

Representation of LGBTQ People in Film and Television

Introduction:

The purpose of this research is use semiotic analysis and discourse analysis to study the representation of LGBTQ-identified people in popular films released within the past 20 years in the United States. Going into this research, I had three main questions I wanted the analysis to address:

1. What are the stereotypes associated with people who identify as LGBTQ, and how do popular films enforce them?
2. Which LGBTQ identities are represented the most? How are they represented?
3. What does the portrayal of LGBTQ say about American culture, and how might it affect the movement for gay rights?

Methods

To look at representation, I chose to use both semiotic and discourse analysis and apply them to five different popular films featuring prominent LGBTQ characters. All five were films released within the last 15 years by massive Hollywood production companies and all of them were successful at the box office. Along with applying both of these kinds of analysis to the visual representation and storylines within the films themselves, I also used semiotic analysis to look at the movie posters for each film. I selected the five films from a list of prominent LGBTQ movies. I chose to analyze *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Rent* (2005), *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), and *The Imitation Game* (2014). I chose these particular films because they were successful, had main characters that were clearly identified as

LGBTQ, and represented multiple genres. However, because I did select them myself and they were not randomly selected, there is some bias in my results. If I were to expand on this study in the future, I would study a greater amount of films and use a random generator to select the specific ones to analyze in order to decrease the amount of bias in my results.

Why This Research Matters

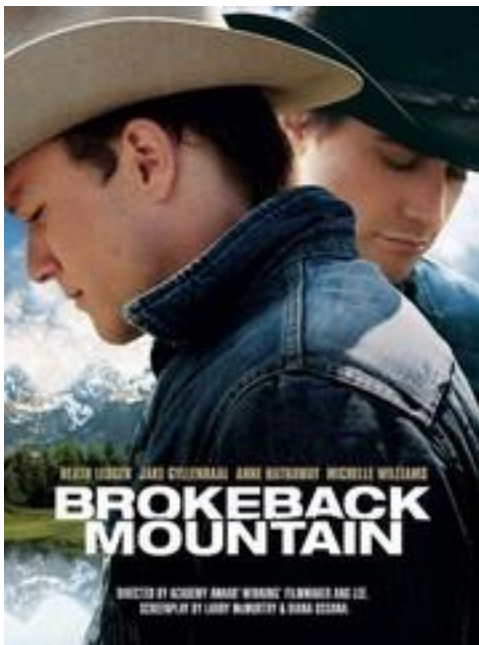
Representation is important because film, like all forms of mainstream media, reinforces the social structures and privileges that already exist in society. LGBTQ people have a history of being portrayed negatively in the media in the United States, particularly in the realm of film.¹ When people of a certain gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation are represented over and over again, in many complex and varying ways, it reinforces the idea that this certain type of person is who the stories should be about. The characters that appear in films shape the way that people see themselves, and how they view and interact with the world around them. According to MediaSmarts, “privilege is the relative benefit that a group enjoys as a result of the discrimination or oppression of other groups.”² Portrayals of minority or oppressed groups in the media can help construct stereotypical and false identities. According to Felmlee, the primary

1. Jennifer Bonds Raacke, Elizabeth T. Cady, Rebecca Schlegel, Richard J. Harris, and Lindsey Firebaugh. “Remembering Gay/Lesbian Media Characters: Can Ellen and Will Improve Attitudes Towards Homosexuals?”

2. “Queer Representation in Film and Television.” *Media Smarts*. Accessed 17 May 2016.
<http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/queer-representation-film-television>

stereotypes attributed to LGBTQ people are, “gender atypical traits, sexual promiscuity, and predatory sexual tendencies.”³ While there were no instances of LGBTQ people being portrayed as sexual predators in the five films I analyzed, gender atypical traits and sexual promiscuity were common themes among the characters. These groups are reduced to only one aspect of their identity, while privileged and widely represented groups are allowed to have complex, rich stories and identities. Having diversity in representation gives the audience a chance to see themselves in characters that are like them and learn more about others who are not.

