

How can the same media text (a film, TV show or other form) be interpreted by different audience members as having either entirely heterosexual or obviously homosexual meanings? Explore, discuss and explain how ‘queer readings’ operate.

The interpretation of media texts is a dynamic and subjective process, influenced by the diverse perspectives and experiences of different audiences. The meanings derived from a media text are not fixed or predetermined, but rather, they can vary significantly from person to person. Queer readings provide a powerful lens through which audiences can engage with media in non-normative ways, challenging traditional interpretations and subverting dominant norms. In this essay, we will explore the concept of queer readings, their origins in feminist film criticism, and their influence on the interpretation of media texts. By examining specific examples from film, television, and popular culture, we will demonstrate how queer readings offer alternative perspectives that celebrate diversity, challenge heteronormativity, and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of media.

Queer readings refer to a form of interpretation where the audience perceives a media text in a non-normative way. This means that they do not interpret the text in a traditional or conventional manner, but instead, they bring in their own experiences, perspectives, and beliefs. Queer readings are a way of subverting dominant norms and challenging the status quo. They allow the audience to find alternative meanings in media texts that may not have been intended by the creators.

The concept of queer readings was first introduced by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Mulvey (1975) argued that mainstream cinema reinforces patriarchal power structures by presenting women as objects of male desire. She suggested that queer readings could subvert this dynamic by providing alternative interpretations that resist or challenge these norms.

Queer readings can be applied to any form of media, including films, TV shows, music videos, advertising, and even social media (Jagose, 1994). They are not limited to LGBT+ audiences; but can be used by anyone who wishes to explore non-normative readings of media texts.

Interpretation of Media Texts

The interpretation of media texts is influenced by various factors, including the audience's cultural background, personal experiences, and beliefs. These factors can shape the way that the audience perceives a media text and the meanings that they derive from it.

For example, consider the TV show *Friends*. The show was highly popular in the 1990s and early 2000s and is still watched by many today. The show is widely regarded as a classic sitcom that portrays the lives of six friends living in New York City. However, some audiences have interpreted the show as having queer meanings, particularly in relation to the character of Chandler Bing.

Chandler is portrayed as a sarcastic and sometimes awkward character who struggles with relationships. Some audiences have interpreted Chandler's behaviour as indicating that he is a closeted gay man (Baume, 2021; Keheller, 2021). They point to his reluctance to engage in sexual relationships with women and his close friendships with other male characters as evidence of this interpretation. However, others argue that Chandler's behaviour can be explained by his fear of intimacy and commitment; and that his close relationships with other male characters are simply indicative of close friendships.

Similarly, the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) has been interpreted in various ways by different audiences. The film tells the story of two cowboys who fall in love while working together on a ranch in Wyoming. Some audiences have interpreted the film as a powerful love story between

two men, that challenges traditional notions of masculinity and heterosexuality. Others have criticised the film for reinforcing stereotypes about LGBT+ people and perpetuating harmful tropes about queer relationships (Brajer, 2022).

Queer readings can be particularly powerful when applied to media texts that are traditionally seen as reinforcing heteronormative norms. For example, consider the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). The movie tells the story of Belle, a young woman who falls in love with a prince who has been transformed into a beast by a curse. The film has been widely criticised for promoting traditional gender roles and perpetuating detrimental analogies about relationships.

However, some audiences have interpreted the film in a queer way, arguing that the relationship between Belle and the Beast can be seen as a metaphor for a queer relationship. They point to the fact that the Beast is seen as an outsider who is misunderstood and judged by society, much like many LGBTQ+ individuals. They argue that the film explores themes of acceptance, empathy, and breaking free from societal expectations (Walsh, 2022). By applying a queer reading, audiences can find subversive and empowering meanings within the film that challenge heteronormative narratives.

In addition to personal interpretations, queer readings can also be influenced by broader cultural and societal contexts. As society becomes more inclusive and diverse, audiences are increasingly inclined to seek out and interpret media texts in ways that reflect their own identities and experiences. This can lead to the emergence of alternative readings that challenge mainstream interpretations (Fiske, 2010).

For instance, the TV show *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) features a diverse cast of characters and explores themes of sexuality, gender identity, and intersectionality. While the show

primarily revolves around the experiences of a female protagonist in a women's prison, audiences have applied queer readings to various characters and storylines. For example, the character of Sophia Buset, a transgender woman, has been praised for her representation and portrayal of transgender issues (Symes, 2017). Queer readings of the show allow audiences to appreciate the complex and multifaceted nature of sexuality and identity, going beyond simplistic and binary understandings.

