

FICTION AND FILM ANALYSIS

Homonormativity and the queer love story in *Love, Simon* (2018) and *Happiest Season* (2020)

ISABELLA FRANCIS

Abstract

In this article, I analyse two same-sex romantic comedies, *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020) and *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018). Using a dialectic reading and the concepts of homonormativity and post-gay consumerism, I explore the ideological function of interpellating LGBTQ+ consumers into the mainstream. I draw on Sara Ahmed's conception of the good life to understand the framing of the family and the monogamous relationship within the genre of romantic comedies. I also pay attention to consumer perceptions of LGBTQ+ representation more generally. I conclude that, despite the utopian kernel of queer happiness signified by these movies, the inclusion of lesbian and gay main characters in the romantic comedy genre also serves the ideological function of assimilating queerness into the mainstream in ways that reinforce other relationship-based norms, such as monogamy and family orientation.

Key words

Homonormativity, LGBTQ+, media studies, romantic comedies, lesbian film, queer cinema.

Introduction

Both *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020) and *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018) are firsts – *Happiest Season* is the first lesbian (or gay) holiday film funded by a major studio; *Love, Simon* is the first teen romantic comedy featuring a gay main character funded by a major studio. Queer reviews of *Love, Simon* and *Happiest Season* simultaneously reified the movies as 'groundbreaking' LGBTQ+ narratives while also criticising various aspects of them, including their narrow, privileged view (both main characters are wealthy and White) and the unrelatable nature of the movies given the privilege depicted (e.g. D'Addario, 2018; Nicole, 2020). *Happiest Season* was also criticised for presenting itself as a Christmas romantic comedy when many viewers found it depressing and disappointing (Nicole, 2020).

In this essay, I explore the cultural narratives about queer lives espoused in both *Happiest Season* and *Love, Simon*. I use a dialectic reading to explore both their ideological function in heterosexist, capitalist society as well as the way they represent a positive shift in societal attitude towards accepting LGBTQ+ (although primarily lesbian and gay) people. I have chosen *Happiest Season* and *Love, Simon* as examples of mainstream films that centre on a homonormative love story because they are the only recent examples of mainstream Western same-sex romantic comedies.

Summary of the movies

Let me begin by offering a summary of both movies in order to get a better understanding of their ideological positions. *Happiest Season* was produced and directed by Clea DuVall (a lesbian director). The premise is that Abby (Kristen Stewart) and Harper (Mackenzie Davis), two women in a romantic relationship, visit Harper's parents for Christmas, where Abby plans to propose to Harper. However, halfway to her parent's home, Harper reveals that she is not out as a lesbian to her family and that they think Abby is Harper's heterosexual 'orphan roommate' (DuVall, 2020, 00:22:11). The drama and comedy of the movie largely rely on the hiding-a-relationship trope, alongside the comedic interjections of John (Dan Levy), Abby's gay best friend, and Jane (Mary Holland), Harper's sister. The movie was marketed as a romantic comedy (Hulu, 2020), even though many viewers found it depressing rather than funny (Nicole, 2020; UnsolicitedProject, 2020).

Harper ignores the fact that her family treat Abby poorly for much of the movie, culminating in a fight on the morning of a large social event. Following this, Abby breaks up with Harper at the event. They reconcile privately, but are discovered by Harper's other sister, Sloane (Alison Brie), who outs Harper to everyone. Harper denies she is in a relationship with Abby, causing Abby to leave. Harper then comes out to her family and chases Abby down. They reconcile, and the ending shows them enjoying Christmas as part of the family, with both parents accepting their daughter's sexuality.

Love, Simon is a teenage coming-of-age movie adapted from the novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Albertalli, 2015). The premise is that Simon (Nick Robinson) begins emailing anonymously with 'Blue', another closeted gay boy at his school, through the school's gossip blog CreekSecrets. He spends lots of time trying to guess who Blue might be. These emails are found and connected to him by another student, Martin (Logan Miller), who blackmails Simon to help him connect with Simon's attractive friend Abby (Alexandra Shipp). After Abby rejects Martin, he publicly posts Simon's emails, outing him to the whole school. This outing prompts Simon to come out to his parents and sister, which goes mostly well, although his dad makes an inappropriate joke and walks away. Later, he has heartfelt conversations with his mom and dad about his sexuality, where they both reiterate that they love him. However, after his outing, Simon's friends accuse him of mistreating them, so he has a low point at the movie's climax. After some consideration, Simon comes out to the school and apologizes to his friends via a public post on the school's CreekSecrets blog. He also asks Blue to join him at the carnival after the school play. Simon's friends forgive him and go to the carnival with him, where they watch him ride the Ferris wheel for several hours while he waits for Blue to reveal himself. His school friend Bram (Keiynan Lonsdale) arrives and reveals himself to be Blue. They kiss, eliciting cheers from their watching classmates and friends. The ending scene depicts Simon, his friends and his new boyfriend driving off for an 'adventure' (Berlanti, 2018, 01:45:21).

Both movies share several themes in common, including a basic plotline of being scared to come out, being outed, and coming out (Berlanti, 2018, 01:36:04; DuVall, 2020, 01:25:30). Beyond these surface-level comparisons, both movies also have an implicit focus on living a normative life as a path to happiness – *Happiest Season* through Abby's desire to traditionally propose to Harper (DuVall, 2020, 00:08:51-00:10:11), and *Love, Simon* through Simon's obsession with the idea that *everyone* should have to come out (Berlanti, 2018, 00:45:49- 00:46:29). Both movies also disavow more radically queer existences: in *Happiest Season*, John, Abby's best friend, serves as a post-gay foil as he sarcastically accuses Abby of 'heteronormativity' for wanting to marry Harper; in *Love, Simon*, Simon distances himself

from Ethan, a gender-non-conforming Black gay boy, in a move that reinforces Simon's desire to be accepted into the mainstream.

