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## Love in the Time of Cinema: A Queer Feminist Analysis of Reviews of Four Mainstream Queer Films

Corinne Ebner

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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Ann Savage 4/22/21  
Date

Reader(s) J. Rocky Colavito 4/24/21  
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**Love in the Time of Cinema:  
A Queer Feminist Analysis of Reviews of Four Mainstream Queer Films**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Human Communication and Organizational Leadership

College of Communication

and

The Honors Program

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Corinne Ebner

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**Abstract**

From a queer-feminist media studies perspective, this paper performs a qualitative discourse analysis on a large selection of film reviews about the recent queer films *Atomic Blonde* (2017), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *Carol* (2015), and *Rocketman* (2019). Given the historically taboo nature of queer relationships on screen, these films stand out as productions that were widely distributed and critically acclaimed while containing explicit depictions of queer romance and sexuality. This analysis compares reviews of the two films centered around gay (male-male) couples—*Call Me by Your Name* and *Rocketman*—to those of films centered around lesbian (female-female) couples—*Carol* and *Atomic Blonde*—in an effort to determine how reviewers differ in their portrayal of the films. Through careful analysis, it becomes clear that, even though both lesbian films are more liberal with their inclusion of queer elements, the gay films receive more reviews that emphasize their queerness, therefore “othering” male gayness as somehow less acceptable than heterosexuality or even same-sex relationships between women.

## Introduction

Queer representation in visual media has existed since the beginning of film itself (Russo, 1981), and thus it has been a topic of heated debate among scholars, film enthusiasts, and the general public for nearly as long—is what we have good enough, is it necessary, is it “appropriate?” The topic is surprisingly broad, with any number of divergent streams of argument and analysis, and it has become all the more prominent with the advancement of gay rights in the West and a subsequent higher level of queer visibility in pop culture. In the past several years, shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Schitt’s Creek* (2015-2020), *Pose* (2018-), *Queer Eye* (2018-), and *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-) and films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Moonlight* (2016), and *Love, Simon* (2018) have achieved widespread acceptance and positive reactions from queer and straight audiences alike, reflecting a trend of greater social/political openness surrounding queer people and issues.

My intention with this paper, however, is not to analyze the content and quantity of queer films but rather to identify themes in film reviews in both queer and mainstream media. To this end, this paper engages in a qualitative discourse analysis of journalistic reviews of four popular queer or queer-thematic films in order to reveal reviewer biases for and against openly queer romances on screen, focusing specifically on the reception of female-on-female (hereafter, “lesbian”) versus male-on-male (hereafter, “gay”) sexual relationships. In essence, I investigate the question of whether or not gay sexuality is seen as less socially acceptable (i.e., more taboo) than lesbian sexuality, and for this purpose I single out four films that are both mainstream and include scenes of queer sex onscreen: chronologically, *Carol* (2015, dir. Todd Haynes), *Atomic Blonde* (2017, dir. David

Leitch), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017, dir. Luca Guadagnino), and *Rocketman* (2019, dir. Dexter Fletcher).

There has been much scholarly discussion over the last several decades about the content and importance of queer media in general and queer films specifically (Leung, 2016; Pramaggiore, 1997; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). However, there has been far less focus on the inevitable reception of said films aside from analyses of fandom (Maris, 2016; San Filippo, 2015). This film-review-focused study is crucial to understanding queer film through the ways reviews operate in constructing and influencing audience perceptions of it. Studying media-critic reviews of films—one set male and one set female—that contain queer elements may reveal a gender bias that perpetuates norms of what types of sexuality are culturally permitted. Popular press reviews of films play an impressionable role in the public's acceptance or rejection of queer-themed films, and therefore analysis of them is an important aspect of studying queer media as a whole.

By looking at critics' responses to the four films centered in this paper—responses which have influential power to make or break the box office results (Duan et. al., 2008; Chintagunta et. al., 2010)—I analyze critical perceptions of mainstream queer film. Although the opinions stated in these reviews may not be generalizable to every viewer, they claim to reflect overall audience sentiments and are widely trusted by moviegoers (King, 2006), which makes them valuable both to film scholars and to the Hollywood powers that be. Reviewers can impact the future of queer film, shaping real-life perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community in modern culture.

## **Examining the Discussions of Queer Film and Audience Analysis: A Literature Review**

There is a large body of established literature on queer film theory and its themes and impacts. Particularly since B. Ruby Rich's creation of the term "New Queer Cinema" in the early '90s to describe the rise of queer-themed independent film (Rich, 1992), there has been a variety of research and critique on both mainstream and independent films that contain same-sex attraction, relationships, and sex. These range from textual analyses of the films themselves (Pramaggiore, 1997) to small-scale audience surveys about the films (Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; McKinnon, 2015) to analyses of the fanbase as a whole (Maris, 2016; San Filippo, 2015). There are also discussions of various film-adjacent topics, such as directors' relationships with film material (Leung, 2008), media and trailer coverage of queer elements in films (Richards, 2016), and film reviews (Cooper & Pease, 2008). The research detailed in this paper, of course, falls into the latter group, and while it builds off of the concepts and discussions begun by the other categories, the focus here is centered on audience and critical reviews as contributors to those discussions.

Much of the current research, especially older research, is based on independent (or "indie") films rather than mainstream cinema. This is not surprising, since most queer film up to this point has been independent due to a number of factors—not least of which is the social taboo on queer subjects (McKinnon, 2015). Pramaggiore (2008) and Richards (2016) both do excellent analyses of films and their surrounding elements, but their subject choices are fairly inaccessible due to the niche market that they catered to. The selections may be important in a narrow sense, but their results are far from broadly applicable. Pramaggiore's (2008) reading of two indie lesbian films and Richards' (2016)

analysis of queer film marketing provide important contributions to the study of queer media, but they also leave behind a wide research gap concerning more mainstream films. Namely, when most scholarly film analyses are centered on indie film without much mainstream traction, it highlights a clear lack of queer-themed films that have been released for wider public consumption. While the films Pramaggiore and Richards discuss—*Go Fish*, *A Single Man*, and *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*—are important pieces of queer visual media, most of them are fundamentally inaccessible outside of a certain niche and have had little broader impact.

