). Thereby, Mary reinforces the gender stereotype that men must not show any feelings (during the foreplay), because only women are emotional. She explicitly states that foreplay is unmanly and just for gays ("sissies").

As I have illustrated by means of these various examples, taking into account costume, dialogue between the characters, cinematography (in order to grasp the power relations), and colour symbolism, *But I'm a Cheerleader* is full of gender stereotypes. They are presented in a very exaggerated, obvious, satirical, and gaudy manner, which renders them odd and queer. Through this parodic way of representation, Babbitt highlights that gender (including gender stereotypes) is/are culturally constructed, emphasising its artificial quality. Moreover, stereotypes are not only portrayed in a satirical way, but they are frequently turned around. This is shown when Jan, who is represented as a 'butch', being very masculine with short hair, suddenly declares that she is heterosexual. Babbitt does not only play around with stereotypes in terms of sexual orientation and looks, but also with regard to the way Jan's coming out is represented. As she is running out of the room, crying, it appears as if Jan is sad about having discovered her heterosexuality. Usually, it is the other way around: A (young) man or woman is shocked and desperate when he/she finds out being gay. Jan's coming out is a suitable example which demonstrates Babbitt's playing around with stereotypes.

Heteronormativity, being also a significant theme recurring again and again, is challenged by Mary's bigoted commands and assertions, for instance, "Foreplay is for sissies", or, "Now, what we must do is to relearn our masculinity and our femininity", or "It's important to make your man feel at ease when he comes home from a long day at work". Through this funny and parodic representation of masculinity and femininity, and the absurd rules, stereotypes, and traditions included therein (girls need to be dressed in pink, while boys must wear blue clothes, girls need to clean the house, while boys repair the car), spectators are able to acknowledge the artificiality and constructedness of gender. Concerning homosexuality, the movie conveys that "rehabilitation programmes", like 'True Directions', do not help at all (which is also implied in the last sequence when Megan

wins Graham back). Scenes showing same-sex characters getting close to each other (like Graham fondling Megan's forehead, or exchanging amorous glances), imply that queerness cannot be opposed or suppressed. Also, Andre (Douglas Spain) expresses this thought angrily, when he learns that he has failed the final test, "Congratulations liars! You know who you are and you know who you want; and nobody gonna change that!" (01:00:48). Ironically, it is Megan's parents who need to undergo a kind of therapy, as the final scene of the film shows (mentioned in the plot summary). Actually, they are "ill", since they participate in this therapy, whereas Megan has declined Mary's offer to stay in the camp (she has managed to escape the heteronormative system), if she performs the simulation in the fifth step of the programme with Rock. *But I'm a Cheerleader* is representative for the right to live out one's sexual identity freely. Accordingly, the Political Film Society has nominated the film for an award as best film exposé and best film on human rights for the year 2000<sup>71</sup>. Additionally, heterosexuals are presented as the "queer" ones because this movie does not only point out that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, but also takes the norms and "truths", represented by heteronormative society, and renders them strange and queer<sup>72</sup>. These significant aspects make *But I'm a Cheerleader* a valuable example of Queer Cinema. How gender and stereotypes, among other aspects, are represented in the final film, will be demonstrated in the next subchapter.

### 5.3. The Kids Are All Right

The American family film *The Kids Are All Right* was released in 2010 and directed by Lisa Cholodenko. It is set in California and revolves around a lesbian couple having two children<sup>73</sup>. The movie was nominated for 70 prizes and awards, and has won 16 (including two Golden Globes, one in the category of *Best Motion Picture – Comedy or Musical*, and Annette Bening for *Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture - Comedy or Musical*)<sup>74</sup>. Originally, *The Kids Are All Right* should have been released in 2006, however director Cholodenko delayed the project, as she became pregnant<sup>75</sup>. Concerning the movie's title, Cholodenko once stated in an interview,

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/polfilms/cheerleader.html>

<sup>72</sup> Sullivan, Nikki, p. 52-56.

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0842926/>

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0842926/awards>

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, Michael (June 25, 2010). "The woman behind 'The Kids Are All Right'". *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved June 29, 2010.

The film is about, you know, these women and their experience making a family. The family. The man who comes in and wants to be part of the family. Really when you're talking about the family, it's about the life of the kids. So it's sort of an ironic title, in the sense that the kids are kind of doing better than the moms, in a way. And it's also a kind of a wink to the notion that gay people can't raise healthy, psychologically healthy children. Like, the kids are fine. Don't worry about them. They're just right<sup>76</sup>.