Both *Happiest Season* and *Love, Simon* have happy and uplifting endings that are nonetheless unsatisfying. In *Happiest Season*, Harper and Abby reconcile outside a gas station, then have a happy Christmas morning with Harper's family, who have come to accept Abby as part of the family. The film closes with a 'one year later' scene, showing off Harper's engagement ring as the family attend Jane's book signing event and then watch the iconic feel-good Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*. This was difficult to swallow for many viewers (Nicole, 2020; Dawson, 2020) because of the queer trauma that underlies so much of the movie – Harper's distress at being closeted and then outed, and Abby's distress at being rejected by her partner and family. While happy endings are the foregone conclusion of romantic comedies, *Happiest Season*'s 'happy' ending felt forced because many viewers did not feel invested enough in the couple's relationship and thought it was essentially toxic throughout the film (Nicole, 2020; Dawson, 2020; UnsolicitedProject, 2020). This contrasts with *Love, Simon*'s ending, where Simon and Bram's relationship is just beginning, much to the approval of their cheering schoolmates. In the final shot, Simon picks up his friends and Bram, and they drive off after he announces that they are skipping school. This ending is more believable than *Happiest Season*'s, but the homophobia represented during the film is wrapped up too neatly, which left the conclusion feeling a little trite (I discuss this more later).

Love, Simon was broadly well-received, despite criticisms of Simon's privilege (demonstrated by the irony of his voiceover saying, 'I'm just like everyone else' as his parents gift him a car) (D'Addario, 2018; Rogers & Yang, 2018; Lawson, 2018; Bradshaw, 2018). Many critics commented on how important this movie would have been to them as a young queer person, but also questioned whether young people today, with access to a wide range of media, need representation in the same way as previous generations (D'Addario, 2018). One article noted fans' engagement with the movie: some shared stories of how the movie helped them come out, while others engaged in fannish behaviours, such as taking over the email addresses used in the film (Haley Jr., 2018, pp. 8–9). This seemed to indicate a positive response to the movie by the intended audience.

Happiest Season was extremely polarising and less well-received than *Love, Simon* – many viewers were disappointed by the perceived toxicity of the central relationship and found it deeply saddening and heart-breaking to watch (Nicole, 2020). In addition, several reviews commented on the rapid explosion of fan culture that explored the idea of Abby having a romantic relationship with side-character Riley, played by Aubrey Plaza (Dawson, 2020; Nicole, 2020; Bradbury-Rance, 2020). Overall, however, the film was well received by a number of critics (Loughrey, 2020), some of whom thought it was 'funny, sweet, well acted (*sic*) and told a whole story' (Nicole, 2020).

The culture industry as a producer of texts

Throughout this essay, I will be using a dialectic approach to consider both the ideological function these films serve and the consumer response to them. I want to pay attention to their ideological function using Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry hypothesis (as developed in Adorno & Bernstein, 1991), while also paying attention to how these texts demonstrate positive representation from consumers' perspectives.

Jameson (1981) argues that mass cultural texts must always be read through a dialectic lens, one that acknowledges both the origins of the text in the culture industry (and therefore its

use as an ideological tool), but also its function to present the consumer with something they want, which he designates the 'utopian kernel' (Jameson, 1981, p. 287). Considering both the ideological function of the movies and the representation that consumers desire will allow me to explore the conflicting messages of representation and ideology in these movies.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe the culture industry as the commercialization of art into media: it produces cultural texts with the primary function of subjugating the working class by placating them through entertainment and creating false psychological needs. For example, genre films function to shore up ideology (e.g. the action film reifies the American military complex) and placate consumers because the plots are similar and easy to follow, with clearly defined heroes and villains (Adorno & Bernstein, 1991).

Romantic comedies and the ideological function of homonormativity

Both *Happiest Season* and *Love, Simon* are romantic comedies, although they have secondary categorizations (such as LGBTQ+, Christmas, coming-of-age). McDonald (2007, pp. 9-10) aptly defines a romantic comedy as 'a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and ... to a successful conclusion'. Following on from this, McDonald (2007) also discusses how the primacy of the monogamous couple is a central feature of romantic comedies' ideology. This couple is usually also White and heterosexual, and their representation structures how we think of the 'good life' (Ahmed, 2006, 2010) and to whom it is available. The good life is an idealized norm of how we should structure our lives and relationships to minimise social friction (Ahmed, 2010, p. 115).

The first ideological function of the romantic comedy's normative representation of gay and lesbian couples is ultimately serving capitalism, as it interpellates LG(BTQ+) consumers into consumption rather than political action. As demonstrated by persistent 'rainbow capitalism' (participation of corporations in branding exercises based around LGBTQ+ pride), it is now highly profitable in Western countries at least to publicly support LGBTQ+ rights in order to tap into the LGBTQ+ (and ally) consumer base. Like corporations, media producers and distributors are also beginning to recognise the untapped potential of LGBTQ+ consumers (Ng, 2013): many forms of visual media now feature LGBTQ+ characters (for examples of television series, see GLAAD Media Institute, 2021).

