

# **QUEER PUBLIC FIGURES IN BIOPICS**

**ELEANOR MAY THORPE**

Student No. 14009854

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## ABSTRACT

This work considers the impact of queer representation and queer visibility in the biopic genre, with a specific focus on the morality of artifice when representing the life story of a real figure. How does a figure's representation impact their legacy, reputation, and the perception of queer people in general? The biopic is defined and analysed in terms of genre, subgenre, and conventions. Filmmaker intentions and motivations are highlighted within case studies including *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2014) and a close comparison between *Behind the Candelabra* (Soderberg, 2013), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018) and *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019). Considering the impact of archetypes, the hero's journey and generic narrative structures, this work highlights the potential impact of changes to a figure's life story for the purpose of revenue, critical acclaim, and entertainment.

# THE PORTRAYAL OF QUEER PUBLIC FIGURES IN BIOPICS

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores how queer public historical figures are portrayed within the biopic genre, with specific references to Dyer (1984, 1993), Custen (1992), Bingham (2010) and Vogler (2007). Within this thesis I aim to explore the methods of portraying established queer figures within the genre and investigate the impact of the filmmaker's creative choices in portraying these figures, with particular focus on how this effects an audience's interaction with the portrayal and the subject. Considering the results of studies exploring the impact of the representation of queer characters on both queer and heterosexual viewers, a key objective of this thesis is to highlight how a production company or filmmaker's personal approach to a figure's story can positively or negatively affect the reputation of the figure and the perceptions of queerness, including the influence on LGBTQA+ youth. The impact of artifice in narrative is further studied, debating the ethics of authorship, changing historical fact to fit a narrative structure and whether these changes negatively or positively affect the subject, audience, and the general public's historical knowledge.

### **Queerness**

As defined by *Stonewall* (2017) 'Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.' This is an umbrella term referring to those with a non-normative sexual and/or gender identity and 'can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism etc).' The organisation continues to explain that 'although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it.' Whilst the visibility of queer people in cinema and television has been improving, queer

characters are still often subject to characterisation through the use of stereotypes and potentially negative non-queer typification. Therefore, it is worth considering the impact of this kind of characterisation on real queer figures as they are represented in biopics.

In society heterosexuality and cisgender identities are generally considered the norm, whether individuals are consciously aware of this or not. Heterosexuality is, in many ways, invisible to members of society as it is a societal norm. It is a social reality that has been enforced throughout history based on a heteronormative standard. Richard Dyer (1993, p.118) argues that it is particularly invisible to those who benefit from this social structure. He cites this as a 'remorseless construction of heterosexuality as natural.' which not only suggests that there is a specific way of life that one must follow based on the laws of nature, but it also implies that anything that is not heterosexual is unnatural, breaking some form of biological law our bodies naturally adhere to. 'If things are natural, they cannot be questioned or scrutinised and so they fade from view.' (Dyer, 1993, p.118-119) Therefore queerness is considered 'other', hence the related alternate meaning and etymological definition of the term 'queer' to mean 'odd' or 'perverse'. This societal preconception perpetuates heterosexism, the discrimination or prejudice towards non-heterosexuals on the basis of a notion that heterosexuality is natural and therefore non-heterosexuals are unnatural. The use of the term 'non-heterosexual' and 'non-cisgender' to refer to queer people and cultures has been suggested as an alternative to queer due to arguments that the term 'queer' is pejorative and holds too much negative weight from its previous use as a homophobic slur. However, this term could be discredited by some as enforcing heterosexism as it implies that society consists of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, enforcing the idea that heterosexuality is the standard and identifying as any of the many sexualities found throughout history grouped together as being 'other'. This study will be referring to non-heterosexuals under the umbrella of 'queer' as it not only has roots in academic study but connotes an idea of greater sexual fluidity. The term non-

heterosexual has some roots in monosexism, the thought that a person can only be attracted to one gender. Suggesting that you are either a heterosexual who desires the opposite sex or a homosexual who desires the same sex. Bisexuals often find themselves involved in heterosexual relationships whilst continuing to be queer. Therefore, by referring to bisexuals under the term 'non-heterosexual' could be considered to erase and invalidate the heterosexual attraction and relationships that they experience as a part of their sexuality.

