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But I'm a Cheerleader: Queer in Content and Production

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When most people talk about LGBT representation in film, they talk about the writing. Is it accurate? Are the gay characters stereotypes? Does the only queer character die in the end (a common trope known as “Bury Your Gays”)? We don’t often analyze the technical aspects of queer cinema. While story content is important for representation of marginalized groups, how a film is shot and edited is just as important when it comes to portraying how LGBT people live their lives. One film revered by the LGBT community is Jamie Babbit’s *But I’m a Cheerleader* (2000) which uses techniques in art direction, shot selection, and editing to authentically represent how a queer person experiences life.

It’s important to note that not every gay, lesbian, trans etc. person has the same experiences. We are all individuals with multiple overlapping identities. This essay will draw mostly from my personal experience as a lesbian and from the experiences of my friends within the LGBT community. Nonetheless, many of us face similar experiences and *But I’m a Cheerleader* illustrates a few of them.

*But I’m a Cheerleader* was directed by Babbit, an out lesbian, and produced by Andrea Sperling, who was her girlfriend at the time (Fuchs, 2000). The film is about Megan Bloomfield, an all-American teenage girl with a passion for cheerleading. Megan is suspected by her friends and family to be a lesbian. In order to “help” her, they send her to a conversion therapy camp where she is made to confront her homosexuality, perform tasks deemed appropriate for her gender and to learn to love men in hopes of becoming an “ex-gay.”
Gender roles and stereotypes are present in films of all genres. Film theorist Robin Wood writes about this phenomenon in his essay *Ideology, Genre, Auteur*. In his essay, Wood defines American capitalist ideology which includes male and female “ideals” that are often present in films. Men are seen as adventurous and action oriented. Women are depicted as gentle and compassionate wives and mothers. Both are heterosexual and destined to marry, have children and continue the legacy. Wood states, “The most striking fact about this list is that it presents an ideology that, far from being monolithic, is inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions.” (Wood, 528-529).

Gender roles are fake, that is, they are socially constructed concepts that we humans came up with ourselves. However, because we’re constantly exposed to media that presents us with these ideals, people often feel pressured to adhere to them. This pressure is especially true for queer people who often don’t fit into these ideals. The art direction in *But I'm a Cheerleader* exemplifies this effect.

Everything about the conversion camp that Megan is sent to, called True Directions, represents gender roles similar to the ones that Wood discusses. All of the boys wear blue, typically masculine clothing such as button up shirts and lumberjack outfits. All of the girls at the camp wear pink skirts and blouses. The girls’ bedroom is pink and frilly. They learn to do housework in a room that looks like a typical 1950s living room. The boys learn to fix blue cars, chop wood out in nature, and even learn to be warriors in a scene where they pretend to battle
with guns. The patrons of the camp are bombarded with gender roles and forced to adhere to them.

Everything in the camp has a plastic quality to it. The plants are all fake and the house itself looks like a dollhouse. This approach to the film’s design expresses how gender roles are socially constructed and not real. Babbit explains her decisions in art direction in an interview with film professor Cynthia Fuchs. She states, “I wanted the production design to reflect the themes, like the artificiality of gender construction, like you’re more of a man if you can chop wood. It’s so stupid.” She notes how the fake, colorful set of True Directions contrasts with the scenes at Megan’s home, which have more browns and feel more organic (Fuchs). At home, Megan was comfortable and free to be herself. At True Directions, she’s forced to pretend to be something she’s not.

Throughout the film, as the characters try harder and harder to adhere to the roles they are given, the production design becomes more and more artificial looking until, at their graduation ceremony, even their clothes are made of plastic. This ceremony represents how queer people (especially those in closet) will often fake aspects of themselves in order to fit in and escape discrimination.
Another aspect of the production design in *But I’m a Cheerleader* includes suggestive set pieces. Babbit says in her interview, “We tried to give it a very homoerotic aspect, so that on all the boys’ sets, there are lots of phallic objects, as jokes, but also showing how if you repress something, it comes out in other ways.” Often times in the midst of trying to prove to the world that they’re not queer, parts of someone’s true identity can come out in ways they wouldn’t expect. This repression even happens to Megan. Though she’s even convinced herself that she’s straight, she keeps pictures of women in her locker and openly talks about how she hates making out with her boyfriend.
While the production design of *But I’m a Cheerleader* carries gendered symbolism, how the film is shot also speaks volumes. In the scene where Megan’s family and friends are giving her an intervention, there are many point-of-view shots from Megan’s perspective. A slightly distorted and disorienting wide angle shot shows everyone in the room staring at her, adding discomfort to the scene. Shots of Megan are from a higher angle, emphasizing how she doesn’t have much power in the situation. As each person among her friends and family gives their superficial reasoning for thinking Megan is gay, it cuts to close ups of their faces, even panning quickly between characters at certain points, further adding to the intensity and unease.

In this scene, we get a sense of how Megan feels. Everybody is ganging up on her and it seems like nobody wants to listen to her. At this point, Megan is unaware of her sexuality, but this experience can be compared to when queer people are trying to stay in the closet. It can feel like all eyes are on you and that every action you make can and will be scrutinized.

The high and low angle dynamic is kept throughout the film whenever the leaders of True Directions are addressing the group of teens. It’s at its most exaggerated in the third act of the film just before the kids of True Directions are tested on how well they can perform as a heterosexual. The two camp counselors are shot from extreme low angles, while the
teens are shot from extreme high angles which conveys how powerless they are. If they don’t pass the test they’re going to be kicked out of the camp and likely kicked out of their homes. This power struggle is very real for queer youth in America. Many, if not all of them rely on support from their parents in order to live and face the threat of being kicked out when they come out. It’s also easy to feel powerless in general when living in a society where many people don’t accept your sexuality.

Lastly, editing helps convey the meanings in But I’m a Cheerleader. In his essay The Dramaturgy of Film Form, Sergei Eisenstein wrote about how editing two seemingly unrelated images together can create an entirely new meaning. This editing technique is also known as the Kuleshov effect. For example, a shot of a man’s face followed by a shot of a bowl of soup conveys the idea that the man is hungry.

This technique is used in one of the opening scenes of But I’m a Cheerleader. Megan is making out with her boyfriend in his car. She seems incredibly uncomfortable and the scene is intercut with suggestive shots of cheerleaders performing. This shot sequence suggests that Megan would probably rather be kissing the cheerleaders than her boyfriend. This inference is confirmed later on when Megan comes to
realize that she is in fact gay. Shots of her fellow True Direction members are intercut with the same shots of cheerleaders and shots of her friends saying things like, “You hug us way too much,” and her boyfriend saying, “You don’t even like to kiss me.”

These moments are examples of experiences a person has when they first realize that they’re gay or bisexual. One will often fantasize about people of the same gender. Sometimes, those people in the closet don’t even realize what they’re doing. Megan says, “Everyone looks at other girls, all the time,” to which one of the other group members says “But you only assume that they’re thinking what you’re thinking when they look.” After finally realizing that she’s a lesbian, Megan begins to think about all of the red flags that she hadn’t seen before, something that many queer people do.

Though many of the production choices of But I’m a Cheerleader are exaggerated, the movie might not have gotten its point across had it been produced in a more typical way. Sure, the heartfelt story, humor and representation of gay and lesbian people would have been fine on its own, but techniques used in the movie are what gets the audience to fully understand what these characters are going through.
Works Cited

Babbit, Jamie, director. But I'm a Cheerleader. 1999.