According to the well known film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, 93% of critics have reviewed the comedy-drama picture positively. There is the consensus that, "Worthwhile as both a well-acted ensemble piece and as a smart, warm statement on family values, *The Kids Are All Right* is remarkable"<sup>77</sup>. Or, as *The Los Angeles Times* puts it,

[It] follows many of the conventions of the domestic suburban dramedy: take a seemingly ordinary, interesting couple with some smart, distinct teenagers and see how many deep and potentially dangerous fissures are revealed when the family is twisted in uncomfortable directions<sup>78</sup>.

This quotation leads me to the plot summary.

### **5.3.1. Plot**

Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore) are married and live together in a comfortable, suburban Southern California home. They are raising two teenage children, 18-year-old Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and 15-year-old Laser (Josh Hutcherson). The two mothers have received their children by means of donor insemination. They were using the same sperm donor, whereby each of them has given birth to one child. Nic is working as a perinatologist, whereas Jules is a housewife, who is intending to start a career in landscape design business. One day, Laser feels the need to find his biological father and asks his sister Joni for help, who, as she is already 18 years old, has the legal right to receive contact information about the sperm donor, if the latter agrees. No sooner said than done: The three meet. Paul (Mark Ruffalo), who is an easy-going restaurateur, immediately likes the two kids a lot, which is based on reciprocity. Joni is impressed by Paul's unconventional lifestyle, which stands in stark contrast to her own, regulated routine, since her mother, Nic is rather controlling and conservative. The kids intend to keep their meeting with Paul secret, however, Nic and Julie find out and invite Paul to dinner. When Julie states that she plans to engage in landscape business, Paul asks

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<sup>76</sup> [http://www.sfbg.com/pixel\\_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right](http://www.sfbg.com/pixel_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right)

<sup>77</sup> [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/10012141-kids\\_are\\_all\\_right/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/10012141-kids_are_all_right/)

<sup>78</sup> <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/17/entertainment/la-et-kids-20100617>

her to garden his back garden. Although Nic is not enthusiastic about the offer, Jules agrees. One day, while working for Paul, Jules suddenly kisses Paul and the two start an affair. Jules, Joni and Laser spend increasingly more time with Paul, while Nic feels undermined in authority, as Paul drives Joni home with his motorcycle (Nic is angry about it as she considers riding the motorcycle dangerous). In an attempt to get to know each other better, and to ease the tension, Paul invites Nic and the rest of the family to dinner. In Paul's bathroom, however, Nic finds traces of Jules' hair in the plughole (as well in Paul's bed). Jules admits the affair and the general mood becomes rather tense, as Nic and the kids are upset with Jules. When Paul suggests that Jules should bring the kids, abandon Nic and live with him, Jules declines his offer, appalled by his incomprehension for Jules' relationship with Nic. The night before Joni leaves home, in order to go to college, Jules remorsefully admits her mistakes under tears to her family and asks for forgiveness. The next morning, when they are driving home from the college, Laser tells his moms that they should not terminate their relationship because, "I think you're too old" (01:37:36), as he declares. The film ends with them smiling at each other, holding hands, which is observed by Laser, who is sitting on the backseat, also grinning.

### **5.3.2. *Lesbian Gender Stereotypes and Heteronormativity in The Kids Are All Right***

Although the first scenes in *The Kids Are All Right* suggest that Jules and Nic are having the perfect, intact family, spectators may become alert when Nic comes home from work, asking whose car is standing outside. Jules explains that it is her car and that she needs it for the business. Nic has no idea what she is talking about and states, "Oh, you mean the gardening?" (03:28). Joni adds, "Isn't it landscape design?" and Jules replies, "Thank you very much" (03:32). The fact that Nic does not even remember her wife's plans to start a career in landscape design, at first, indicates, right at the beginning of the film, that Nic does not take Jules so seriously when it comes to career plans. Moreover, Nic just calls it "gardening", whereas Joni corrects her mom, "Isn't it landscape design?". When Jules starts to narrate about the job offer, Nic does not seem to be interested at all, as she interrupts her, "Okay. Do we have any more of the Fiddlehead" (03:38). The "Fiddlehead" is a bottle of red wine and this dialogue between Nic and Jules indicates that Nic is more interested in alcohol than in her wife's project, hinting at both Nic's alcoholism and egocentrism.