Beyond the simple profit motive, there are also wider capitalist and social reproductive motives to integrate queer individuals into the mainstream understanding of monogamous romantic love. The first is that using identity politics to engage queer people in consumption removes the explosive political potential of queerness. In this context, 'identity politics' means political organisation based around common identities (such as LGBTQ+) rather than around the deconstruction of the sex/gender system (Jagose, 1996). An example of this is the proliferation of merchandise using various pride flags for different queer identities, which uses identity to encourage capitalist participation and consumption over coalitional politics.

We can turn to 'homonormativity' as one way to understand the de-politicisation of queerness under capitalism. This term, coined by Duggan (2002, p. 179), refers to 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'. Homonormativity is definitely on display in both *Love, Simon* and *Happiest Season*. Both movies do it slightly differently, given their different contexts: *Love, Simon*, as a teenage coming-of-age comedy, positions Simon as wanting to fit in and have the same opportunities for love as his heterosexual

friends; *Happiest Season*, as a holiday movie about adults, displays the normativity of Abby's desire for marriage and Harper's desire for familial affection. Both films feature a strong focus on the family as a key location for love and on the monogamous relationship as the location for reproducing the family.

The second ideological function of homonormativity is to expand the availability of 'the good life' to same-sex monogamous couples. This is (at least in part) because the nuclear family and childrearing are necessary to the ongoing success of capitalism. This good life is the utopian kernel in these mainstream lesbian and gay movies – the reason that queer consumers want happy endings and romantic comedies. The promise of happiness and the good life presented in a romantic comedy is tantalizing because queer life under heterosexist capitalism can be a struggle. By expanding the possibility for a good life to lesbian and gay couples, homonormativity provides a way for these consumers to be accepted into the mainstream.

Ahmed's discussion of the good life shows how heterosexist society orientates us towards a heterosexual good life, with family interactions orientating us towards reproducing the family (Ahmed, 2010, p. 92). Heterosexual coupledness and reproduction of coupledness are the ultimate happiness goals (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 90-91). This is clearly on display in both movies: they revolve around the family as a central place for the production of happiness. In *Love, Simon*, the happy family is a recurring motif. Simon and his sister are shown joyously interacting with their parents regularly over meals, at family movie nights and in a home-video montage (Berlanti, 2018). In *Happiest Season*, Harper's family structures the entire movie, and although they are not happy for much of the movie, the plot suggests that the familial unhappiness is because of the secrets that Harper, Sloane and their father (Victor Garber) are hiding. Harper's secret is her sexuality and her relationship with Abby; Sloane's secret is her divorce; their father's secret is that he has spent their family's savings on a political campaign. Once these are out in the open and the family has declared their love for one another, the movie ends with their happy family Christmas photo and activities (DuVall, 2020, 01:35:23). McDonald (2007) notes that the couple's happy ending is essential to the ideological function of romantic comedies even when it seems unlikely within the text, as in *Happiest Season*, because romantic comedies are ultimately selling the good life and the good life includes romantic success.

Depicting lesbian and gay people living the good life suggests little reason for lesbian or gay consumers to rebel against mainstream structures (such as the nuclear family and the sex/gender system), as those structures now accept them. The overturning of the sex/gender system was a significant part of the politics of the early stages of gay liberation (Jagose, 1996). Homonormativity still leaves the other (BTQ+) identities unassimilated, particularly those that implicitly pose threats to the sex/gender order, like non-binary people whose existence demonstrates the failures of a binary sex/gender system, and asexual/aromantic people who may question the centrality of monogamous romantic love in society.

Homonormativity has a different ideological function for lesbian/gay consumers and cisgender/heterosexual consumers. For lesbian/gay consumers, its purpose is to assimilate them into heterosexual happiness and to empty queer identity of its political possibility, as I previously discussed. For cisgender/heterosexual consumers, the purpose of homonormativity is to fit queer people into their understanding of the world – to make themselves believe that queer people are 'just like them'. While this might seem less important than assimilating queer people themselves, it reinforces the social norms that queer people must align with, creating more social pressure for them to adhere to homonormativity and to reject political actions that threaten the sex/gender system.

Post-feminism and disavowal of the queer other

In both *Love, Simon* and *Happiest Season*, the main characters disavow queerness that goes ‘too far.’ This can be thought through using a post-feminist, or post-gay, lens. Post-feminism refers to a cultural narrative that society has moved past sexism and, therefore, past the need for feminism (although the meaning is contested; see, for example, Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Showden, 2009). Likewise, the term post-gay suggests that we have moved past the need for gay liberation – Ng (2013, p. 272) notes that it mainly refers to the acceptance of middle-class, gender-conforming lesbians and gays. The idea that we are ‘past’ gay liberation is reinforced in these movies by the disavowal of the queer other.

Both movies have side characters whose specific purpose is to exist in a less acceptable queer way and thus to be dismissed through humour. In this way, the movies underscore the idea that the ‘right’ way to be lesbian or gay is to assimilate into a heteronormative framework of monogamous relationships and marriage. In *Happiest Season*, Abby’s gay best friend John serves this function by espousing more radically queer positions; in *Love, Simon*, Ethan serves this function by existing as a gender-non-conforming Black gay student (Rauchberg, 2019).