The only “mainstream” piece that extensive literature exists for is the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee). Even in this case, the film was not produced by a mainstream media company but was an indie film that was popular among general audiences. *Brokeback Mountain* was either referenced or discussed in depth by several of the articles pulled into this project, including a review analysis that will directly influence the research methods used in this paper. In it, the researchers delve into 113 reviews of the movie from all corners of the United States and in multiple types of publications. They come up with three common themes that they then use to critique general audience perceptions (Cooper & Pease, 2008). The other two articles talk about the content of the film itself and its contributory elements, with Leung (2008) analyzing the unique position of director Ang Lee and Richards (2016) going into the reverse queerbaiting—that is, the intentional exemption of queer elements from movie trailers and posters—involved in the film’s ad campaign. While not directly related to the content discussed in this paper, these do help to give a better idea of how to work with more widely viewed films in a way that the research on independent films does not.

Finally, many of the pieces gathered as a starting point for the analysis that follows are more specifically about audience reactions to queer or queer-coded media. Scanlon and Lewis (2017) conducted audience interviews after women-only screenings of queer films to assess the differences between mixed and single-gender audiences. McKinnon (2015) focused more on widespread audience reactions to gay men on screen throughout a period of Australian history. Two other articles (Maris, 2016; San Filippo, 2015) focus on large fanbases and online discussion platforms as conduits for audience reactions to and criticism of film and TV. Maris (2016) analyzed the *Xena: Warrior Princess* online fandom and how they interacted with the show on both a professional and casual basis. San Filippo (2015) provided an overview of AfterEllen, a site that allowed mostly queer women to talk about their opinions on various movies, television shows, and other media that contained queer elements. Because the internet has contributed so much to the spread of information globally about film and fandom, it becomes an important aspect of any audience analysis work.

However, although the reviews selected for this analysis came from online sources, they will also be from traditional news sources or magazines that employ film critics. Borrowing from Cooper and Pease's (2008) research based on 113 reviews of *Brokeback Mountain*, this project collects film reviews to analyze but broadens the range to four films. Simultaneously, the following analysis narrows research to just a few dozen reviews per film. The intention here is to look more closely at the actual content of each review rather than mapping general trends; the focus is on common threads between films rather than reviews. With that in mind, Cooper and Pease's (2008) research serves as a jumping-off point for comparison purposes.

### **Methods: Review Collection and Analysis**

To unpack potential gender influence in reviews of queer films, this qualitative discourse analysis of 72 film reviews is focused around four queer films that have been successful among mainstream U.S. audiences. According to widely accepted scholarship, qualitative (or “critical”) discourse analysis “tries to determine the relationship between the actual text and the processes involved in listening, speaking, reading and writing” (Mogashoa, 2014), allowing for a deeper interpretation of a text beyond surface level elements. In the context of this paper, an analysis of this kind seeks to determine social biases that are reflected in the way the authors of the selected reviews experienced the films they write about and subsequently translate into their writing. Through a feminist criticism lens, this study heavily focuses on differences in these reviews about lesbian versus gay romance and sexuality, detecting and discussing recurring themes that surface consistently in reviews of lesbian and gay films and provide distinctions between the two.

### **The Films: Public Displays of Queer Affection**

The four films whose reviews are the center of the project are, in chronological order, *Carol* (2015, dir. Todd Haynes), *Atomic Blonde* (2017, dir. David Leitch), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017, dir. Luca Guadagnino), and *Rocketman* (2019, dir. Dexter Fletcher). These films are all from the last five years and feature sex scenes between same-sex participants, whether or not they make queer content the center of the plot. They can also be paired off based on thematic elements to make the male- and female-centered pieces easier to compare. Specifically, *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* are both focused around historical same-sex relationships in the romance genre, while *Atomic Blonde* and *Rocketman* are focused around a single historical figure (fictional and non-

fictional) and emphasize action and camp. However, in this analysis the films are primarily grouped by gender of the protagonists, which leads to many comparable themes that demonstrate consistent biases throughout reviews.

Each film was studied carefully and independently, with particular attention to the cinematic choices made in regard to any sexual content as well as the length of intimate scenes; this helped to provide context to the reviewers' discussion of said sexual content. In addition, it gave me an objective view of the films' inclusion of sexuality, aiding in critical discourse analysis by establishing a reference point to which I can compare the reviewers' statements and observations. It was also, of course, helpful to have a general understanding of the plot and thematic elements that were discussed in the reviews. Thus prepared, my research turned to the actual film reviews included in my analysis.

### **The Reviews: Acknowledging the Peanut Gallery**

For the purpose of this analysis, roughly 15-20 reviews for each film were gathered from a variety of sources, including smaller news outlets and queer magazines. This added up to a total of 72 film reviews. Although the differences in media outlets do not factor heavily into this study, gathering a broad expanse of reviews from both mainstream publications such as the *New York Times* or small independent ones such as *RogerEbert.com* ensures a holistic approach that attempts to avoid including reviews from only one demographic. Nearly 80% of movie reviewers are white men (Choueiti et. al., 2018), and diversity in perspective is important to an inclusive analysis. Though more than half of the collected reviews did turn out to be by male authors, a significant portion were also penned by women and, presumably, queer journalists. Race and cultural background/identity are not factors considered in this paper; while important, this aspect

is beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, although not an exhaustive list of reviews, enough were collected to provide insight into gender dynamics in queer sex on film without going beyond the project's scope. Given the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of this analysis, once repetitive themes began to emerge (generally after 15 to 20 reviews were collected), the number of reviews was deemed sufficient.