Besides this short incident, gender roles seem to be divided clearly: Nic is the breadwinner, as she is having a full-time job and brings home the money, whereas Jules stays at home with the children, preparing dinner. In a traditional conception of gender roles, taking into consideration the women's daily tasks, one can argue that Nic represents the male gender role, whereas Jules is representative of the female one. This image of gender roles is often described as the "butch and femme dichotomy" (Walker et al. 104), which is a depiction of lesbian stereotypes in terms of gender. However, this alleged clear division of gender roles begins to blur in the course of the film, as Jules also begins to work for Paul.

Such lesbian gender labels (for example, dyke, butch, soft butch, femme, high femme) are decoded through mannerisms, ways of behaviour, and clothing styles that lesbians exhibit (Walker et al. 90). Butch and dyke lesbians represent gender along the "masculine" end of gender spectrum (for instance, by means of having short hair, wearing men's clothes, acting manlike, working in businesses dominated by men), whereas femme- and high femme lesbians embrace styles and behaviours that are regarded as typically feminine (wearing makeup, dresses and skirts, being employed in female professions, having long hair, wearing high heels, and so on). In between this gender spectrum, there are various gradations within the lesbian community, for example, soft butch (more masculine than femme, but more feminine than butch) and high femme (more feminine than 'femme'). Or, as Walker et al. explain, "[A soft butch] may be a lesbian who presents along the masculine spectrum of gender yet may have a few feminine qualities" (91). There are also 'butch/femme' lesbians who are difficult to categorise, as they "may present relatively equal masculine and feminine traits, or may alternate between the two presentations" (91). It is important to consider, however, that these labels can create positive or negative connotations, for example femmes could be considered fussy, or butches may be regarded as being emotionless because of their tough appearance. Generalisations like these can lead to false attributions to all homosexual women, as it happens generally with stereotypes and gay men, straight people, transsexuals, and so on.

Moreover, critics have argued that the butch-femme binary is a mere imitation of the gender roles of heterosexual men and women. However, Kennison claims that, "butch and femme are parodies that expose the fictionality of heterosexual norms" (148, 2008). She quotes Butler, who states,

The replication of heterosexual constructs in nonheterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual origin. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original' [...] reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original (43).

I have already stated the fact that "gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" in relation with drag (in chapter 3.3.3.). Butler also affirms the fictional quality and constructedness of heterosexuality. Hence, the butch-femme dichotomy cannot be regarded as an imitation of the heterosexual male-female binary, but rather as a copy of a copy, without an original.

As already mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, Nic and Jules seem to represent this butch-femme dynamic at the beginning of *The Kids Are All Right*. Director Lisa Cholodenko, however, did not want to fabricate the two characters in a fixed butch-femme style. She states, "I don't live in a world where people are super stratified. [Y]ou get Annette Bening and you get Julianne Moore, and they come with their own essence and personality. Julianne Moore has some butch in her and Annette Bening has some femme in her. They are who they are"<sup>79</sup>. Thus, Cholodenko intended to create a mixture of feminine as well as masculine traits in both characters.

In terms of style, and outward appearance, neither Jules nor Nic exhibit exclusively masculine, or feminine traits. The only aspect that makes Jules appear slightly more feminine is her long, fiery red hair. Her body is slender, but her clothes do not accentuate her female curves very much, as she is wearing trousers (no skirts or dresses) and T-shirts (no low-cut blouses) (Figure 25). From a stylistic perspective, Nic resembles Jules. She also wears trousers, blouses (which conceal her breasts), blazers, sweaters, and comfortable leisure shoes (Figure 26). Concerning clothes, both women rather dress casual, gender-neutral, since wearing trousers as a woman, is regarded as normal in modern Western societies (in comparison to former times). Therefore, I do not consider pants as a masculine marker. Additionally, none of them wears make-up or high-heels, which is feminine-coded. Based on these observations, neither Jules nor Nic are exemplary epitomes of butch and femme lesbians.