In *Happiest Season*, John says to Abby: ‘[You are] tricking the woman you claim to love by trapping her in a box of heteronormativity and trying to make her your property. She is not a rice cooker or a cake plate. She’s a human being!’ (DuVall, 2020, 00:09:31). John serves the purpose of providing a witty nod to the audience, acknowledging the homonormativity on display. Abby refutes John’s position by telling him, ‘It’s not about owning her. It’s about building a life with her. She is my person, and I really want everyone to know that’. She then explains to him how she is planning to propose to Harper: ‘I understand this is very old-fashioned, but I’m probably gonna ask her dad for his blessing and ask her on Christmas morning’. John responds, ‘Way to stick it to the patriarchy! Really well done!’ This exchange shows how Abby is enacting her relationship in what she sees as the ‘correct’ (monogamous, quasi-heterosexual) way. John’s questioning is intended to come off comedic and excessive; of course, the viewers believe in monogamous love.

In *Love, Simon*, Simon is a little more explicit in his disavowal of the queer other. Ethan (Clark Moore), a gender-non-conforming Black boy, functions as an embodiment of this disavowed queerness. After a passer-by verbally abuses Ethan at school, Simon says to his friends, ‘I wish Ethan wouldn’t make it so easy for them’ (Berlanti, 2018, 00:07:05), referring to Ethan’s effeminate manner, flamboyant dress sense and generally queer gender presentation. Rauchberg (2019, p. 38) points out that in this scene, ‘Simon stares at Ethan because he fears if he, too, is outed, he will receive the same harassment’, so he separates himself from Ethan’s overt display of queerness through staring and verbal dismissal.

Ethan is depicted as the victim of homophobic bullying on three separate occasions during the film – first, at school, two popular boys say to him, ‘Cool scarf, Ethan. Hope it doesn’t get caught in your vagina’. He responds, ‘Great choice on the cargo pants, by the way. It looks like you got gang-banged by a TJ Maxx’ (Berlanti, 2018, 00:06:40). (This is the occasion on which Simon says, ‘I wish Ethan wouldn’t make it so easy for them’). Later, at the Homecoming football game, the same two guys approach, making dismissive homophobic comments. Ethan responds, ‘Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to grab your micro-penis in public? Could we get some hummus for that baby carrot?’ The bullying directed at Ethan is seen as less important than the (hypothetical) bullying directed at Simon because Ethan always has a witty (if sometimes misogynistic) comeback.

The final instance of homophobic bullying occurs after Simon is outed and it targets both Ethan and Simon. The same two boys run into the cafeteria during lunchtime, one dressed as

Ethan, the other calling out, ‘This one’s for you, Spier’ (Simon’s last name), making it clear that he is imitating Simon. They get up on a table while playing rap music from a boom box and simulate kissing and anal penetration. A teacher intervenes, and the two boys are disciplined. While they are being disciplined, Ethan and Simon talk outside the vice-principal’s office. Simon says, ‘Maybe I was jealous. You’ve been out since you were sixteen. You know, it seems so easy for you’. Ethan responds, ‘Easy? Are you kidding me?’ (Berlanti, 2018, 00:22:45). As one reviewer points out, this is a tone-deaf interpretation on Simon’s part, as he regularly sees Ethan get bullied (Rogers & Yang, 2018) and, in fact, even condones it.

Ethan’s in-text treatment reinforces the idea that gender-non-conforming queer people should always be ready to defend themselves against bullying because it is expected. In contrast, Simon did not expect to be bullied because he is gender-conforming and heterosexual-passing. The film depicts Simon believing that Ethan should align more closely to homonormativity in order to become less of a target; it does not portray him appreciating the social forces that make queerness a target for homophobia. In this way, the movie reduces queer politics to the individual rather than the societal and reinforces a notion of homonormativity that includes normative gender presentation.

Additionally, Ethan is specifically portrayed as *unable* to come out because he performs gayness openly. While Simon, as the heterosexual-passing main character, is allowed to have a complicated path to coming out, Ethan’s coming out is seen as a joke. In the scene where he says, ‘I’m gay’, the camera pans around a circle of his friends, who unconvincingly tell him that they had no idea and that it is a surprise (Berlanti, 2018, 00:20:11). This narrative decision affords Simon a fully complicated human relationship with his identity, while Ethan’s identity is seen as a punchline. Because the movie positions coming out as an essential part of the good life for LGBTQ+ people (discussed in the section ‘Coming out’), this limits the possibility for non-White LGBTQ+ people to access the good life, which is a key part of representation. It also positions Whiteness as the prerequisite to successful LGBTQ+ identity (I discuss this further in the following section).

Something notable about both movies is that none of the main characters seem to take a political position on queerness (or even LGBTQ+ identities) that reflected their awareness of a wider queer/LGBTQ+ community. Abby and Harper both struggle with being closeted on an individual level, but there is no indication in the narrative that either of them see this as couched in systemic heterosexism. Simon is more explicit about his political position, but it is still not very radical: ‘It doesn’t seem fair that only gay people have to come out’, he complains, suggesting that he thinks *everyone* should have to come out – and indeed the movie includes a twee sequence where he fantasises that all of his heterosexual friends come out as straight (Berlanti, 2018, 00:45:44). A significant recurring theme throughout *Love, Simon* is Simon’s desire to be ‘just like everyone else’. The movie opens with a monologue where he discusses exactly how similar to everyone else he is. He says, ‘Yeah, maybe not that gay’ (Berlanti 2018, 00:47:30), referring to a daydream where he walks through a university surrounded by a rainbow-clad dance team singing and dancing to Whitney Houston. Simon’s desire for everyone to come out is the closest the movie gets to a main character having a political position on queerness. Moreover, it is an individualist position on identity, which chooses to reify the sex/gender system, rather than question why anyone has to come out and why we order society and sexuality based on gender.