Though all reviews collected are digital, many of the media outlets represented also published the reviews in the print editions of their periodicals (e.g., the *New Yorker*, *OUT Magazine*, *Time*). In keeping with the scope of this project, a total of 15-20 reviews were chosen for each of the four films discussed above, resulting in a master document of the full texts of each review. For the purposes of this analysis, reviews presented in forms other than print were not considered.

Once gathered, the reviews were read thoroughly and critically, with particular attention paid to mentions of queer elements as well as each critic's subjective opinion on the films. As part of a close textual analysis, in-depth annotations were performed on each review in an attempt to pick out any particular consistent themes; this would give a general view of critical reactions to queer elements in the films.

As reviews were collected and analyzed, it was noted whether each review was positive, negative, or ambiguous; whether the reviewer was male or female; whether the review was from a mainstream or queer outlet; the amount of attention queer sexuality received in each; and overall descriptive terms used—for example, adjectives with particular connotations (positive/negative/neutral). However, in keeping with the methodology of a qualitative critical discourse analysis, this paper delves into more depth

as to the particular nuances of the words, syntax, and organization used by reviewers as it relates to the inherent persuasive nature of film reviews.

For this paper, I focus specifically on the themes present in reviews surrounding gay-centered films versus lesbian-centered films in order to assess the cultural biases that affect the way queer visual media is viewed. First, reviews of *Carol* and *Atomic Blonde* are analyzed to isolate trends uniquely associated with critical responses to lesbian films; ultimately, a close reading reveals that these trends converge to desexualize lesbian intimate encounters and their contexts as much as possible. Second, reviews of the films *Call Me By Your Name* and *Rocketman* are given the same treatment, focusing on the ways in which they differ from reviews of the lesbian films once subjected to a close reading. This determines how reviewers either under- or over-sexualize the subjects of the films depending on their gender, marking important distinctions in the responses to queer film.

### **Girls on Film: Interrogating Responses to Lesbian Intimacy on Screen**

*Carol* and *Atomic Blonde* are uniquely positioned as some of the most visible sapphic representation in visual media in the last several years. Both feature clear same-sex relationships centered around one of the main characters, and both also contain up-front sex scenes that last for several minutes each and clearly show two women engaging in sexual intimacy on camera. Though one film is in the romantic drama genre and the other is an action-packed thriller, the films and, of course, their reviews highlight similar frames around lesbian sexuality and the way it functions in the current cultural moment.

As the reviews were categorized and analyzed, two particularly prominent motifs began to emerge that seemed to contribute to a blanket undersexualization of both the

films and their main characters. Namely, inconsistent mentions of sex scenes in reviews and an emphasis on coldness—both aesthetically and emotionally—are the persistent themes that surface throughout the reviews of both films. They serve to desexualize lesbian relationships in a way that perhaps speaks to the overwrought fetishization of lesbian sex in American society and subsequent undersexualization of anything short of the pornographic.

***Carol*: “Harold, They’re Lesbians”**

*Carol* depicts a forbidden relationship between two women in the 1950s, starring Cate Blanchett in the titular role—a glamorous, wealthy pre-divorcee who is mostly comfortable with her sexuality—and Rooney Mara as Therese, her conflicted young love interest who works at a fashionable department store. The two women have a chance meeting while Therese is at work, and they dance around each other hesitantly through increasingly contrived meetings and favors, finally going on a road trip alone to explore and solidify their relationship. Meanwhile, Carol’s husband collects proof of her taboo lifestyle in an attempt to gain sole custody of their daughter in the divorce. Though Carol and Therese break things off because of the husband’s interference, the movie ends hopefully as Therese approaches Carol again at a crowded restaurant with the intent of mending the relationship.

Reviews of *Carol* are overwhelmingly positive (Truitt, 2015; O’Malley, 2015; Taylor, 2015), an encouraging sign of burgeoning acceptance and even celebration of queer characters and sexualities. One critic goes so far as to call it “the goddess Venus disguised as a movie” (Zacharek, 2015), and much of the praise the film receives is on the basis of its elegant depiction of a budding romance aided by the strong acting of its

two female leads—Rooney Mara is referred to as “Audrey Hepburn-esque” by no fewer than four separate reviewers, and Cate Blanchett in her portrayal of the title character is almost universally lauded as “typically outstanding” (Kohn, 2015) and “an actress of sublime beauty and brilliance” (Travers, 2015). In addition to this, reviewers seemed to appreciate the overall aesthetic of the film, using phrases like “exquisitely choreographed” (Hornaday, 2015), “immaculate, dreamlike” (Byrnes, 2016), and “a new peak in film artistry” (Travers, 2015) to describe the lesbian drama.

Not many reviewers among those I sampled found enough fault with *Carol* for their criticisms to outweigh their accolades (though their reviews are both exceptionally short); one critic relates that the story is “weighed down” by the leads’ acting and that “As a love story this left me unsatisfied” (Jones, 2015) while sympathizing with Carol’s brutish and manipulative husband (noting that the actor who plays him is “moving as her anguished husband”). Of all the collected reviews, this one is the only piece that borders on homophobia, although it ends with the reviewer congratulating himself on his “enlightened” worldview compared to those expressed in the film (Jones, 2015). The only review sourced from a queer outlet that is negative also finds the film lacking in that it “flatters the market for gay P.C. fashion” and “is alarmingly old-fashioned” (White, 2015) in its depictions of queer romance and sexuality. This critic argues that director Todd Haynes, while believing himself the creator of a breakthrough film, in actuality caters so much to straight audiences that the film’s purpose is in fact subverted; queerness is made palatable and “bland” in “its smug conceit to teach audiences about the difficulty of being a gay woman in a repressive society” (White, 2015).