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<sup>79</sup> [http://www.sfbg.com/pixel\\_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right](http://www.sfbg.com/pixel_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right)



Figure 25



Figure 26

Due to the fact that Jules stays at home with the children, being a caring mother and housewife preparing dinner, she is rather associated with the traditional female role than the masculine. Nic, on the other hand, as I stated, is the “moneymaker”, thus she can be rather attributed to the male role, than to the female (which is also underlined by her male name). However, she is very anxious about her children, almost controlling. Nic also behaves towards Jules in this way, as she seems to force Jules to stay at home, and does not like the idea of Jules working for Paul. Jules expresses this thought, hinting at Nic’s control addiction, when they are having an argument one night, “Come on, you hated it when I worked. You wanted me at home taking care of the kids. You wanted a wife. You didn’t like any of the nannies, and you sure didn’t back my career” (01:00:48). Nic replies, “What are you talking about? I just helped you start another business” (01:00:50). Jules responds, emphasising Nic’s egocentrism, “Yeah, so you can feel better about yourself” (01:00:54). This scene shows that Nic seems to feel more comfortable when tasks and responsibilities are distributed clearly; she is going to work, whereas Jules stays at home with the children. With regard to outward appearance and character, Nic and Jules fall in the middle of the gender spectrum (where feminine and masculine traits blur), exhibiting both feminine and masculine attributes (as both women show their emotions, for example). Thus, the femme-butch dichotomy, I discussed, cannot be applied fully. Cholodenko’s blending of masculine and feminine stereotypes (behaviour, looks, and appearance), thus, conveys a queer notion, as Jules and Nic cannot be categorised strictly. Moreover, the mere fact that *The Kids Are All Right* deals with two female protagonists being married, which is against the so-called norm, renders the movie queer and exemplary for Queer Cinema.

In contrast to Jules and Nic, Paul can be described more clearly regarding his outward appearance. He is very masculine in appearance, having a beard, short hair, an athletic figure, wearing jeans, man's shirts, and a leather jacket (Figure 27). Additionally, he is a passionate motorcyclist, which underpins his masculine appearance. Paul is an easy-going, confident, independent guy, both in terms of business (as he has his own little organic farm), and in matters of love, since he does not have a committed relationship, but prefers having casual sex with the feminine, exotic beauty Tanya. Due to the fact that Paul desires a lesbian woman (Jules) and has an interracial sexual relationship with an exotic beauty, Paul can be considered as a queer character, since Queer Theory also regards factors like race and ethnicity. However, the romance between Paul and Jules was not welcomed by the lesbian and gay community, as I will explain subsequently.



Figure 27

Despite the fact that *The Kids Are All Right* deals with two lesbian protagonists, the film has been heavily criticised for perpetuating the stereotypes that “all gay women secretly desire a man”<sup>80</sup>, or, “all gay women have had bad experiences with men and therefore became lesbians“. Thus, the film was accused of reinforcing heteronormativity because a lesbian, being in a committed relationship, starts an affair with a man. As the film follows Hollywood conventions, which portray heterosexual love relations as the ideal, it is implied that “heteronormativity remains at the throne”<sup>81</sup>. Director Cholodenko argues that she intended to reach a wide audience, to represent a diverse spectrum of human sexuality, and to make a

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/the-kids-are-all-right-not-according-to-the-lesbian-lobby-2141111.html>

<sup>81</sup> <http://iheartcinema-wendy.blogspot.co.at/2010/08/kids-are-alright.html>



mainstream movie, therefore, she has included the romance between Paul and Jules. She describes the film as an “interesting intermingling of straight and gay. [...] This is really inclusive of gay and straight”<sup>82</sup>. Or, as some critics defend Cholodenko, “[A]s a gay mother, she realistically represents the fluid nature of sexual desire”<sup>83</sup>. Whether *The Kids Are All Right* is representative of fluid, various sexualities, which renders it queer, or whether it confirms heteronormativity is a matter of opinion. Indeed, it contains many queer aspects and provides significant information regarding gender stereotypes, as I have analysed.

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<sup>82</sup>[http://www.sfbg.com/pixel\\_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right](http://www.sfbg.com/pixel_vision/2010/07/07/lisa-cholodenko-kids-are-all-right)

<sup>83</sup><http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/the-kids-are-all-right-not-according-to-the-lesbian-lobby-2141111.html>

## 6. CONCLUSION

This thesis critically examined representations of sex, gender, stereotypes, identity, queerness and heteronormativity in the three American motion pictures *Boys Don't Cry*, *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *The Kids Are All Right*. In the course of my paper, I have given a detailed insight into various representations of gender. I analysed suitable scenes and sequences from the films, looking closely at dialogues between the characters (direct verbal expressions), behaviours and gestures (indirect conveyance), costume and style (clothing, makeup, hairstyle), particular gendered objects and symbols (for example, the cowboy hat, cigarettes, the artificial penis), setting and location, and technical, cinematic aspects (camera movement, angle, colour imagery, lighting, etc.).