Analysis



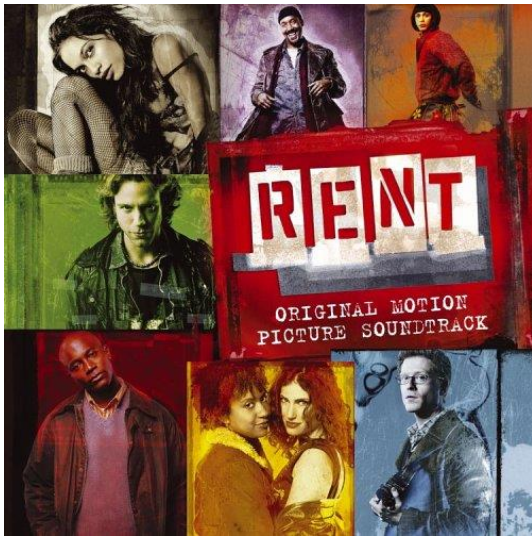
Film 1: Brokeback Mountain

3. Evelyn Schlatter and Robert Steinback. “10 Anti-Gay Myths Debunked.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Published 27 February 2011. Accessed 25 May 2016. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2011/10-anti-gay-myths-debunked>

The first film I analyzed was *Brokeback Mountain*, which was released in 2005. The movie stars two very famous actors, with Heath Ledger as Ennis Del Mar and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack Twist, playing two cowboys that fall in love and must keep their connection a secret in a conservative town in 1960s Montana. This film is a drama, and explores the struggles of the two men and their forbidden relationship in a very complex, human way. Their relationship is never portrayed as comedic or insubstantial. Despite the intense romantic relationship the two have together, both characters go on to marry women and start families, which shows how dangerous it was for people to “come out” about being homosexual at that time. Even though they are not portrayed as straight, they are still white, masculine, and conventionally attractive men. Their sexuality is the only aspect of their identity that does not fit into the most common protagonist type in American movies, which is the white, cis-gender, and straight male. Of the two, Ennis is closer to achieving this standard. He is more reluctant about the relationship, does not openly express his emotions, and seems much more committed to his relationship and life with his wife than Jack does with his. It is unclear whether Ennis is completely gay or bisexual. Jack, in contrast, aligns more closely with the stereotypes associated with gay men. He initiates more of their interactions, expresses interest in other men later on in bars, and dresses in a way that is more flamboyant. He appears to be more comfortable with his sexuality than Ennis, and he eventually pays the ultimate price for it when he is murdered by a group of homophobic men from town.

These same themes also play into the poster for the film. Ennis is takes up most of the space on the poster, standing in front of Jack but looking down with a solemn, reserved expression. Jack is behind him and is much less visible. He appears to be

leaning in to Ennis's shoulder, while Ennis looks away, possibly implying that Jack was more in love than his partner. The film portrays two LGBT men whose lives and emotions are complex and human, but still seems to punish the "gayer" character in the end.