The purpose of this apolitical stance, and the disavowal of the queer other, is to do the ideological work of saying that ‘gays are just like straights’ – they want marriage and romance (and probably children too). Thus, if the lesbian and gay characters in these movies are shown

to have homonormative goals and want to be accepted by their families, this functions as a relatable narrative for many people (gay and straight); it also shows that lesbian and gay identities can be apolitical. This in turn suggests that these identities are not inherently political, thereby emptying them of political potential.

Racism, normative Whiteness and queer rehabilitation

Both movies have also been criticised for the Whiteness and economic privilege of the lead characters. D'Addario (2018) suggests that the privilege depicted made the movies unrelatable. *Happiest Season* received criticism for having an all-White main cast (Nicole, 2020), while *Love, Simon* was criticised for having a racially diverse cast that functioned to reinscribe racism through a post-racial framework (Rauchberg, 2019). A post-racial framework functions to suggest that society has moved past racism by featuring a cast with several non-White characters. However, Rauchberg suggests that *Love, Simon* uses '[racial] representation to distract viewers from [its] use of racial stereotyping' (Rauchberg, 2019, p. 18). In particular, Rauchberg takes issue with the way that Abby, one of Simon's close friends, was portrayed as emotionally supporting him despite having complicated issues herself, suggesting that she took on a 'Mammy' role for him (Rauchberg, 2019, p. 25).

It is important to note that both movies were explicitly racist in several ways – in *Happiest Season*, the mixed-race children were portrayed negatively: their central plot point was sneaking a necklace into Abby's bag, which causes her to be arrested (DuVall, 2020, 00:48:08). This is obviously a tone-deaf choice given the recent political movements about police brutality against people of colour in the United States. Also, the overall Whiteness of the cast was noted as symbolic of the systemic racism that went into the movie (Nicole, 2020). *Love, Simon* tastelessly jokes about race. For example, Martin asks 'What do you call something Black and Jewish? Blue-ish' (Berlanti 2018, 00:59:21). Also, as discussed earlier, the film unapologetically portrays the racist treatment of Ethan.

Apart from this explicit racism, Rauchberg (2019) identified the more subtly racist 'homonationalism' as a framing feature of *Love, Simon*. I would also suggest that homonationalism frames much of *Happiest Season*. Rauchberg defines homonationalism as the idea that 'white gay wealthy citizens who can pass as straight are awarded the freedom to openly pursue an LGBTQ identity' (2019, p. 42, drawing on Puar, 2007). She suggests that Simon's Whiteness and upper-middle-class lifestyle rehabilitate his gayness; in other words, the movie was able to focus exclusively on Simon's gayness as a point of difference because Whiteness and economic privilege are regarded as default identities in film. Likewise, in *Happiest Season*, Harper's family's wealth and Whiteness allow Harper's coming out narrative to focus exclusively on her relationship with her parents, rather than complicating societal factors (which I discuss later in the 'Coming out' section).

Considering the ideological function of homonormativity, it is also worth noting how the centring of a White, privileged story of gayness is a way to bring certain facets of lesbian and gay experience into the (White) mainstream, all the while, as Love (2007, p. 10) puts it, 'break[ing] ties with all those who cannot make it – the non-white and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant (*sic*), the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others'. By telling a normative White, gay, economically-privileged story, *Love, Simon* and *Happiest Season* function to erase the complexities of queer experience, particularly for those situated outside the norms. The ideological function of centring a White gay boy, in the context where *Love, Simon* is the only teen romantic comedy about an LGBTQ+

person, is to centre Whiteness as the normative default for LGBTQ+ identity. Likewise, in the context where *Happiest Season* is the only romantic comedy with a lesbian romance, centring two White women serves to establish Whiteness as a prerequisite to successful (i.e. acceptable) LGBTQ+ identity.

Queer unhappiness and queer love: A dialectic

Much of the queer experience is structured by a struggle between, on the one hand, appreciating the complex ways that living queerly in a heterosexist world creates trauma and, on the other hand, envisaging queer futures and the happiness and resistance present in many queer lives and relationships. In my experience, this tension regularly crops up in non-academic discussions on media representation, queer political action and queer identities.

This dialectic is present in both movies – there are moments of queer joy: Simon and his mom have a touching conversation about his sexuality (Berlanti, 2018, 01:28:51- 01:30:21); Abby and Riley go to a Christmas-themed performance by drag queens (DuVall, 2020, 00:52:58-00:56:58); and Abby and Harper joyously kiss at the start of *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020, 00:05:43). Equally, both movies are occupied with queer unhappiness: Abby and Harper are closeted; Harper and Simon are outed; Simon’s friends reject him (Berlanti 2018, 01:17:06-01:19:26); and Abby and Harper fight, including one scene where Harper tells Abby she ‘needs space’ after avoiding her for several days (DuVall, 2020, 01:00:34-01:01:54).

In particular, *Happiest Season* was criticised for being *so* unhappy. In a roundtable discussion on Autostraddle, several people expressed this: Rachel said, ‘I wanted to finish it and feel so whole and so seen, but I just felt really sad ... I felt a little tricked by the trailer, which made it seem like it would be made up of more fun and shenanigans, and less CRUSHING HEARTBREAK’ (Nicole, 2020, emphasis original). In the same roundtable, Vanessa said, ‘It made me SAD. It was not funny, it was deeply painful and very, very difficult to watch!’ (Nicole, 2020, emphasis original). These responses were echoed on social media and indicated that viewers sought representation of queer happiness and were disappointed by the queer unhappiness that marred the romance.