In *Boys Don't Cry*, I have illustrated that sex and gender are two independent concepts, which do not necessarily have to be in accordance. This film rejects rigid categorisations, which is a primary principle of Queer theory. This has been predominantly demonstrated by means of the transsexual protagonist Brandon Teena, who was born a woman, however, prefers to live as a man. Thus, it proves that gender is a performance, no stable, essential entity, undepinning Butler's theory of performativity. In terms of the presentation of gender, Brandon Teena obviously intends to pass as a man. Therefore, he is dressed in a rather stereotypical way: Mostly he is wearing man's shirts, trousers, shoes, and a cowboy hat, underlining his masculine physique. His hair is cut short and he wraps up his breasts every day in order to pass as a man. Paradoxically, Brandon Teena embodies many male signifiers, although he is actually a woman. Due to his disguise and deliberate passing as a man, Teena is portrayed in a very stereotypical way, which conveys, for example, 'a real man needs to wear loose-fit pants and shirts, preferably in blue colours (as blue is associated with the male gender), shingled hair, and a cowboy hat'. 'Men need to have a penis, however, must not have breasts'. Through this stereotypical portrayal of Brandon Teena, various stereotypes of how a man should dress and be like, are confirmed, as I have illustrated by means of the examples in the analysis. Although, *Boys Don't Cry* provides a space for queerness and challenges the concept of sex per se, it reinforces stereotypes concerning the male gender. Nevertheless, the film may be regarded as a worthwhile contribution to the field of Queer theory, as it deals with crucial concepts, like sexuality, identity, gender, homophobia, which are issues at stake within the academic field of Queer theory.

The second film I have analysed, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, is abound with sexual stereotypes, as already discussed. It offers a colourful presentation of how men and women should behave in order to attain the 'right' sexual orientation (heterosexuality) and to rediscover their hidden sexual identity. However, through this exaggerated and absurd portrayal of being 'feminine' and 'masculine', gender stereotypes are parodied, which renders them odd, ridiculous, hence queer. In this way, director Babbit also highlights that, both gender and the stereotypes resulting thereof, are artificial constructs, thereby conveying their subversive potential. Thus, both the subversive and queer aspect of the movie is notably perceptible. Although this depiction of gender stereotypes is exemplary of the stereotypes existing in real life about men and women, it cannot be taken seriously because of its satirical presentation and parody. Actually, this parodic way of representing stereotypes encourages to think about how deeply gender stereotypes are entrenched within our culture, and how some of them are deployed to the detriment of other people (in this example homosexual adolescents).

The last and final picture, I have dealt with, is *The Kids Are All Right*. In the course of my analysis, it became clear that, although the two lesbian protagonists do not completely represent the butch-femme dichotomy, some gender stereotypes are perpetuated in the film. For example, the fact that Nic, who is the breadwinner, does not like the idea of Jules pursuing a career, implies that one of the two spouses must stay at home with the children, being a housewife. This confirms the traditional role model of men going to work, making money, whereas women stay at home, taking care of the kids and preparing dinner. Due to the fact that in *The Kids Are All Right*, two women represent this distribution of tasks, however, the film can be regarded as an example of Queer Cinema. On the other hand, many lesbian and gay critics have argued that *The Kids Are all Right* has achieved nothing but a confirmation of heteronormative values and beliefs, which is predominantly resulting of the fact that an outspoken, married lesbian is having an affair with a heterosexual man. Based on Cholodenko's argument that she intended to include an "interesting intermingling of straight and gay. [...] This is really inclusive of gay and straight", thereby representing the fluid nature of sexual desire, *The Kids Are All Right* conveys a certain degree of queerness.

Summing up, I have demonstrated by means of these three American movies that sex and gender are two unrelated concepts. Through the various examples of

my analyses, I have shown that gender is a performative, artificial construction, having been fabricated by society and culture. All protagonists of the films are facing issues of identity, gender, stereotypes, sexual orientation, heteronormativity, social acceptance and prejudice, homophobia, right versus false, and intolerance. All three pictures are concerned with aspects of femininity and masculinity and challenge the heteronormative space. *Boys Don't Cry* shows that a girl who identifies as heterosexual, is falling in love with a biological woman disguised as a man. *But I'm A Cheerleader* demonstrates that heteronormative values and assumptions are as artificial and fictional, as gender itself, by parodying these concepts. Last but not least, *The Kids Are All Right* revolves around a lesbian family, which challenges the heteronormative family, 'normally' consisting of a mother, a father, and children. My findings underline the queer notion, these movies share.