***Atomic Blonde: Is That a Knife in Your Pocket...?***

*Atomic Blonde* features what is essentially a female James Bond, with Charlize Theron as a suave and unshakable British Cold War spy, Lorraine, intent on recovering a list of current operatives in East Germany whose safety is now in jeopardy. Throughout the film, she fights with nearly every political faction imaginable, tentatively making allies and enthusiastically making enemies wherever she goes. She and her contact, Percival (James Macavoy) are suspicious of each other throughout, and it appears that each suspects the other of being the notorious double-agent known as Satchel. At one point, she meets French spy Delphine, played by Sophia Boutella, and the two have a short-lived sexual relationship before Delphine is killed by Percival. The film is framed by an interrogation from Lorraine's bosses, to whom she is giving an apparently unsuccessful mission report, and it becomes clear by the end that Lorraine is Satchel and is not only a double-agent but ultimately working for the CIA as well.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the action-oriented and adrenaline-pumped *Atomic Blonde* was less well-received by critics than the period drama films in the previous section. Indeed, only a little over half of the selected reviews of the film came to a positive conclusion about it. They are perhaps justified in this, as allegations of a "plot that is both difficult and seemingly pointless to follow" (Barker, 2017) and of its "hopeless infatuation with its own fabulous retro style" (Chang, 2017) do not ring entirely false during an objective viewing of the film. Because it relies so heavily on romanticized (or even fetishized) '80s pop aesthetics and its strong leading lady, there is inevitably little room for a cohesive storyline or much in the way of character

development—the film is unequivocally an exercise in “style over substance—but wow what style!” (Tobias, 2017)

The nicest things most reviewers have to say about *Atomic Blonde* are that it is “sexy, ass-kicking fun” (Stewart, 2017) and that Charlize Theron in the lead role as Lorraine is a “dynamite star” (Travers, 2017). Critics also praise the “lavishly violent, inventively choreographed fights” (Dargis, 2017), including a minutes-long fight scene toward the end of the film that is ostensibly shot in one take and is one of the most disturbingly realistic depictions of brutal violence in modern action cinema. Interestingly, *Atomic Blonde*’s reviewers have the most balanced male-to-female ratio, about 4:3 to be exact, in comparison to the roughly 3:1 ratio of *Carol*’s reviewers. Female reviewers tend to rank the film more highly than males do, which makes sense given that men tend to hold action movies to a higher standard, particularly when they star women in leading roles (Wühr & Schwarz, 2016; Lauzen, 2018).

Some reviewers of *Atomic Blonde* also criticized the somewhat exploitative nature of the queer elements in the film. The only review I could find from a queer outlet puts this aspect of the film front and center, complaining that it serves as “the most recent example of Hollywood exploiting gender attraction—a cunt-tease without the art-movie pretense” (White, 2017). Even mainstream reviewers catch this exploitation angle, with one of them going so far to say that the sex is “hot only if you’re a 16-year-old boy and not a lesbian” (O’Sullivan, 2017)—and this coming from a male critic. Though this is promising and shows a burgeoning awareness of both the male gaze and the perpetual exploitation of the queer body, it is a sentiment echoed only a few times (and

halfheartedly at that) across the many collected reviews, further showcasing the normalization of fake-woke queer content designed for straight audiences.

### **Theme 1: The Absence of Sex in Reviews (What's Love Got to Do with It?)**

What was most interesting about the reviews of *Carol* and *Atomic Blonde* was actually how the sex scenes were absent from them. *Carol*'s lovemaking scene lasts about two minutes, with frontal nudity, heavy kissing, and implied oral sex. In *Atomic Blonde*, the scene lasts nearly three minutes, from the initial nightclub-adjacent makeout to the bedroom escapades that feature partial frontal nudity and clear evidence of oral sex and fingering. Both scenes are heavily stylized and attuned almost uncomfortably to the male gaze, with emphasis on the women's bodies and not much else. Indeed, given that the directors of *Carol* and *Atomic Blonde* are both male, the sex scenes are filmed to titillation and generally have little bearing on the plot other than to make tangible the connection between the women involved. Despite this blatant pandering to straight male audiences, the sexuality of both films is consistently downplayed by most of the reviews about them.

Out of 16 reviews of *Atomic Blonde*, five do not see fit to even mention the sexual encounters between two women, while 13 out of 17 *Carol* reviewers either chose not to feature the sex scene at all or wrote vaguely that the women "give into their desires" (Long, 2015) or that their "furtive affections finally become passionate" (Rainer, 2015) instead of telling readers that they had sex. Is this because sex between two women has been normalized to a certain extent, because it is not classified as "real" sex if there is no man present, or some combination of the two? Either way, it denotes a form of dismissal

that tends to apply mainly to women in a patriarchal system and reduces their sexuality as functionally dependent on men—either as observers or participants.

Indeed, the emphasis is not on the women's own enjoyment but on the aesthetics of lesbian sex, something that only one or two of the reviews from each film pointed out; one reviewer notes that the moment between Lorraine and Delphine is “showy, aestheticized” (Willmore, 2017) and goes on to analyze how the inclusion of queer elements in *Atomic Blonde* function in the current cultural context. Meanwhile, the only review that provides any in-depth discussion about the sexuality of *Carol* is one sourced from *OUT Magazine*, a notably queer outlet. The rest of the reviews, for *Atomic Blonde* in particular, seem to take a “good for her!” approach, lauding the main character for “spend[ing] the occasional night instead [of with Percival] with the far worthier Delphine” (Anderson, 2017) and noting that “a female-centric action saga featuring queer romance sounds more like the stuff of empowerment than exploitation” (Willmore, 2017). The attitude of reviewers toward the sex in *Carol* is much more difficult to discern; as showcased earlier, over three fourths of the film reviews neglected to even mention it.