Queer readings also operate within a larger framework of queer theory, which challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Queer theory acknowledges the fluidity and diversity of identities and aims to deconstruct and critique societal norms and power structures. By applying queer readings to media texts, audiences can actively engage with and question the dominant narratives, exposing underlying assumptions and biases (Liu, 2023).

It is important to note that queer readings do not invalidate or dismiss other interpretations of media texts. Instead, they provide an alternative lens through which audiences can explore and appreciate the diversity of human experiences. They contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of media and challenge the perpetuation of stereotypes and heteronormativity.

Queer readings, as discussed earlier, involve interpreting media texts in a non-normative way, challenging traditional interpretations and norms. These readings provide alternative perspectives that resist or subvert dominant power structures and offer insights into marginalised identities and experiences.

One aspect to consider when discussing queer readings is the notion of queer coding in media. Queer coding refers to the subtle or indirect representations of LGBTQ+ characters, themes, or relationships in media texts. It allows for interpretations that go beyond the explicit portrayal of

queerness (Baer et al., 2022). For example, in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the character of Ursula, the sea witch, has been interpreted by some audiences as a queer-coded character due to her flamboyant mannerisms and subversive nature. This interpretation challenges traditional heteronormative representations and offers a queer reading that explores themes of otherness and non-conformity.

Moreover, Sinfield (2005) argues: "Queer readings often intersect with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and class. These intersections influence the way audiences interpret media texts and can lead to more complex readings." For instance, the film *Moonlight* (2016), which explores the coming-of-age story of a young, gay, Black man, incorporates intersections of race and sexuality in its portrayal. Queer readings of the film not only focus on the character's sexuality but also delve into the experiences of queer individuals of colour and the challenges they face in a society that marginalises multiple aspects of their identity (Wheeler, 2021).

Exploring Nuances and Complexities

Queer readings operate within a larger framework of queer theory, which examines the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality. Queer theory challenges the binary understanding of sexuality and promotes a more fluid and diverse understanding of identities. This theoretical foundation allows for nuanced interpretations of media texts that go beyond a simplistic understanding of sexual orientation.

An important aspect to consider when discussing queer readings is the intention of the creators versus the audience's interpretation. Media texts are created with certain intentions and messages, but they can be received and interpreted differently by diverse audiences. Queer readings

emphasise the agency of the audience in constructing meanings, allowing for subjective and personal interpretations that resonate with individual experiences.

In-depth Analysis of Specific Media Examples

The film *Carol* (2015), directed by Todd Haynes, tells the story of a forbidden love affair between two women in the 1950s. The film explores themes of desire, societal constraints, and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in a repressive era. A queer reading of *Carol* not only acknowledges the explicit representation of lesbian relationships but also delves into the subtext, the power dynamics between the characters, and the societal expectations that shape their experiences (Bradbury-Rance, 2019). By examining the nuances of the film's narrative, cinematography, and performances, audiences can uncover deeper layers of queer meanings that challenge the heteronormative structures depicted.

Schitt's Creek (2015-2020), a comedy TV show created by Dan Levy and his father Eugene Levy, centers around a wealthy family who loses their fortune and is forced to relocate to a small town. While the show primarily focuses on the comedic aspects of the characters' lives, it also incorporates diverse and inclusive representations of sexuality and relationships. Queer readings of *Schitt's Creek* highlight the positive and affirming portrayal of queer characters, the exploration of queer relationships and self-discovery, and the show's emphasis on acceptance and growth. For example, the character of David Rose, played by Dan Levy, identifies as pansexual, and his relationships with both men and women are depicted in a normalised and non-judgmental manner (Pandey, 2020). Queer readings of *Schitt's Creek* appreciate the show's celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, its portrayal of queer love and relationships, and its overall message of embracing authenticity and personal growth.

Another significant example to consider is the film *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), directed by Luca Guadagnino. The film explores the burgeoning relationship between Elio, a 17-year-old boy, and Oliver, a graduate student who visits Elio's family for the summer. *Call Me by Your Name* has been interpreted as a queer love story that transcends conventional notions of age and gender. Queer readings of the film emphasise the exploration of desire, the fluidity of sexual awakening, and the celebration of same-sex love in a beautifully depicted coming-of-age narrative. The film's lush cinematography, the intense emotional connection between the characters, and the nuanced performances contribute to the rich tapestry of queer meanings that audiences can derive from the film (Chulick, 2019).

