

TAILORING GAYNESS FOR THE MAINSTREAM: THE NUANCES OF QUEER REPRESENTATION IN *LOVE, SIMON*

Love, Simon is an American romantic comedy directed by Greg Berlanti and was released in 2018. The film is an adapted screenplay, based on the novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli. The film was the first blockbuster released by a major Hollywood studio that featured a gay main character. For that reason alone, *Love, Simon* has been regarded as a groundbreaking film, in addition to grossing about \$66 million at the box office and being well received by critics (“Love, Simon”). The main character, Simon Spier, is played by Nick Robinson. Simon is a white, middle-class, high school student who is struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation – being gay. Simon strikes up an online relationship with an anonymous fellow male student, “Blue,” after replying to his online confession on the school’s blogsite “Creek Secrets.” When another student, Martin, finds the emails and threatens to expose Simon’s secret to the rest of the school unless he helps him date one of his best friends, Simon must make difficult decisions in terms of his friendships, while simultaneously continuing to deal with his internal struggles.

Although groundbreaking in its mere existence, besides its gay lead, *Love, Simon* fits neatly into the formula for successful mainstream romantic comedies. Therefore, the gay main character is inserted directly into a historically heteronormative context. Furthermore, every other aspect of Simon’s identity is kept as mainstream as possible, including his gender, socio-economic status, and race. In this paper, I argue that the use of heteronormative tropes, as well as the lack of “otherness” in the film (besides gayness), is what makes it appealing for cis-het audiences and therefore qualified for mainstream release. Certain aspects of the film’s narrative, such as Simon’s aversion to explicit expressions of queerness and the romanticization of an

involuntary outing, offer an aversive reading to queer audiences and misleading one for straight audiences. The goal is therefore to examine the queer representation in *Love, Simon* beyond the groundbreaking meaning of its mere existence, while taking into consideration the wider context of the demands of the mainstream and the place of queerness within it.

THE ROMANTIC COMEDY FORMULA

To start, it is important to acknowledge that romantic comedies have long since followed a certain format. Their story arcs are similar, and they include many of the same tropes and characteristics. This is a format that audiences have been trained to expect and enjoy, giving directors very little wiggle room within the format, if they want their films to succeed. Any alteration from the normal format will pose a risk to the opportunity of success for the film. Leger Grindon argues that “romantic comedy is a process of orientation, conventions, and expectation” (1-2). The film industry orients its audiences to watch these films through catchy titles, popular actors, and marketing campaigns. Filmmakers follow the classic format and adapt elements from successful films in the genre. The audience has expectations that they will find in a romantic comedy familiar elements such as “flirtatious quarreling, and a particular emotional tone shaped by humor” (Grindon 2). To be accepted into the mainstream, romantic comedies must contain these elements.

THE DEMANDS OF THE MAINSTREAM

To be called mainstream blockbusters, films usually have to cost a lot and be made and distributed to maximize profits. Blockbusters are produced by major film studios and marketed through all forms of media. They are distributed widely and made to appeal to a large audience (Przylipiak 17). A defining feature of mainstream cinema, and the most important one in the context of this paper, is that it contains and propagates a dominant ideology, meaning that ideas or beliefs that are portrayed in mainstream films serve the interests of dominant groups

(Przylipiak 20). As is well known, the film industry is largely dominated by white, straight, male producers, directors, and executives (Smith 780). It can therefore be determined that the dominant ideologies in mainstream film serve the interests of that group in particular. Depictions of otherness such as queerness, racial or ethnic diversity, or radical ideologies like feminism, are therefore not likely to succeed within the confines of mainstream blockbuster filmmaking.

THE GAY BLOCKBUSTER

Given the history of the romantic comedy and the demands of the mainstream, it is obvious that queer stories do not fit into these models and have rather been told in the independent film sphere. The decision to insert gayness into the romantic comedy formula with the goal of still creating a blockbuster film is therefore a courageous task – one that includes a generous risk. This must be acknowledged and the creators of *Love, Simon* applauded for that decision. The director, Greg Berlanti, is gay himself and that is an important contextual element to acknowledge when the quality of the representation is evaluated. However, besides Simon's gayness, *Love, Simon* is highly formulaic, does not include any other elements that break out of the status quo, and includes tropes that have been deemed detrimental to representation of otherness. There are certainly elements existent in the film that are obviously included to make the story more palatable for straight audiences and contribute to the justification of queerness in straight spaces only if it is not too flamboyant, expressive, or visible.

SIMON SPIER: PERFECTLY NORMAL

First, it is important to acknowledge the obvious lack of otherness in the story and Simon's identity besides gayness. Simon is a white, middle-class, young man – the classic protagonist of a romantic comedy. He is a part of a classic nuclear family and lives with both his parents and his younger sister. When he comes out as gay to his parents, they react seemingly well, and Simon is never in danger of being kicked out of his home or losing his relationship with

his family. Even though his relationship with his friends suffers, it is not because of Simon's sexual orientation per se, but rather the actions he takes to protect his secret. He is seemingly "just like everyone else" and has "a totally perfectly normal life" as is emphasized in the film repeatedly (*Love, Simon* 01:58 – 02:05). Critics have claimed this emphasis on "normalcy" or even banality of the story to be one of the most commendable and powerful elements of the film (Sims). Nevertheless, the question arises of whether queer stories *should* emphasize how "normal" queerness is, and therefore be made palatable for straight audiences. It is debatable whether this sort of dilution of the depth and nuances of queerness, in order to appeal to a broader audience, can actually be deemed beneficial queer representation. Emphasizing the "normalcy" of being gay takes away the opportunity to depict the nuances of queer existence and disregards a long history of fight for human rights and social justice, fought by people that were far from the "normal" that Simon exemplifies.