Ultimately, then, this trend of ignoring the sexuality of lesbian characters in film reviews—though it is front and center in the films themselves—illustrates either a cultural desensitization to female-on-female sex or an unwillingness to categorize such forms of intimacy as legitimate sexual encounters. It also intersects with issues of the male gaze, the objectification of women as a passive element during sex, and, as is further discussed in the next section, the problematic stereotype of lesbians as cold or unfeeling. Perhaps the scant mention of lesbianism could be interpreted as a step toward

further normalizing lesbian sexuality onscreen; however, the language used to describe the women's coupling—phrases like “smoking girl-on-girl action” (Adams, 2017), “bedroom antics” (Kohn, 2015), “sapphic sexcapades” (Travers, 2017), “steamy tryst” (Stewart, 2017), or any number of other similarly fetishistic terms—basically nullifies that argument.

## **Theme 2: The Frigid Lesbian Label (You're As Cold As Ice)**

Across all of the collected reviews, over two thirds of uses of the word “cold” appear in reviews of *Carol* or *Atomic Blonde* (not counting references to the Cold War). Similarly, reviews of the female-led films claim four out of five instances of the word “chilly” (though the other applied to a female character in a male-led film) and all three of “frigid.” Though this is somewhat related to the general aesthetic of *Atomic Blonde* especially, it is more often the heroines themselves that are referred to by these terms, creating a correlation—at least in this context—between queer women on screen and icy, distant tendencies. The connotations, of course, of cold words are emotional distance and indifference, playing into the idea of lesbian relationships as somehow lesser due to a lack of “real” passion.

Most of the negative opinions about *Carol* manifested in claims that the movie felt “cold” and “easy to admire but hard to hold close” (Zacharek, 2015)—though in fairness just as many felt that “accusing *Carol* of being a distant film still feels unfair” (Sims, 2016). Similarly, reviewers remarked about *Atomic Blonde* that the female characters’ “couplings aren't filmed with much tenderness or heat” (Chang, 2017) and the “attempt to convince us that [Lorraine] has an actual human emotional response to Delphine...rings entirely false” (O'Sullivan, 2017). Interestingly, the reviews that

characterize the films as chilly have little to no engagement with their queer nature, glossing over both the eroticism and the cultural taboos that would have prevented more warmth in cultural context, whereas those like critic David Sims' passionate defense of *Carol* (and Kate Taylor's [2015] gentle criticism of the filmmakers' appeal to what she calls the "straight gaze") tend to delve deeper into the systems of heterosexual patriarchy in justifying the tendency toward emotional distance.

So, though the casual viewer might contend that there is actually quite a bit of warmth in the intimate relationships between the characters, only about a fifth of the instances of "warm" occur in reviews of the two lesbian films, and they are overshadowed by the consistent characterization of these films as physically and emotionally cold. However, for Carol and Lorraine, queer women of the past whose life and livelihood hinged on concealing their sexual identities, the sexual tension of a loaded gaze was as close as they could get to expressing warmth to a partner in a public space. Ultimately, then—particularly in combination with the glossing-over of sex scenes in general—the fixation on the coldness (read: emotional distance) in the films acts as an attention draw that distracts from and erases, to some extent, the complicated sexuality of the main characters.

### **Sleeping for the Wrong Team: Gay Male Sexuality in Film Reviews**

The two films chosen to represent current depictions of gay male relationships in mainstream film—*Call Me By Your Name* and *Rocketman*—sit on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of genre and content. *Call Me By Your Name*, a romantic drama set in early '80s Italy, is a completely serious and poignant exploration of queer first love; *Rocketman*, a biopic as campy as they come about one of the most flamboyant queer rock

stars in history, tends to drown its seriousness in rhinestones. The films are very little alike in any way, but their differences serve to highlight the films' comparison points, making it all the more fascinating that reviews of the two contain numerous similar themes; these ultimately lead to a demonstration that reviewers tend to heavily oversexualize films starring gay male characters in a way that they clearly do not for lesbian-led films.

The three most prominent themes that surfaced across the collected reviews were the use of words like “sexy” or “sensual” to describe the movies themselves, the portrayal of gay sex as somehow scandalous or risqué (in a way that sex in the lesbian films was not), and the accusations (mostly from queer outlets) that the film seems “closeted” (Holleran, 2017) or not fully representative of the gay experience. Though the last theme might seem to be a contradiction to the other two, it demonstrates that the films themselves are not nearly as “sexy” as the reviews would make them seem. In contrasting complaints about the restrained nature of the films with the amped-up sexuality present in the reviews, the following analysis emphasizes the oversexualization of gay male relationships, and gay sex scenes in particular, throughout reviews.

### ***Call Me by Your Name: Twinks in Their Natural Habitat***

The 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name* is essentially the story of two young men who come closer and closer together over the course of a summer in Italy, until finally they end up in a not-so-clandestine romantic and sexual relationship. Elio, played by Timothée Chalamet, is at first unimpressed with Oliver (Armie Hammer), the older graduate student his father has brought on as a research assistant, but the two warily build a friendship that quickly turns into something deeper. Biking around the Italian

countryside, having philosophical discussions, and dodging their respective girlfriends, Elio and Oliver forge a seemingly unbreakable bond which is nevertheless shattered by Oliver's return to America at the end of the summer and his subsequent engagement to a long-term girlfriend he had never mentioned to Elio. On the surface, it is a fairly simple film, but it ultimately explores the hefty emotions involved in not only first love but first exploration of queer identity, and as such it resonated with many American audiences.