Writing about the happiness and unhappiness in *Love, Simon*, D’Addario (2018) sums it up best:

The movie faces a double bind. Young queer people in bad situations, for whom it could represent a meaningful piece of affirmation, might well find its stabs at relatability fairly ludicrous. As we watch Simon’s nurturing parents giving him a new car, parked outside their picturesque suburban home, he intones in voiceover narration, ‘I’m just like you’. Sure thing, Simon! But those kids who were met with support when they came out are probably too sophisticated for *Love, Simon* – so much so that its vision of how good it feels for a masculine, traditionally attractive bro to receive encouragement might not resonate at all.

This touches on the bind between representing queer unhappiness – the difficulties of coming out and the material consequences of queerness that viewers may experience – and queer happiness – the aspirational love story and the accepting family, which may become ‘ludicrous’ for viewers experiencing queer unhappiness.

Political evolution: From New Queer Cinema to gaystreaming

Now I turn to a brief history of queer/LGBTQ+ politics and their reflections in queer/LGBTQ+ films. In the early days of queer gay liberation, a political stance of questioning the sex/gender structure and the consumerist, nuclear-family-oriented nature of Western society was the

primary locus of political engagement (see Jagose, 1996, although here, I risk over-simplifying the complex history of queer movements). More recently, political discourses concerned with respectability and civil rights have become the focus of LGBTQ+ politics. Jagose (1996, p. 6) describes this as an ‘ethnic model’ of civil rights, operating on the basis that LGBTQ+ individuals are just like everyone else and therefore deserve rights such as marriage, freedom from harassment, and equal employment opportunities. This change in political goals and actions is somewhat mirrored in the transition from the New Queer Cinema movement to what Ng (2013, p. 259) terms the ‘gaystreaming’ movement of the current time, which mainstreams gay culture and normalises gay people as consumers. New Queer Cinema is a term coined by Rich (2013, pp. xv-xvi) to describe a wave of independent movies in the 1980s to 1990s which featured irreverent, post-modern queer narratives. Often dealing with troubling narratives and unclear identities and alliances, they were not romantic comedies or stories with guaranteed happy endings. Based on negative responses from queer consumers to New Queer Cinema at film festivals in the 1990s, Rich (2013, p. 41) suggests that gay and lesbian audiences wanted films that promoted homonormativity and aligned with the shift in queer politics towards the ethnic model of LGBTQ+ rights. She states:

These queer publics want films of validation and a culture of affirmation: work that reinforces identity, visualizes respectability, combats injustice, and bolsters social status. They want a little something new, but not too new; sexy, sure, but with the emphasis on romance; stylish, but reliably realistic and not too demanding; nothing downbeat or too revelatory; and happy endings, of course. (Rich, 2013, p. 41)

These aesthetically pleasing, big-budget romances have finally come to fruition in *Love, Simon* and *Happiest Season*. According to Lawson (2018), ‘It’s thrilling and almost surreal to be given two hours of this – without anything shaded, coded, or tragic ... gay stuff looks good on a bigger budget’. That is, of course, the whole point. To make attractive, big-budget, mainstream films that promise the good life is to assimilate the queer consumer into heterosexist capitalism.

Coming out

A key ideological function of homonormativity in movies is to normalise and rehabilitate same-sex relationships. In both movies, the characters are scared about coming out, but ultimately, once they do, they are accepted by their families and can resolve the other issues in their lives. This implicitly functions to suggest that coming out is a necessary part of the good life for LGBTQ+ people. These movies show that lesbian and gay people can be accepted by their families and have a good life in which they reproduce the family structure, because the family structure can now accommodate them as monogamous, romantic couples.

In *Love, Simon*, there is a scene where his mom talks to him after his coming out:

Being gay is your thing. There are parts of it you have to go through alone. I hate that. As soon as you came out, you said, ‘Mom, I’m still me’. I need you to hear this. You are still you, Simon. You are still the same son who I love to tease, and who your father depends on for just about everything. And you’re the same brother who always compliments his sister on her food, even when it sucks. You get to exhale now, Simon. You get to be more you than you have been in a very long time. You deserve everything you want. (Berlanti, 2018, 01:27:39-01:30:22).

This scene is touching and is often highlighted as a good part of the film in reviews (e.g. Bradshaw, 2018). However, its purpose is to explicitly demonstrate the importance of happiness as a goal and to remind viewers that Simon is ‘just like everyone else’.

In *Happiest Season*, Harper’s coming out is related only to her relationship with her parents, without considering the role of heterosexist structures. Her parents are never explicitly homophobic, only making comments with implications of homophobia: her mother insists, ‘I

would never ask two grown women to share the same bed!’ (DuVall, 2020, 00:17:41). Also, during a discussion at dinner, her father says, ‘Did you hear [Riley’s] doing her residency at Johns Hopkins? It’s very impressive. Her parents must be proud – and relieved’. Her mother responds, ‘That lifestyle choice’ (referring to Riley being an out lesbian) and shakes her head. ‘Such a shame’, her father concurs (DuVall, 2020, 00:22:58). Neither of these scenes is explicitly homophobic, although they are likely intended to be read as homophobic in the context of the movie. The comments portray homophobia as being an ideological choice on the parents’ behalf rather than a social issue. When her parents come to terms with Harper’s coming out, there is still no acknowledgement of societal influences, which reiterates that homophobia is a problem with individuals rather than a societal-level sex/gender system.