Human sexuality is a complicated subject that is still not entirely understood by modern science or psychology. It can be classified in four condensed, although arguably over-simplified, categories;

- Heterosexual - attracted to the opposite sex, solely consisting of androphilic females and gynophilic males.
- Homosexual - attracted to the same sex, solely consisting of androphilic males and gynophilic females.
- Bisexual - attracted to both males and females, with further subdivisions including attraction to those outside the gender binary.
- Asexual - those who feel little to no sexual attraction to anyone.

People at every age find themselves questioning or discovering their sexuality hence why queer representation in accessible film and television of all genres and target demographics is so important. Not only does representation of 'non-normative' sexualities increase awareness and educate the viewer, but it has also been shown to be capable of emotionally influencing audiences to an extent that they further understand themselves and others. Halberstam further discusses the concept of heteronormativity and the impact of heteronormativity on perceptions of success and happiness. He also stresses the importance of finding non-normative identities, families and relationships in low culture, media, literature or art that is

extremely popular even if formulaic and structurally conformist at times. Low culture can often be overlooked when approaching theory as some can view this media as unchallenging, revenue focussed and cookie cutter, however in terms of queer visibility, popular media is where representation needs to be.

Whilst queer is a term that not only refers to sexuality but also gender, this thesis will be focusing on the concept of sexuality and its representation rather than the representation of the complexities of gender identity. There are arguments to be made that the matters of sexuality and gender are directly linked, however, the extent of which is up for debate and is not the focus of this writing. Judith Butler (1990) highlights what is described as “the heterosexual matrix”, a standard by which society understands the link between your predetermined sex, its associated cultural gender identity and your sexual and romantic desires. David Gauntlett (2002, pp.148-149) further simplifies this theory with the three markers, ‘you have a body’, ‘you may perform an identity’ and ‘you may have desires’. Butler (1990) suggests that the idea that these markers follow any fixed pattern and that any notion of links or causation between them should be forgotten. This thesis will only be referring to gender identity when it is suspected to have a direct influence towards the representation of a queer relationship and the influences of conventional gender roles in a heterosexual relationship on the expectations of the viewer. For example, to draw a direct connection to the stereotype of the ‘lipstick’ (feminine) lesbian and the ‘butch’ (masculine) lesbian. Not only does this suggest that homosexual people can be categorised into two gender types but also an alignment with a heteronormative perspective on queer relationships. This extreme feminine and masculine stereotype of lesbians and gay men enforces a further stereotype of homosexual relationships consisting of a feminine person and a masculine person. UM, a creative media company, conducted a survey with almost five hundred ‘women who define as queer (lesbian, bisexual and otherwise non-straight)’. The study

concluded that 82% of women highlighted the common stereotype ‘in every queer couple, one has to be the man’ (UM, 2019) Whilst lesbian identities exist on a gender spectrum, the stereotype of a lesbian relationship that contains these two stereotypes enforces the construct of heterosexual gender roles in a relationship and implies that relationships with two masculine or two feminine figures do not exist. Dyer (1993, p.119) notes that ‘masculinity and femininity themselves are held to be inherent opposites, requiring one another to create a perfect whole, the heterosexual couple.’ despite the fact that ‘personal and moral qualities may be found equally among women or men’. This, therefore, creates a false binary in which, for example, lesbians are either extremely feminine or extremely masculine and when combined they create the equivalent of the heterosexual couple. This stereotype can remove the autonomy of individuals, queer people often display a range of masculine and feminine traits, and even if they display a hyperfeminine or hypermasculine character type, this does not mean that their only options for a successful relationship is to be with someone displaying a counter character type.

## **Biopics**

The term biopic is a contraction, formed through the combination of the word ‘biographical’, content detailing a person’s life, and ‘motion picture’, more commonly referred to as cinematic film. Portraying anywhere from the entire life story of a subject to focus around a specific event for which he or she is acknowledged. Are figures for whom we have real-world accounts characterised in a different way from reality as a result of stereotyping or heteronormativity? This thesis highlights and postulates some of the comparative differences between the accounts of the real queer figure and the queer characterisation of the figure, and further considers the causes and impacts of these differences.