Mainstream critics almost universally loved *Call Me by Your Name*. It seems to be the perfect combination of “beautiful landscapes, bodies, and language” (Dowd, 2017) and “cinematic virtuosity [sic]” (Debruge, 2017), which are the two aspects of the film that reviewers praise most often. The highly stylized aesthetics of the film are remarked on in every review, emphasizing the “sinfully sensuous settings” (Burr, 2017) just as much as, if not more than, the “masterful poise” (Frank, 2017) of actors Timothée Chalamet and Armie Hammer. Most critics seem to be in agreement that *Call Me by Your Name* is a beautiful movie; the script is lauded as “tremendously insightful” (Sims, 2017), the pace as an “agonizing, exciting waltz” (Dowd, 2017), and even the film's score as “glorious” (van Hoejj, 2017).

This sometimes backfires, according to critics, as some feel that the actors are not “rich enough as characters to outshine their surroundings” and that there is a pointed “lack of sharp conflict” (Rainer, 2017) to provide a truly satisfying viewing experience. In addition, a few reviewers characterized the movie as “a bit overdone” (Guzmán, 2017) or noted that “the symbolism threatens at times to get a little too on-the-nose” (Dowd, 2017), criticizing the way that the aesthetics of the film often overtake other elements, such as the plot or the characters themselves. Otherwise, though, very few critics have

anything negative to say about the film as a whole, even those who find some fault with admitting that “There aren’t many summer love stories as rapturously bittersweet as *Call Me By Your Name*,” (Dowd, 2017) as one review from the *AV Club* was titled.

### ***Rocketman*: Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘n’ Roll**

Named after the song that provides one of the most poignant moments in the film, *Rocketman* is a campy, over-the-top, creatively licensed film biography of Elton John, arranged as a musical featuring some of his most popular tunes. The movie is framed by a group rehab meeting, in which John (played by Taron Egerton) tells his life story, with a few embellishments and inaccuracies. As the audience watches him grow up on screen, they are made aware of some of the influences on his music as well as his downward spiral into various addictions and self-destructive tendencies. His relationships with songwriter Bernie Taupin (Jamie Bell) and manager John Reid (Richard Madden)—with whom he has a tumultuous love affair—are explored throughout, adding a very personal and emotional depth to the film. There is no shying away from the queer elements of John’s life, and either despite or because of that, *Rocketman* was wildly successful and enjoyed by fans and casual viewers alike.

Unlike the other films listed here, *Rocketman* is a film made by, and arguably for, the queers it represents. This is reflected in the fact that every review I encountered from a queer source was hugely positive, whereas only about two thirds of mainstream critics concluded that *Rocketman* had much in the way of artistic merit. Queer reviewers lauded the film as “appropriately flamboyant” (Carpenter, 2019), “delightfully weird” (Dommu, 2019), and “a thrill ride all the way” (Carman, 2019). The overall tone of reviews from outlets like *RAGE* or *Out Magazine* was one of refreshment—one critic remarked that “at

the very least, queer people will get to see a major studio film that presents the life of a gay icon as it actually happened” (Dommu, 2019). This is particularly important in the context of the recent *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic about Freddie Mercury, which even mainstream critics “derided for downplaying Mercury’s homosexuality” (Brody, 2019).

For film reviewers at some mainstream outlets, though, *Rocketman* is “not especially engaging” (Hassenger, 2019). Many complain about the disjointedness and the liberties taken with the source material, especially when it comes to the music, which is “out of chronology and in no particular order” (Burr, 2019). Reviewers also critiqued it as “stuffed to the gills with clichés” (Coyle, 2019) and “a snazzy, overproduced vessel for the songs” (Kohn, 2019), dismissing the campy biopic as simply a cash-grab that capitalized on the success of recent films that share its overall premise. However, in comparison to these recent films—most notably, *Bohemian Rhapsody*—a vast majority of critics found *Rocketman* both more compelling (Bloomer, 2019; Greenblatt, 2019; Carman, 2019) and more honest (Dommu, 2019; Brody, 2019; Wheeler, 2019).

### **Theme 1: Objectification of Films through Descriptive Language (It’s Very Sexy of Them)**

In general, reviewers found the two gay films overall to be infused with sexual energy, even though both sex scenes in the films lasted only a little over a minute each. Indeed, over 75% of the words “sexy” and “sensual” appeared in reviews of *Call Me By Your Name* and *Rocketman* and only 25% in reviews of the lesbian films, illustrating a stark contrast in the attitudes that reviewers brought to the films. With this in mind, there is a fundamental disconnect between the amount of sex in the films and the amount of sex in the reviews. For example, the sex in *Rocketman* is either heavily implied (brief scenes

of mostly clothed men participating in orgies or oral sex) or very straightforward—the only sex scene between Elton John and his manager/lover, John Reid, lasts for less than a minute and is a matter-of-fact depiction; no one is twisting sexily at a camera, and it's choreographed in a way that makes it clear the characters are having fun with it. The men are allowed to laugh and fumble around, shifting the focus from the actual sex to the human connection between them. In short, it does not immediately register as being for the audience's viewing pleasure.

And yet, critics consistently over-sex the content that does exist by infusing their reviews with sexualized language. In *Call Me By Your Name* especially, there is such a purposeful centering of the sensuality of the film (the words “sensuous,” “sensual,” and “sensuality” appear 16 times over the course of 23 reviews) that without context, it might seem that *Call Me by Your Name* is an unrestrained ode to carnal pleasures. Though the main characters do walk around shirtless for half the film, this is decidedly not the case; *Call Me by Your Name* is better characterized as lazy and soft than hot or electric. It is worthwhile to ask the question: if the film had been a straight romance or even a lesbian one, would critics still be clamoring that it was the “Sexiest Film of 2017” (Travers, 2017) with its tame, minute-long sex scene between the two leads? Though one critic opines that the “love scenes are all choreographed with care” (Sims, 2017), there wasn't much to choreograph, in all actuality; indeed, most of the minute that marks the consummation of the leads' relationship is spent with the camera looking determinedly out the window while the audience hears, in muffled tones, the couple awkwardly lovemaking in the background. This is not to claim that the film has no eroticism, but there seems to be a disconnect between the level of sexiness espoused in the reviews of

*Call Me by Your Name* than the extent of it in the actual film. Perhaps one critic nails the reason for this when he remarks that “[t]he relative discretion about the full physical compatibility of the men could potentially help the film gain a wider audience beyond the LGBTQ community” (van Hoejj, 2017). This could explain why the restrained sexuality is plenty raunchy enough, even “an erotic triumph” (Lane, 2017), to the vast majority of mainstream reviewers, while most queer critics are left lamenting the “closeted emotions” that stem from “an out-dated, introverted and mostly inept sensibility” (White, 2017).