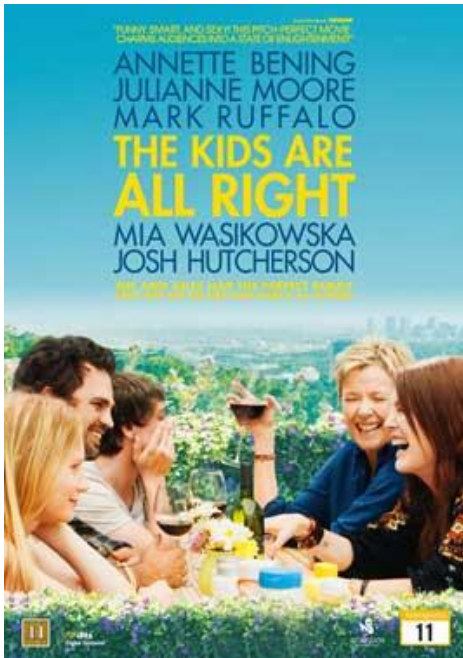
Film 2: Rent

The second film that was analyzed, *Rent*, was adapted from a Broadway musical and released as a movie in 2005. The narrative follows the lives of eight friends, all poor and struggling artists, living in New York City during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. This film is extremely diverse in its portrayals of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ableism. The characters come from various ethnic backgrounds, and there are different characters that identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender. However, there were still some portrayals that play into harmful stereotypes often associated with these different identities. The relationship between the characters Maureen and Joanne is a strong example of this. Their relationship is tumultuous, unhealthy, and unstable. They fight constantly and struggle with trusting each other. Maureen also dated the character Mark for awhile (before leaving him for Joanne) and can be assumed to be bisexual. She

is portrayed as a cheater, as someone who is sexually promiscuous and who cannot commit to whoever she is dating at the time. There are multiple scenes where she is shown flirting with other women while Joanne is in the room with her- even at their own wedding ceremony. Being sexually promiscuous and unable to maintain healthy, loving relationships are common stereotypes associated with LGBTQ people, especially those that identify as bisexual.⁴

Another important aspect of the narrative in this film is that it is told through the perspective of the character Mark, who is an amateur filmmaker documenting what it is like to live in New York City. He is filming everything the eight of them do together throughout the film, and the very last scene is Mark playing the final cut, which is a montage of all of the experiences together over the past two and a half years. Of the eight characters in the show, five of them are people of color and four of them are definitely identified as somewhere in the LGBTQ spectrum, and yet the story is told through the gaze of a straight white male. Despite the diversity the film achieved with its casting and characters, the audience is still told the story through the literal lens of the kind of character they will already be the most familiar with.

4. Amber Hooke. "The Portrayal of the LGBT Community in Media." *Rampages*. Accessed 21 May 2016.
<http://rampages.us/amberhooke1/research-essay-lgbt-media/>



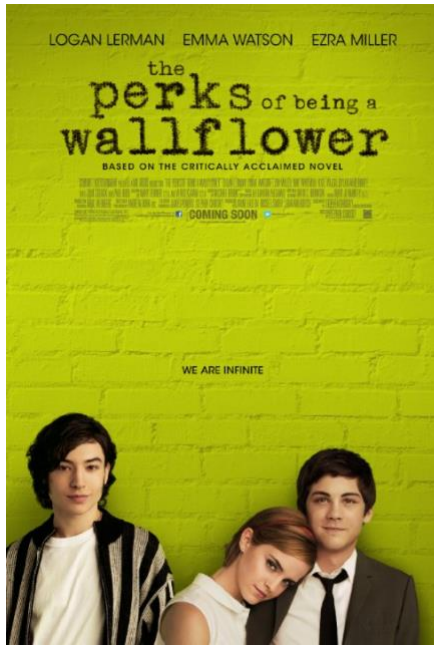
Film 3: The Kids Are All Right

The Kids Are All Right is a comedy-drama that focuses on a lesbian couple who each gave birth to a child from the same anonymous sperm donor, and how their family begins to struggle once the kids decide they want to get to know the donor. Though some of their conflicts arise from their unique circumstances as a same-sex couple who cannot have biological children without a sperm donor, the fact that they are lesbian does not define either of the mothers or the family they have created together. In all other aspects, they line up well with the “normal” American family as a white, middle class, and slightly dysfunctional. They live in a suburban neighborhood in Southern California, drive a nice car, and are dealing with the expected struggles of trying to keep a marriage together while balancing careers and raising two standoffish teenagers.