The classification of the biopic is considered and compared to the similar genres of the docu-drama and period drama, drawing distinctions between the differing levels of expected artifice. Using *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), the extent to which a figure's story is their own is studied. Are there moral issues with presenting the story of a real figure whilst changing key elements, such as character names? Does this exemplify the theft of a life story, taking away credit from those who actually achieved and suffered or is it simply true that real-life stories often affect fiction and the impact of the story on the audience is the true take away regardless of credit? Taking on the legal context of the biopic and the impact of defamation, this thesis discusses who should be held responsible for any effect on the real figure's reputation or legacy. Several theorists have studied the biopic genre, some arguing that it may not be a stand-alone genre at all. If the biopic is a stand-alone genre then what can be considered its conventions? This thesis takes into account the thoughts of theorists such as Dennis Bingham, Ina Bertrand and Will D. Routh, and suggests that the biopic genre can be further divided into three subcategories; 'the Life Story', 'the Redemption' and 'the Crusade'. Each subcategory follows a different narrative structure and is used to evoke a specific emotion and perception of the subject. For clarity, this thesis refers to the real figure by their last name and their characterisation by their first name.

Since the beginning of storytelling, stories have contained a protagonist, a lead character who is often fighting for moral justice, and an antagonist, an adversary to the protagonist who is often villainous in their actions. This thesis highlights the contrast between this important narrative tool and the reality that whilst real-life situations often involve moral or immoral actions from opposing sides of the dispute, human beings are more complex than solely good or evil. Fictionalised characters can display these simplified characteristics however real people contain conflicting qualities that are not always optimal for certain narratives. In order for audiences to best understand the narrative, they need to learn the character motivations, a

task that can become confusing when the characters have too many opposing characteristics. It is considered how the application of archetypes in biopics can affect the perception of real figures. For example, hero narratives used to evoke empathy may have a positive impact on the figure's reputation however this can lead to a glorification of figures who have flaws and may not fully deserve admiration. *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2014) is used to exemplify the impact of narrative structure and character archetypes on historical fact.

Acknowledging the impact of these interpretations of an established story, accountability and bias are questioned, in terms of both legality and ethics. There is further study into the impact of involvement in one's own biopic, whether the subject themselves are involved, those close to them or those spurned by them. As most biopics occur after the death of the figure portrayed, the information comes from a variety of sources, accounts and testimonies. Therefore, to what extent can biopics be trusted by audiences as historical truth and can the subject's personal reality, such as their sexuality, be reflected without being distorted for the sake of censorship, publicity and/or filmmaker's perceptions? This study employs a three-film case study of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018), *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019) and *Behind the Candelabra* (Soderberg, 2013). These three films, set in and around the 1970s and 1980s, all detail the lives of famous queer musical personalities; Freddie Mercury, Elton John, Liberace. Despite their similarities, each film utilises a different primary source of information and therefore tackles the representation of the subject's sexuality to varying degrees of factuality and visual clarity.

## CHAPTER 1

Positioning Queerness: legally, historically and in representation censorship

### **Legality**

Discrimination towards queer people can be in the form of social interaction or social stigmatisation however it can also become ingrained in political practice and criminal law. Discrimination can become institutionalised, in organisations and political systems. Lotta Samelius and Erik Wågberg (2005, p.19) detail many ways in which discrimination through criminalisation can affect the lives and livelihood of queer people. Their examples include healthcare issues such as ‘pathologizing, forced medication and cruel treatments,’ and ignorance towards minorities within the queer community such as ‘neglect of the existence and needs of LGBT people with disabilities, young LGBT persons and elderly LGBT persons’ and threat of physical harm such as ‘violence and harassment from official state representatives including execution.’ Not only can these laws have a grievous impact on the physical and mental health of queer people, but it can create a social climate in which hatred and discrimination towards queer people is seen as acceptable by the public. For example, if a government finds it justifiable to punish queer people with execution this sends a message that queer people are inherently wrong, going against laws perceived to be founded on moral and safety grounds, and that queer lives are worth less than those of heterosexual people. This can create an incredibly toxic culture in which queer people hide in fear and often begin to believe the governments indoctrination themselves, leading to diminished self-worth and self-hatred. In some countries there are laws to protect citizens from discrimination in the workplace, in education and as a consumer. UK law defines certain ‘protected characteristics’ protected from discrimination, including, but not limited to age, sex, sexual orientation and religious beliefs. The four categories of discrimination, according to UK Government (GOV.UK, 2020) are:

- ‘Direct Discrimination’; treating those with protected characteristics less favourably.
- ‘Indirect Discrimination’; enforcing rules that apply to everyone however they provide an unfair disadvantage to those with protected characteristics.
- ‘Harassment’, unwanted behaviours that violate dignity or creates an offensive environment for those with protected characteristics.
- ‘Victimisation’, the unfair treatment of someone who has complained or reported discrimination or harassment.