In reviews of *Rocketman*, overall, reviewers tended to be lukewarm about the depiction of gay sex on screen, if it was mentioned at all; at most, it was described as “honest” (Wheeler, 2019), but surprisingly few other adjectives are attached to the scene. One or two reviews did go into depth about the inclusion of John’s sex life with his manager, Reid, and of particular interest is one which simply stated that “[t]he new movie has a brief sex scene of little eroticism, which might as well have been a title card saying ‘They had sex.’ Watching a scene in which Elton flaunts his sexual success to his mother (‘I’ve fucked everything that moves!’) viewers are likely to wonder, Where? When?, because nothing in the film indicates that Elton has in fact done so” (Brody, 2019). Yet, the film in general is apparently “sexier, raunchier and more profane” (Lemire, 2019) than, for example, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and actor Richard Madden is described multiple times as “seductive” (Travers, 2019) or “deviously sexy” (Zacharek, 2019).

An important point of comparison here is the number of times that sex between the men in the films is mentioned in reviews. Out of 44 reviews for both films, 35 of them specifically discuss the sex, or about 80%. Compare this to the number of reviews that dismissed the (arguably more explicit) scenes in the lesbian films: for double the

screen time, the women get half as many mentions of their sex scenes than the men do. It seems as though there is a much stronger emphasis on gay male sexuality in these reviews, connoting it as more of a spectacle than lesbian sex and making necessary a discussion of the ways gay sex is described in the reviews.

### **Theme 2: Othering Gay Sex as Unnatural (“Right in Front of My Salad??”)**

Something that was particularly telling was the way that many reviewers categorized the sexual encounters in the films—namely, as somehow inherently taboo or sinful in some way. In *Rocketman*, reviewers tended to lump Elton John’s homosexuality in with his “bad behavior”: “falling into bed with Reid, quenching his thirsty soul with vodka, and surfing atop a mob of orgiasts” (Lane, 2019) are all ranked equally in terms of sinful activity, and one critic states that when John “hooks up with manager John Reid,” it’s what “truly launches [him] into a life of debauchery” (Lemire, 2019). Other reviews also make the connection between John’s sexuality and vice, though their authors may not be aware of the connotations of their doing so.

In reviews of *Call Me By Your Name*, this trend surfaces mostly in oft-repeated terms like “seductive,” “stolen” (in reference to moments or touches), or “lust”—the latter, coincidentally, otherwise only appearing in reviews of *Rocketman*. All of these terms have decidedly negative or “dirty” connotations, serving to emphasize the idea of gay sex as not only more “real” than lesbian sex but also more scandalous. This is especially interesting in the context of the films themselves; in *Carol*, for example, everyone around the two leads is against their relationship, whereas in *Call Me by Your Name*, the boys’ affair is unopposed, even encouraged (by Elio’s father and girlfriend, no less). Because the words used to describe the men’s relationships are so negatively

loaded, someone getting information about the film solely through reviews might have a skewed perception of how “dirty” it actually is. Overall, the implicit associations and biases have an impact on what is printed, which in turn impacts readers’ opinions and continues to reinforce cultural norms about the acceptability of engaging in gay sex.

### **Theme 3: “And Here’s My Review: Not Gay Enough!”**

Finally, many reviewers of both films called out the lack of authentic queer content—if such a thing can exist in fiction—in *Call Me By Your Name* and *Rocketman*. Many felt that it seemed staged or closeted, and this observation in combination with the hypersexualized tendencies of other reviews makes an important point: even with less sexual content on the whole, gay films are consistently more sexualized than lesbian films in the same categories. In pointing out how tame in terms of sex the films actually were, it becomes clear that the emphasis on that sex stems from a bias against gay men expressing their sexuality.

For example, reviewers from queer outlets tended to have a decidedly less enthusiastic outlook on *Call Me By Your Name* especially than mainstream reviewers. Many were hesitant to call it a satisfying piece of queer representation, as it “seems to refuse to engage with gayness at all,” instead opting for “prudery and polished romance justified as pure and magical love” (Ratskoff, 2018). Another critic feels that “[t]here is something closeted, dare I say creepy, about the film” (Holleran, 2017). These criticisms are entirely fair given the somewhat sanitized portrait of queer sexuality that *Call Me by Your Name* depicts, not even going as far in its studied sensuality as the novel on which it is based; according to Ratskoff’s and others’ reviews, the book delves deep into the

inherent queerness of “salacious filth and sexualized male flesh” (Ratskoff, 2018) that the film does not dare touch.

In the case of *Rocketman*, though many mainstream critics lauded its “open[ness] about John’s sexuality, which gives it a degree of authenticity” (Lemire, 2019), others are more skeptical about the film’s depiction of gay sex: “it is, in a word, inoffensive—to gay viewers, and, as some executives out there are surely hoping, to most audiences panicked by too much man-on-man” (Bloomer, 2019). The sexuality of the film, while present, reads to many reviewers as a calculated effort to include some gayness but not enough to lose its appeal to straight audiences.