As I have stated in the introduction, this thesis seeks to examine whether the representation of gender roles and gendered behaviour in the selected films subverts, or underpins heteronormative power structures. Due to the fact that Brandon Teena is portrayed as a man in a rather stereotypical way, *Boys Don't Cry* confirms the stereotype of how a typical, ideal man should be like (in terms of outward appearance and behaviour). The fact that Brandon Teena is actually a woman, however, challenges normative assumptions on gender, which conveys a subversive notion. In *But I'm A Cheerleader*, director Jamie Babbit is playing around with gender stereotypes in a very parodic way, thereby subverting these stereotypes rather than affirming them. Like *Boys Don't Cry*, Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* has both subversive and confirming potential. It depends on the viewpoint, if the film reinforces traditional role models of man and woman (as I have already explained), or if it subverts traditional gender stereotypes because of the fact that the two married protagonists are women, who exhibit both masculine and feminine traits in terms of behaviour, clothing, style, and so on (hence, both Nic and Jules convey an androgynous notion). Thus, my proposed hypothesis can be verified only partially.

In conclusion, this thesis has illustrated that the films I have dealt with, display a diverse gender spectrum and highlight that gender is rather a continuum than a binary. In the course of my analysis, I have tried to demonstrate that these varied performances of gender do not only emphasise that gender is diverse, but point out that, ideally, neither of these performances can be done wrong nor right. However, as Judith Butler describes gender as a "strategy of survival [...] with clearly punitive

consequences“ (522), *Boys Don't Cry* supports this argument as it ends with fatal consequences. In terms of gender stereotypes, the three movies show that they serve an important function in culture and society and exert great influence: They have a lasting impression on people's conceptions of how a man and a woman should be like. In order to raise awareness that gender stereotypes are artificial constructions, fabricated by society, I decided to focus on these stereotypes. Owing to the fact that the analysed films belong to the genre of Queer Cinema, and the primary focus of this thesis lies on gender, I consider this paper a significant contribution to both Gender and Queer studies.

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*But I'm A Cheerleader*. Screenplay written by Brian Wayne Peterson. Dir. Jamie Babbit. DVD. Lionsgate, 1999.

*The Kids Are All Right*. Screenplay written by Lisa Cholodenko, Stuart Blumberg. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko. DVD. Focus Features, 2010.

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*The Celluloid Closet: Gefangen in der Traumfabrik*. Screenplay written by Rob Epstein, Vito Russo, Jeffrey Friedman, Sharon Wood, Armistead Maupin. Dir. Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman. DVD. TriStar Pictures, 1996.

*Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema*. Screenplay written by Lisa Ades, Lesli Klainberg. Dir. Lisa Ades, Lesli Klainberg. DVD. Pro-Fun Media, 2006.

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## 8. APPENDIX

Abstract: English

Based on an extensive, theoretical framework, this thesis investigates to what extent significant academic disciplines, like Gender Studies and Queer Theory, represent relevant notions and beliefs concerning stereotypes, gender, identity, performativity, and heteronormativity. In order to comprehend the mentioned, theoretical concepts, this thesis refers to influential scholars arising from the field of Queer Theory, as well as Gender Studies. By means of these theories and approaches, it will be demonstrated that Queer Theory rejects any kind of essential, assumed norm, whereby sexual identities and categories are regarded as social constructions without any essential core. By means of Gender Studies, being the second major academic field of interest with regard to this thesis, it will be illustrated that both sex and gender are cultural constructs, which means that gender is performatively reproduced through the body again and again. In order to provide an introduction into the field of Gender Studies, both Butler's and Beauvoir's notions of sex and gender, among others, will be discussed.