When discussing Harper’s reluctance to come out, John says to Abby, ‘Just because Harper isn’t ready it doesn’t mean she never will be, and it doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you’ (DuVall, 2020, 01:20:30-01:22:14). This positions coming out as an inevitable and necessary part of becoming a happy queer, which is a homonormative notion that further reifies LGBTQ+ people’s difference from heterosexual norms, rather than questioning societal structures that require people to declare their sexuality or gender. This is similar to the function of Simon’s idea that everyone should have to come out, regardless of their sexuality.

Positive understandings of mainstream representation

While these movies do present homonormativity as the only way to be LGBTQ+ and specifically do not question the heterosexist sex/gender system in any way, many consumers still see the value in their queer representations. Most of the reviews I read (of both movies) acknowledged how nice it was to have a same-sex relationship that was not subtextual or shrouded in gloom (e.g. Bradbury-Rance, 2020; Hogan, 2020; UnsolicitedProject, 2020; Nicole, 2020; Bradshaw, 2018; Lawson, 2018; Rogers & Yang, 2018; D’Addario, 2018). They also often acknowledged the ‘firsts’ that these movies represented – *Love, Simon* was the first gay teen romantic comedy and *Happiest Season* was the first mainstream lesbian romantic comedy.

I want to consider why representation is an important issue for LGBTQ+ people in Western media. I use ‘representation’ to mean seeing one’s experiences or identities represented authentically and positively in fictional media. It is a long-standing issue for LGBTQ+ consumers, particularly outside of academic contexts – many young people use social media platforms to bemoan the lack of representation of their identities in media (for an example of young queer women’s perspectives, see Driver, 2007). In addition, fandom studies demonstrates that consumers have, for a long time, been taking characters (straight, queer and unknown) from popular media and using them to create stories, art and videos with queer narratives; this occurs because of a lack of queer representation in the source material (for a summary of fandom studies, see Coppa, 2014).

Other studies have demonstrated the importance of representation for LGBTQ+ youth in particular. For example, a participant in Craig et al.’s (2015, p. 263) study said, ‘turning to some media is a form of escapism from the harsh reality that is the heteronormative, the heterosexist world that we live in’. A young queer woman in Driver’s (2007, p. 57) research said, ‘people’s eyes begin to open and they see love and a sense of right instead of just lesbians. It becomes part of people’s daily lives and gradually they become more open to the thought of us being here for good’. These two quotes illustrate two significant ways of thinking about LGBTQ+ representation: firstly, that media offers LGBTQ+ people an escape from their real lives, which are structured by oppressive forces of heterosexism; and secondly,

that LGBTQ+ representation in media has a positive effect on cisgender and heterosexual viewers' understandings of LGBTQ+ people, because they become humanised and therefore normalised (that this is even required is a depressing state of affairs to be sure). Notably, discourses about humanising and normalising same-sex relationships were heavily present in reviews of the movies, with some reviewers noting how the movies could be (and were) used to facilitate coming-out conversations with family (for example, Haley Jr, 2018). Although, the normalisation and humanisation of LGBTQ+ people through media also has to be understood within the context of homonormativity, which only normalises those who are already close to the normative centre (White, monogamous, cisgender, able-bodied, etc.).

Conclusion

Having reviewed both movies, it has become clear that both do the ideological work of creating LGBTQ+ consumers by presenting a monogamous love story between same-sex characters, who are also wealthy, White, and cisgender. The purpose of this ideological work is, firstly, to assimilate the queer individual as a consumer, and secondly, to empty queerness of its political potential by presenting queer characters as 'just like' other characters. As Bradbury-Rance (2020) puts it, '*Happiest Season* is a landmark film for LGBTQ+ representation, yes, but it leaves other norms untouched'.

The films present the main characters as disavowing more overt queerness to reassure (assumed heterosexual) audiences that they are 'just like them'. Despite these issues, the movies do present a utopian kernel. Firstly, they were made and promoted, which indicates a generally positive public attitude to lesbian and gay people. Secondly, a narrative where queer happiness is the inevitable ending presents a contrast to a lot of queer media, which often focuses on queer unhappiness (examples include both New Queer Cinema and more modern media featuring the 'bury your gays' trope; see TV Tropes, n.d.). They also present the good life as available to lesbian and gay people. Many of us are invested in having the good life available to us, because we are all immersed in a broader media landscape that promotes normative happiness as a key goal. Nevertheless, as these movies disavow parts of the queer experience as 'too queer' and present homonormativity (White, economically privileged, monogamous coupling) as the only way to be acceptably lesbian or gay, the movies foreclose possibilities for political action based on eradicating the sex/gender system and assimilate queer consumers into the mainstream.

Of course, I would like to end on a note of hope. As many commentators pointed out (e.g. UnsolicitedProject, 2020; Bradbury-Rance, 2020; Lawson, 2018; Rogers & Yang, 2018), these movies are just the beginning of many more independent and mainstream films focusing on queer narratives of all kinds. Some are already being made: examples of recent queer media that grapple with the dialectic of queer unhappiness and queer happiness while not coming off as either trite or depressing include *Ellie and Abbie (and Ellie's Dead Aunt)* (Zanetti 2020), a queer coming-of-age romantic comedy that uses the figure of an older queer person to include queer history as part of the younger leads' queer coming-of-age. Another example is *Pride* (Warchus 2014), which takes on queer political action as its topic and represents both the challenges of queerness and the joy of existing queerly in a heterosexist world. These films suggest that queer media can present queerness as a happy and fulfilling existence (even an existence that is not modelled on heterosexual happiness) which strikes the ever-difficult balance between depoliticised queer happiness and unhappily queer political consciousness.