One important aspect of queer readings is the exploration of subtext and symbolism within media texts. This involves analysing elements such as character dynamics, narrative arcs, visual imagery, and dialogue to uncover hidden or implicit queer themes. By delving into subtext, audiences can reveal queer narratives or undertones that may not be overtly stated but can be interpreted through a queer lens (Anaina, 2020).

For example, in the TV show *Sherlock* (2010-2017), the relationship between the titular character Sherlock Holmes and his close friend and companion Dr. John Watson has been a subject of queer readings. Audiences have analysed the deep emotional connection, intense bond, and often ambiguous interactions between the characters, suggesting that their relationship could be interpreted as queer or having homoerotic undertones. These queer readings challenge the traditional portrayal of Holmes and Watson as platonic friends and explore the possibility of a queer narrative within the series.

Another aspect to consider when discussing queer readings is the influence of fan culture and fan interpretations. Fans often engage in transformative works, such as fan fiction, fan art, or fan

theories, that explore and expand upon the original media texts. Queer fans, in particular, may use these creative outlets to reimagine characters and relationships through a queer lens, allowing for alternative narratives and interpretations to emerge (Greer, 2015).

The Nuances and Complexities of Queer Readings

Queer readings are not limited to a single perspective or interpretation. They encompass a wide range of experiences and identities within the LGBTQ+ community. The diversity within queer readings allows for nuanced and multifaceted interpretations of media texts.

It is important to recognise that queer readings are subjective and depend on the audience's own experiences, identities, and cultural contexts. What may be a queer reading for one person may not resonate in the same way for another. Therefore, multiple queer readings can coexist, each offering unique insights and perspectives.

Analysis of Specific Media Examples

To illustrate the concept of queer readings in action, let's analyse the global pop sensation BTS.

BTS is a South Korean boy band that has gained immense popularity worldwide. Their music and visuals have resonated with diverse audiences, including LGBTQ+ fans who have embraced the band's messages of self-love, individuality, and acceptance.

Queer readings of BTS's music videos and performances highlight elements that challenge gender norms and present alternative expressions of identity and desire. For instance, the music video for their song "Boy With Luv" showcases vibrant and colorful aesthetics, playful choreography, and interactions between the band members that blur traditional gender norms. Audiences have interpreted these visuals as embracing queerness, celebrating non-binary expressions of identity,

and subverting heteronormative expectations. The band's performances, which often feature androgynous fashion choices and fluid movements, have further contributed to these queer readings (Hubbard, 2022; Sanchez, 2023).

Another example is the film "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" (2019), directed by Céline Sciamma. The film depicts a passionate and intimate relationship between two women in the 18th century. Queer readings of the film emphasise the exploration of desire, the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in repressive historical contexts, and the celebration of same-sex love. The film's cinematography, with its focus on subtle gestures and intense gazes, amplifies the emotional connection between the characters and invites queer interpretations (Bacholle, 2023; Jender, 2019).

Furthermore, the TV show "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" (2013-2021) has been praised for its inclusive and diverse representation of LGBTQ+ characters. Queer readings of the show appreciate the positive portrayal of queer relationships, the exploration of LGBTQ+ issues, and the incorporation of queer storylines (Miller, 2019). The character of Rosa Diaz, portrayed by Stephanie Beatriz, is a bisexual Latina detective whose coming out and subsequent relationships are depicted with sensitivity and authenticity. Queer readings of Rosa's storyline highlight the show's commitment to representation and the normalising of LGBTQ+ identities within a comedic context.

These examples demonstrate the power of queer readings to uncover alternative narratives, challenge societal norms, and celebrate diverse identities within media texts. Through analysing specific films, TV shows, and artists like BTS, we can see how queer readings can emerge from various cultural contexts, encouraging inclusivity, and expanding the understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences.

In conclusion, queer readings play a vital role in expanding the interpretation and understanding of media texts. They allow audiences to go beyond conventional and normative readings, offering alternative perspectives that challenge dominant power structures and resist heteronormativity. By drawing on personal experiences, cultural contexts, and the principles of queer theory, audiences can uncover hidden meanings, subtext, and symbolism within media texts. Whether it is reinterpreting beloved sitcoms like *Friends*, analysing critically acclaimed films such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Call Me by Your Name*, or appreciating the inclusive representation in TV shows like *Schitt's Creek* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, queer readings provide a platform for marginalised voices and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive media landscape. As audiences continue to seek out interpretations that reflect their identities and experiences, queer readings will remain a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes, dismantling societal norms, and fostering empathy and understanding. By embracing queer readings, we can celebrate the complexities of human experiences and create a more inclusive and accepting society.

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