While this is more of an analysis of the films themselves than their reviews, it highlights an important point about the context of the reviews. Because a scant few (and mostly queer) reviewers noticed the almost closeted nature of the men’s sexuality, it serves to emphasize the extent to which that sexuality is embellished in other reviews. There is a sharp divide between reviews that recognize that the sex in *Call Me By Your Name* and *Rocketman* is ultimately restrained and those that see it as more raunchy; in sum, then, gay sex in these movies is sensationalized by critics in a way that it is not in reviews of lesbian films.

### **Discussion**

By comparing the critical conversations around each of the films I selected, I hoped to point out the discrepancies between reviewers’ opinions on gay versus lesbian sex onscreen. To this end, it was important to look at specific words, phrases, and trends that have positive, negative, or neutral connotations—some of these may be intentional, but many more of them are not, and a close analysis is helpful in extracting the layers of

meaning and discussing them in context. Through a careful perusal of over 70 reviews, it was clear that there was a pattern of oversexualization of male-on-male romantic tension and an undersexualization of its lesbian counterpart. The themes discussed in previous sections highlight this pattern: both the exclusion of lesbian sex in reviews and the emphasis on coldness contribute to desexualization, whereas the spotlight on sexuality and dirtiness in gay films—in the context of a fairly closeted depiction of queerness—underpins the consistent hypersexualization of gay men and the films they feature in.

Ultimately, a marked difference in critical tone becomes the factor that distinguishes reviews of lesbian films from those of gay ones. While a few reviewers do note the eroticism and sexuality in *Carol* and *Atomic Blonde*, it is a perpetual focus of reviews concerning *Call Me by Your Name* and *Rocketman*, emphasizing the physical rather than the intangible. Although some of this is directed toward the overall aesthetics and setting, it mostly applies to the leading men and their interactions. Though *Carol* and *Atomic Blonde* are also sometimes referred to as “seductive,” “beguiling,” or “sexy” (Hornaday, 2015; Stewart, 2017), reviews that characterize the films this way and amp up the sexuality in them are few and far between. With both of these films, it was important to note that reviewers were less likely to discuss and scrutinize the sexual encounters between the women involved than they were for the films centered around gay men, even though both sex scenes in these films were both longer and more explicit than in *Call Me By Your Name* or *Rocketman*. Reviewers used more positive and hazy language around lesbian sex scenes, while gay sex scenes were often described in raunchier and more concrete terms; this plays directly into the idea that sex between men is often sensationalized, while lesbian sexuality is seen as softer (and often not “real” sex). While

both are certainly fetishized in popular culture, male-on-male sex seems to be viewed more negatively than female-on-female sex. This could be due to a number of factors, none of which are the focus of this paper, but the most prominent ones are the proliferation of lesbian pornography aimed toward straight men and the general stigma against gay men as predatory or emasculated.

Even though each lesbian film corresponds to a gay one in tone and content, the reviews paint them in entirely distinct ways. Inevitably, much of the nuance is erased in critics' decisions to paint *Carol*, for example, as almost solely emotional while *Call Me by Your Name* becomes overwhelmingly physical. Not only does this fall squarely into common societal stereotypes concerning male versus female sexuality, but it also betrays a certain bias that is applied to *gay versus lesbian* sexuality. Namely, the sex in *Carol* is less dangerous, more normalized—perhaps through the proliferation of lesbian pornography directed at heterosexual male audiences—while that in *Call Me by Your Name* is more deviant, almost to the point of fetishization, though it is on paper (or, rather, on film) less pronounced than in its lesbian counterpart. There is little explanation for this trend in the films themselves, and the critics (some of whom reviewed multiple of the films for the same media outlets) may be unaware of it in their own writing—it is only through a comparison of the words and phrases that it becomes clear, and once seen it cannot be unseen. Ultimately, what I hope to have shown through this analysis is the repetition of harmful cultural norms surrounding queer sexuality in widely-consumed media criticism, perhaps contributing to the lack of authentic and normalized queer representation on the big screen.

This analysis, of course, is quite limited in scope and thus not generalizable on a wider scale. It would be nearly impossible to collect every review made about any of the films identified in this analysis, and even so, this data would not be applicable to wider audiences, who do not have the same outlook or background as the film critics cited in this paper. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about casual viewers of mainstream queer films, and of course the study is also limited to reviewers of these four specific films. In addition, no distinctions were made as concerns the backgrounds of reviewers, other than singling out those which come from queer sources. Since the reviewers I selected were from no single demographic, we cannot conclude anything about, say, specifically white male reviewers versus male reviewers of color.

With these caveats, though, there are multiple directions which further research can follow, some of which may address the limitations above. For example, an analysis of reviewers' reactions to queer sexuality onscreen could be done that emphasizes the demographic backgrounds of the reviewers, distinguishing responses based on gender, ethnicity, or age. To address wider audience opinions, an analysis of consumer reviews (on websites like Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb, or Amazon.com) could be useful—though something of that scope may fall more into a quantitative analysis rather than qualitative. Finally, it could be of significant interest to conduct a similar discourse analysis research project based on reviews of queer films versus straight ones, focused on determining differences in language surrounding homo- versus heterosexual activity on screen.

### **Conclusion**

Though it is difficult to pinpoint the level of effect the language in reviews like the ones I have analyzed here have on the public psyche or implicit biases surrounding

queer relationships, it is clear that there are multiple cultural and societal forces affecting responses to gay and lesbian sexualities in popular culture. Intersections of gender and sexuality play a huge role in this, and each intersection brings out different reactions, as has been illustrated through careful analysis and reference to queer and feminist theory. In such a huge and profitable sector as the film industry, it is especially important to recognize and label elements, like the critical responses singled out in this paper, that contribute to representational issues as well as stereotypes and cultural assumptions. Overall, continued research and analysis in this area is crucial in an attempt to create a more inclusive and equitable future of film and popular entertainment.

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