ISABELLA FRANCIS is currently an Honours student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Auckland. She is interested in feminist and queer theory and hopes to research with young queer women in her future studies.

Notes

1. For further discussion of why structuring society based on sexual object choice is odd, see Callis (2014).
2. I acknowledge that representation is also an issue for other marginalized groups, but this falls beyond the remit of this essay.

References

- Adorno, T.W., & Bernstein, J.M. (1991). *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Albertalli, B. (2015). *Simon vs. the homo sapiens agenda*. 1st edition. Balzer & Bray.
- Banet-Weiser, S, Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. *Feminist Theory*, 21(1), 3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>
- Berlanti, G. (2018). *Love, Simon*. Film. 20th Century Fox.
- Bradbury-Rance, C. (2020, 17 December). Happiest Season is the first LGBTQ+ Christmas movie from a major Hollywood studio and it's receiving criticism – is it fair? *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/happiest-season-is-the-first-lgbtq-christmas-movie-from-a-major-hollywood-studio-and-its-receiving-criticism-is-it-fair-151267>
- Bradshaw, P. (2018, 5 April). Love, Simon review: Heart-warming gay romance. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/apr/05/love-simon-review-nick-robinson-gay-romance>
- TV Tropes. (N.d.). Bury your gays. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>
- Callis, A.S. (2014). Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the sexual borderlands. *Sexualities*, 17(1-2), 63-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713511094>
- Coppa, F. (2014). Fuck yeah, fandom is beautiful. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2(1), 73-82. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.73_1
- Craig, S.L., McInroy, L., McCready, L.T., & Alaggia, R. (2015). Media: A catalyst for resilience in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(3), 254-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193>
- D'Addario, D. (2018, 8 March). 'Love, Simon' is a groundbreaking gay movie. But do today's teens actually need it? *Time*. <https://time.com/5190982/love-simon-groundbreaking-gay-movie/>
- Dawson, E. (2020, 17 November). 'Happiest Season' breaks the only rom-com rule that matters. *Ella Dawson*. Blog. <https://elladawson.com/2020/11/27/happiest-season-breaks-the-only-rom-com-rule-that-matters/>
- Driver, S. (2007). *Queer girls and popular culture: Reading, resisting, and creating media*. Mediated Youth 1. Peter Lang.
- Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo & D.D. Nelson (Eds.), *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics* (pp. 175-194). New Americanists. Duke University Press.
- DuVall, C. 2020. *Happiest season*. Film. Hulu.
- GLAAD Media Institute. (2021, 14 January). *GLAAD's where we are on TV 2020-2021 report: Despite tumultuous year in television, LGBTQ representation holds steady*. glaad.org. <https://www.glaad.org/releases/glaads-where-we-are-tv-2020-2021-report-despite-tumultuous-year-television-lgbtq>
- Haley Jr, J. (2018). *Love, Simon* as a modern, gay coming-of-age narrative: A new point of contention and engagement for queer and popular culture. *Cinethesia*, 9(1), 15.
- Hogan, H. (2020, 19 November). 'Happiest Season' Review: Kristen Stewart and Mackenzie Davis are at their best in an instant holidagay classic. *Autostraddle*. <https://www.autostraddle.com/happiest-season-review-kristen-stewart-and-mackenzie-davis-are-an-instant-holidagay-classic/>
- Hulu. (2020). *Happiest Season* – Trailer (Official). A Hulu Original. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h58HkQV1gHY>

- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287f8w.9>
- Lawson, R. (2018, 13 March). *Love, Simon* is a charming gay studio movie that makes us hungry for more. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/love-simon-review>
- Loughrey, C. (2020, 26 November). Kristen Stewart is full of charm in *happiest season*, a groundbreaking queer christmas romcom – review. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/happiest-season-review-kristen-stewart-cast-b1762343.html>
- Love, H. (2007). *Feeling backward: Loss and the politics of queer history*. Harvard University Press.
- McDonald, T.J. (2007). *Romantic comedy: Boy meets girl meets genre*. Short Cuts 34. Wallflower.
- Ng, E. (2013). A ‘post-gay’ era? Media gaystreaming, homonormativity, and the politics of LGBT integration. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6(2), 258-83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12013>.
- Nicole, S. (2020, 28 November). ‘Happiest Season’ roundtable: Yikes, Harper! Woowwww, Aubrey Plaza! *Autostraddle*. <https://www.autostraddle.com/happiest-season-roundtable-yikes-harper-woowwww-aubrey-plaza/>
- Puar, J.K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Next Wave. Duke University Press.
- Rauchberg, J. (2019). Interrogating homonationalism in *Love, Simon*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of South Florida. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/7901>
- Rich, B.R. (2013). *New queer cinema: The director's cut*. Duke University Press.
- Rogers, M., & Yang, B. (2018, 21 March). *Love, Simon? Don't Love, Simon?* A debate on the little gay movie that could. *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/love-simon-dont-love-simon-a-debate.html>
- Showden, C.R. (2009). What's political about the new feminisms? *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 30(2), 166-98.
- UnsolicitedProject. (2020). *Happiest Season* LGBT movie review. YouTube. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5HcluZZ4mo>
- Warchus, M. (2014). *Pride*. Film. 20th Century Fox.
- Zanetti, M. (2020). *Ellie and Abbie (and Ellie's dead aunt)*. Film. Arcadia.