Besides the fundamental "normalcy" embedded in Simon's character and his story, there are numerous aspects of the film that are highly heteronormative, and some can easily be considered detrimental to queer representation. Firstly, Simon is very clearly shown in comparison to the other out gay character at his school. While Simon is white, masculine or straight passing, and in the closet, his counterpart Ethan, is black, effeminate, and has been out of the closet for a long time. Simon says to his friends at one point in the film that he wished "Ethan wouldn't make it so easy for them," (*Love, Simon* 07:05 – 07:12) referring to Ethan being an easy target for bullies because of his feminine appearance and unapologetic expression of queerness. Ethan's character is very obviously sidelined in the film, and has no purpose but to draw up a contrast to Simon. Ethan is clearly meant to emphasize even further the "normalcy" of Simon.

Simon himself is highly averse of explicit expressions of queerness in general, which can be normal in the beginning stages of discovering one's sexuality but is presented in a way

that can be misinterpreted in the film. In a scene that is meant to show Simon's conflicting thoughts about who he is and who he wants to be, a dreamlike musical number breaks out, including people wearing the colors of the rainbow and dancing with Simon at a college campus called "Liberal University". The scene swiftly concludes as Simon shuts down the dance and exclaims "yeah, maybe not that gay" (*Love, Simon* 46:22 – 47:33). Although a normal thought process for a young person discovering their sexuality to have, when put into the context of the romantic comedy formula, keeping in mind the straight audience and the lack of otherness, the scene can be read to suggest that some things are "too gay" to be accepted. The scene suggests that if Simon were to explore his gayness in a more flamboyant or flashy way, he would not be accepted the same. The conclusion of the scene suggests that Simon's expression of his identity will not change and even if he were to come out of the closet, he would not accept more flamboyant depictions of queerness or experiment with them himself.

THE FERRIS WHEEL: ROMANTICIZING TRAUMA

The most concerning element of representation that needs to be scrutinized is the involuntary outing of "Blue" in the film. Ironically, although the whole film is about Simon protecting himself from being outed, he ends up being the one to out his counterpart's identity in a highly public way. After Simon is outed and loses contact with "Blue," he posts on "Creek Secrets," asking "Blue" to meet him at the fair. He asks "Blue" to come sit on the Ferris wheel with him if he wants to be with him, giving him somewhat of an ultimatum. This big romantic gesture fits perfectly into the romantic comedy formula and can to straight audiences seem adorable without setting off any alarm bells. It is however clear, that by asking "Blue" to join him, Simon is asking him to come out of the closet in a very public way, after "Blue" had undeniably indicated that he was not ready to come out of the closet – especially not in public. Simon is asking "Blue" to choose between their relationship and protecting his identity, pushing him to

come out of closet even though he has already stated that he is not ready. This is never addressed in the film, and when “Blue” (who turns out to be Simon’s soccer teammate Bram) shows up at the fair, the moment is very clearly portrayed as happy and romantic, as is the aftermath. This is extremely misleading, especially for straight audiences that cannot understand how traumatic being outed can be.

The biggest issue embedded in this story arc is that this instance is not portrayed as an outing and is instead romanticized. With the whole storyline of the film in mind, the seed is planted that outings are always performed out of malice and clear intent (the way Martin threatened to out Simon), when in fact outings take place in pure thoughtlessness and even out of conceived benevolence sometimes (in the way Simon forced Bram out of the closet). The fact that one type of outing is treated as horrible and traumatizing, while another type is applauded and romanticized is not only inaccurate representation, but also detrimental and harmful. The aftermath of Bram coming out is never detailed either, or whether his experience was different from Simon’s. Bram, who is black, had stated before that his father was religious, and he did not know how he would react to him being gay. Completely keeping Bram’s coming out story out of the narrative makes him the second gay character of color that is sidelined and only serves a purpose as an element in Simon’s character development and personal story. This sidelining strips the narrative of depth and nuances and redirects the audience’s attention repeatedly to the “palatable” and “fit for the mainstream” gay character, Simon.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the nuances of queer representation in *Love, Simon* are considerable, and scrutinizing elements of the narrative is important to analyze the consequences for audiences. Analyzing the ever-growing queer representation in the mainstream media is significant because of its influence on the formation of views and beliefs of large audiences. Analyzing

representation that is deemed “good” on a surface level is particularly important, since representation offers nuanced meaning to its diverse audiences, which must first be acknowledged (and challenged) in order to implement inclusiveness in media, rather than mere tolerance. Beyond the groundbreaking nature of the mere existence of a Hollywood blockbuster romantic comedy that features a gay main character, there are many issues embedded in *Love, Simon* when it comes to queer representation and representation of otherness. Most notably, all otherness besides gayness is stripped away, both in Simon’s character and environment, for example through other elements of his identity, his aversion of queerness, and the sidelining of black gay characters. Furthermore, the romanticization of an outing of another queer character is especially harmful and unfortunately overlooked in the film, sending misleading messages to the audience. Overall, one could argue that *Love, Simon* is a good starting point, a platform if you will, for real queer stories to be told. By making the story as palatable as possible for straight audiences and fit almost every trope of a mainstream romantic comedy, *Love, Simon* may have paved the way for more nuanced, real, and flamboyantly queer stories to be told in blockbuster films. Drawing attention to the flaws of the film does however create an opportunity for improvement as we hopefully move towards bettering queer representation in mainstream film.

Works Cited

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