The two mothers, Nic and Jules, also conform to the expected husband-wife relationship in many ways. Nic, whose name is more masculine, also has shorter hair dresses in less feminine clothes, and is more of a father figure. She has an established

career in the medical field and provides the family's primary income. She is more responsible, organized, and nervous than her wife, Jules. It is clear that she is someone who likes to be in control and helps hold the family together. Jules is much more stereotypically feminine. She has longer hair, wears dresses and more feminine patterns, is silly and giggly a lot of the time, and has focused more on raising the two children than on developing a career. Jules also eventually has an affair with the sperm donor, Paul, and mentions that she has also slept with other men before she was with Nic, implying that she is probably bisexual. Her adultery plays into the theme of LGBTQ people being sexually promiscuous and bisexuals being cheaters who cannot commit. Even though Jules is the one who cheats, she is still portrayed as more sympathetic than Nic's character, who seems hysterical and fragile at times. There is a sense that Jules, as someone who is attracted to both genders, has more freedom and options, while the more stereotypical lesbian Nic, whose life revolves around her family and her love for her wife, is naïve and fragile.

These themes are also apparent in the movie poster. The American idea of normalcy is clear in the image, where we see five white, smiling people as all part of a family enjoying a meal in front of a sunny city skyline. Their meal of cheese and wine seems very upscale and expensive. Jules and Nic are seated next to each other at the table, but the positioning of the bodies is different. Both are laughing, but Nic is doing so while facing her wife, while Jules and Paul are making eye contact. Nic's eyes are also closed, which could represent her blindness to her own marriage struggling and Jules's affair with a straight man.



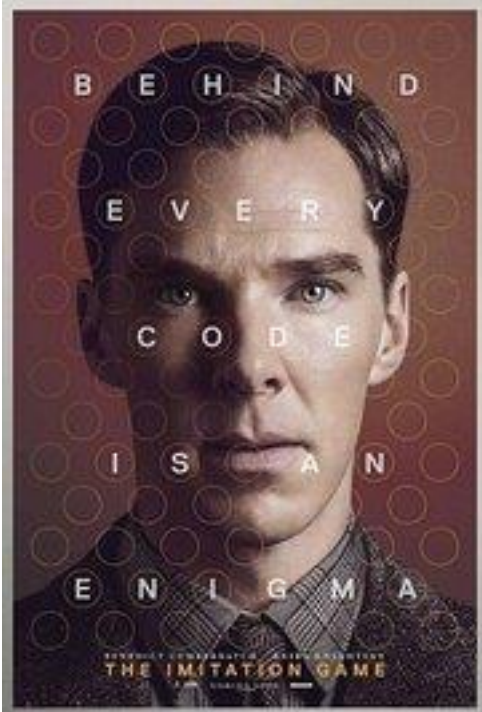
Film 4: The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Released in 2012, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a coming-of-age story focused on a shy boy named Charlie, who narrates his story through letters he addresses to an anonymous person. He deals with many normal themes explored in stories about growing up, such as trying to fit in and find friends in high school, struggling with academics, and falling in love with people who are not interested in him, as well as much more serious topics, such as suicide, child abuse, and sexual assault. This film does a good job of portraying the young characters in a complex, interesting way, where their sexuality impacts their lives and how other people treat them, but it is not the only interesting or important aspect of them figuring out who they are. One of Charlie's best friends, Patrick, is identified as gay and fairly open about his sexuality. In the beginning of the movie, he is dating a boy on the football team who comes from a much more conservative family and wants to keep their relationship a secret. When the football player's father later discovers their relationship, the father beats his son for it, which

leads the son to later beat up Patrick at school and call him a “fag.” This disturbing scene shows the negative impacts of parents not being accepting of their children’s sexual orientation, which is a significant problem for LGBTQ youth in the United States. Of homeless youth in the United States, roughly 20-40% identify as LGBTQ, and the majority of that 20-40% say that they are on the street because of conflicts with their family about their gender identity and/or religious views.⁵

The movie poster for this film has the three main characters looking directly at the camera. Charlie, who is on the far right, appears slightly awkward or uncomfortable, but content. Sam, who is Charlie’s close friend/love interest and Patrick’s sister, is in the center. She is leaning on Charlie’s shoulder affectionately. To the left her is Patrick standing separate from the other two, but also looking directly at the camera.