Despite these laws queer people still suffer discrimination today, whether in major or minor social ways. An International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) report, *State Sponsored Homophobia*, highlights that, in March 2019, ‘...there are 70 UN Member States (35%) that criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts: 68 of them have laws that explicitly criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts...’ (Mendos, 2019, p.15) This evidences the existence of homosexual discrimination and prejudice throughout areas of the world even in modern society. Whilst the UK discrimination laws currently protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in their day to day lives, this has not always been the case.

Queer otherness and it’s distinct subculture is considered to be directly related to the once underground nature of the queer sexuality and gender identity. Homosexuality and legal restriction have been entangled throughout history. Homosexual activity was illegal for centuries, most specifically for homosexual men as for quite a long-time, officials did not consider lesbian activity to exist. The Buggery Act of 1533 criminalised the act of sodomy between two men, along with sodomy between men and women, and sexual acts between a person and an animal. This conviction was punishable by death and evidenced social views that homosexual acts were not only illegal but viewed as comparable to bestiality. Early biblical texts, such as *Leviticus* (20:13), were drawn upon by lawmakers at the time to

condemn male homosexuality, stating 'And if a man also lies with mankind, as with womankind, both of them have committed abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.' (Carroll and Prickett, 2008, p.147) As Christian values became cemented into early western society, ideals such as this influenced both lawmakers and social opinions. The fear surrounding buggery charges led to what was known as 'The Blackmailer's Charter'. '...Blackmail attempts involved a threat to expose a man as a homosexual, whether or not he were in fact gay.' (Norton, 2009) Thieves, muggers and highwaymen would often silence their victims with the threat that they would claim buggery, resulting in a legal death sentence. As a result of this and the lack of evidence required for prosecution, many people, homosexual and heterosexual, were sentenced to death. Whilst the law that created the basis of legal homosexual persecution in the UK, the Buggery Act, was not written into law until 1533 that is not to say that homosexuality was accepted prior to that. There have been periods in history when non-normative sexuality and homosexual activity have attracted some degree of acceptance within society. There were cultures in which homosexuality became part of society although there were still pressures of heteronormativity. An example of this is Ancient Greek pederasty, where sexual interaction between an adult man and younger man (usually an adolescent boy) was common even though there was significant social stigma associated with receiving sexual penetration. Whilst certain queer acts combined with toxic ideology were accepted, committed homosexual relationships were still not considered on a par with heterosexual relationships.

The 1533 Buggery Act was amended through the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1855, criminalising all homosexual activity, including within the privacy of the home. It is estimated that during the 1950s up to one thousand men were arrested each year due to this law. Some tried to argue the decriminalisation of homosexual activity, most famously Sir John Wolfenden in the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and

Prostitution (1957), more commonly known as the Wolfenden Report. This Report presented controversial opinions on homosexuality, stating ‘We accordingly recommend that homosexual behaviours between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence.’ (Lewis, 2016, p.275) Despite this Report recommending homosexuality in private should not be illegal, that homosexuality did not seem to be a disease and that it was not the role of the government to involve themselves in moral matters within the home, homosexuality continued to be illegal until at least 1967. ‘The Sexual Offences Act (1967) decriminalised consensual sex between men over 21 and in private, in England and Wales. In Scotland consensual sex between men was decriminalised by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act (1980).’ (Stonewall, 2017) To some this decriminalisation may seem surprisingly recent and it may be even more shocking to learn that the age of consent for homosexuals was not corrected to match the age of heterosexual citizens (sixteen) until the Sexual Offences (amendment) Act of 2000.

Understanding the legal history of queer people and the heteronormative influence on these laws is key in understanding where queer people have existed in history and their connection to the rest of society. LGBTQ+ history and culture are, of course, far greater than just the prejudice suffered, and it would be a disservice to the queer creatives, influencers and individuals that have contributed to their community and society to distil to simply this. However, in terms of understanding the history of social interaction and discrimination it is key. From a historical perspective the legalisation of consensual homosexual sex is recent history. In 2020 there are still many people who remember a time before decriminalisation. It can take several generations for social views towards minority groups to change, with each generation tending to be more open than its predecessor. Sexual prejudice can still find its way into our society in both minor and major ways. This could mean that a better understanding of queer prejudice could help impact current social situations and laws in a fair

and equal way. If young people learn about LGBTQ+ history, through school or media representation, further generations may better understand queer people and equality.