Based on these considerations, the mentioned concepts will be applied in three films in the second part of this thesis: *Boys Don't Cry*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and *The Kids Are All Right*. When looking at the theoretical approaches, it becomes clear that the selected films provide an ideal basis for "whatever is at odds with the normal", be it transsexuality, homosexuality, rehabilitation camps for homosexual adolescents, or gender and behaviours deviating from the so-called 'norm'. It will be demonstrated in what ways the characters in these films deviate from normative conceptions, and what kind of aggravating, even fatal consequences such deviations will have. For the purpose of illustrating how theoretical conceptions work within cultural representations, this thesis examines in what ways (stereotypical) gender roles are presented, and intends to answer the questions arising thereof. Another important question, which will be pursued in this thesis, is whether the presented behaviours and stereotypes in the selected films undermine, or confirm any gender norm. Since all of the selected movies feature gender- and identity-based themes and provide a vast range of symbolic imagery, I regard them suitable for the analysis in this thesis. The core idea of this thesis is to provide a conclusion of the ways, gender roles and behaviours are being presented, and whether these behaviours

depicted in the movies are conveyed as being (hetero)normative, and thereby confirmed, or if such stereotypical representations are, for example, parodied, and therefore have subversive and undermining potential.

Abstract: German

Basierend auf einem umfangreichen theoretischen Rahmenkonzept untersucht diese Masterarbeit inwiefern Wissenschaftsfächer, wie Genderforschung und Queer Studies, relevante Begriffe und Auffassungen hinsichtlich Stereotypen, Geschlecht, Identität, Performativität und Heteronormativität repräsentieren. Um die beschriebenen, theoretischen Konzepte begreifen zu können, verweist diese Masterarbeit auf einflussreiche Gelehrte, die akademischen Fächern, wie der Queer-Theorie und der Geschlechterforschung entstammen. Mit Hilfe dieser Theorien und Denkansätze wird aufgezeigt, dass Queer-Theorie jegliche "wesenhafte" Normen ablehnt, demzufolge werden sexuelle Identitäten und Kategorien als soziale Konstrukte angesehen, ohne einen grundlegenden, wesentlichen Kern. Anhand von Genderforschung, welche das zweite bedeutende Interessensgebiet dieser Masterarbeit darstellt, wird veranschaulicht, dass das biologische Geschlecht ("sex") und das soziale Geschlecht ("gender") soziale Konstrukte sind, die immer wieder performativ konstruiert/produziert werden. Um eine Einführung in das akademische Feld der Genderforschung anzubieten, werden sowohl Butler's als auch Beauvoir's, (unter anderem), Auffassungen von "sex" und "gender" behandelt.

Auf der Grundlage dieser Überlegungen werden die erwähnten Konzepte im zweiten Teil der Masterarbeit anhand von drei Filmen angewendet: *Boys Don't Cry*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, und *The Kids Are All Right*. In Betracht dieser theoretischen Ansätze wird deutlich, dass die gewählten Filme eine optimale Grundlage für, „Alles was sich gegen die Norm auflehnt“ darstellen, sei es Transsexualität, Homosexualität, Besserungsanstalten für homosexuelle Jugendliche, oder Geschlechtsverhalten, die von der so genannten „Norm“ abweichen. Es wird aufgezeigt, inwiefern Charaktere in diesen Filmen von normativen Auffassungen abweichen, und welche Art von unangenehmen, sogar verheerenden Folgen diese abweichenden „Verhaltensweisen“ haben werden. Um aufzuzeigen wie theoretische Konzepte in sozial, kulturell konstruierten Darstellungen funktionieren, untersucht diese Masterarbeit auf welche Art und Weise (stereotypische) geschlechtsspezifische Rollen dargestellt werden, und intendiert die Fragen, die daraus resultieren, zu

behandeln. Eine weitere wichtige Frage, die sich stellt, und im Laufe dieser Masterarbeit beantwortet werden soll, ist, ob die in den ausgewählten Filmen dargestellten Verhaltensweisen und Stereotypen untergraben, oder geschlechtsspezifische Normen bekräftigen. Da alle gewählten Filme gender- und Identitäts-bezogene Thematiken darbieten, und eine ausgedehnte Bandbreite von symbolischer Bildsprache bereitstellen, sind sie für diese Masterarbeit geeignet. Die Kernidee dieser Arbeit besteht darin, eine logische Schlussfolgerung bereitzustellen, in der Geschlechterrollen und Verhaltensweisen dargeboten werden, und ob die in den Filmen geschilderten Verhaltensweisen als heteronormativ (und dadurch bekräftigt) übermittelt werden, oder ob sie zum Beispiel parodiert werden, und dadurch umstürzlerisches, untergrabendes Potential haben.



# CURRICULUM VITAE

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## Sprachen

*Deutsch:* Muttersprache  
*Englisch:* Fließend  
*Spanisch, Latein:* Grundfertigkeiten