5. “Queer Youth Project.” *Northwest Youth Services*. Published 01 June 2014. Accessed 23 May 2016.
<http://www.nwys.org/wp-content/uploads/gates-pride-recommendations-report.pdf>



Film 5: The Imitation Game

The Imitation Game was a huge success when it was released in 2014. It was commercially successful and was nominated in eight categories at the Academy Awards, which was groundbreaking for a film that focuses on a gay character. It is based on the life of mathematician Allan Turing, who made significant efforts for the Allies in World War Two and contributed to key ideas that would help build the first computer. Even though he made a significant impact on the war efforts, his story is not talked about or taught very often. Though there is a lot of emphasis on Turing's sexuality in the flashbacks to him growing up, it is not made to be the central aspect of who he is. The narrative is much more focused on the conspiracies and drama surrounding the section he was working for during the war. His sexuality is explored mainly in the context of the reactions of people around him, and how learning about that aspect of him changes how they view him, and the way other people see him because of his sexuality eventually

leads to his downfall. Several years after the war has ended, he is convicted of indecency, and is given the choice between going to jail or chemical castration. He chooses castration so he is able to continue his work, but over the years his reputation and mental health deteriorate, and the audience is told that he goes on to commit suicide at 41 years old.

The movie poster for the film is simple, with Turing (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) staring directly into the camera. The viewer can only see his face and neck, making him appear very close and direct. The way he is looking out at the viewer feels personal, like there is a connection established between them. His gaze is at eye-level with the camera as well, which puts him and the viewer on even playing ground. He is not above, as if on a pedestal, or below, as if inferior. The anchorage in white, block letters are in front of his face in the image, and they read, "Behind every code is an enigma." This references how pieces of his own identity became puzzles for others to decode and crack, despite his great accomplishments.

Conclusions and Reflections

Analyzing five popular films from the past 15 years shows that there is still a long way to go in representation of LGBTQ people. While LGBTQ characters are becoming more common, films are still applying harmful stereotypes to these characters and their relationships with other people.⁶ Having more LGBTQ characters is important, but it is important to give them the same variety and complexity that would be given to a

6. Natalie Robehmend. "Study Reports Too Few LGBT Characters, No Transgender Roles in Movies." *Forbes*. Accessed 20 May 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2015/08/06/study-reports-too-few-lgbt-characters-no-transgender-roles-in-movies/#3bf834f574d1>

“normal” protagonist, which would be a straight, white male.⁷ Having LGBTQ characters that are mean or unlikeable or dysfunctional is not inherently negative, but it can become harmful when they are only portrayed in ways that reinforce stereotypes and seem to punish them for not being straight. In both *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Kids Are All Right*, the more flamboyantly gay or lesbian character is made to look more attached and straightforward, bordering on desperate or pathetic. Their outcomes are not as happy as the endings for the “straight-passing” character they are in love with.

There have been some positive steps forward. Because of the increasing amount of LGBTQ roles, the narratives are focusing less on the characters coming to terms with their sexuality and instead having their sexuality be just one piece of their overall identity and story. Most of the films I analyzed did not focus on the “coming out” aspect very much. What needs to accompany this diversity in narratives is diversity in the people in the films.⁸ Consistently, the characters given the most attention and empathy are usually white, conform to gender roles, and are more reluctant about their sexual orientation. Representation has improved drastically, especially within the past fifteen years, but there is still a ways to go.

Word Count: 3017

7. “Studio Responsibility Index.” *GLAAD*. Accessed 20 May 2016.
<http://www.glaad.org/sri/2015/overview>.

8. Eric Deggans. “Hollywood Has a Major Diversity Problem, USC Study Finds.” *NPR*. Published 22 February 2016. Accessed 20 May 2016.
<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/02/22/467665890/hollywood-has-a-major-diversity-problem-usc-study-finds>

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