## **History**

Due to the persecution of, and secrecy surrounding, homosexual activity throughout history it can often be quite difficult to identify and substantiate queer figures. The best and most accurate way to identify queer historical figures are accounts and diaries left by them. One other issue historians face is the interpretation of historical fact based on the subjective bias and beliefs of the historians processing it. Most historians before the 20th century would likely view history with a heteronormative perspective, either not searching for queer evidence or undervaluing its importance with regards to the lives and culture of historical figures. For example, the 6th century poet, Sappho who lived on the island of Lesbos and was one of the few women pictured on Greek pottery, a true display of celebrity at the time. In the poem *Sappho 31*, the speaker laments their jealousy as a beautiful girl whom they are in love with is interested in a man. During translation in the 15th century, the male translators made the assumption that the speaker is another man despite some evidence suggesting the speaker is female and may in fact be Sappho herself. The speaker states ‘chlorotera de poias emmi’ (I am greener than grass), however the word ‘chlorotera’ is formed in such a way that indicates the speaker is female. This is not to say that translators necessarily ignored this with a direct intent of erasing Sappho’s potential queerness, it is likely that most people during this time didn’t even consider queer people or queer relationships, especially involving women, to exist at all. Historical queer women and gynophilic relationships tend to be far less documented, however the number of gynophilic females and androphilic males throughout history is likely to be equal.

‘We don’t have a lot of records of trans people or non-conforming people or even queer people in many instances in the past.’ (Bengry, 2019) Not only has queer history been edited and mistranslated by historical prejudice or misunderstanding, but it has also been altered by queer theorist throughout the 20th and 21st century who have viewed history with a lens of binary sexuality. Custen mentions that ‘...some historians accommodated and even encourage the repression of minorities by not raising problematic, nonmainstream perspectives...’ (Custen, 1992, p.10) Furthermore ‘the history of sexual minorities, as well as other groups, banished from conventional annals for many years, has only recently been recovered. (Custen, 1992, p.11) During an exploration into LGBTQ+ history on BBC podcast ‘You’re Dead to Me’ (2019), queer theorist Dr Justin Bengry discusses Oscar Wilde. He explains that Wilde, who was famously sentenced to manual labour in a very public sodomy case, was known for his interest in men and his long-term boyfriend Sir Alfred Douglas and yet he was also married with children. If Wilde is evidenced to have had a loving relationship with both genders ‘...does he fit into some sort [or] form of bisexuality?’ (Bengry, 2019) Due to societal pressures and expectations to marry it is difficult to assess a queer historical figure’s sexuality. Some modern theorists are now beginning to reassess figures who have been categorised as heterosexuals who have had some sexual or romantic interaction with the same sex and homosexuals who have done the same with those of the opposite gender. Considering bisexuality, transgender and non-binary identities as they assess history. Bengry states that ‘Many many people, I think, if we start to look at the queer past, are going to fit into a less rigid binary model of sexuality.’ (Bengry, 2019) Due not only to fear of persecution from the law but also from civilians, queer people were forced to live underground secretive lives to protect themselves and their families. Much like any other marginalised and persecuted minority, queer people formed an underground subculture that did not enter the mainstream until homosexuality became gradually more accepted through



the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It is important that everyone understands just how long queer people have existed, expelling all notions that LGBTQ+ people are a new, and perhaps considered by some, generational, fad or phenomenon that has recently appeared and may eventually cease to be present. The representation of historical queer people within education, through media or schooling, enforces the idea that being queer is a natural human state and that queerness has existed just as long as heterosexuality has. Not only is it important that heterosexual people who may hold the view that queerness is modern learn the expanse of queer history, but it can be crucial to queer youth who are looking for role models through history. This could help queer youth understand their sexuality more easily, being able to connect with those with whom they share a common trait, allowing them to see some of their successes and contributions to the world.

## **Representation**

Historical prejudices, based on race, gender and sexuality, have influenced the types of characters portrayed in TV and film over the years, creating a form of elitism that has been gradually tackled as minority groups have become more accepted and respected throughout society. Socially we use ‘representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.’ (Hall, 1997, p.25)

The root of representation is portraying an idea of something, whilst this idea is sometimes subjective; it is chiefly used as part of communication. Representation is found across all media and is increasingly prevalent in modern film and television. Even some of the most fantastical or abstract films and TV shows are often based somewhat in a kind of ‘grounded reality’ that contains strong correlations to the reality of the audience. This allows viewers to be aligned with characters and feel more immersed within the reality of the film as they comprehend it more readily and therefore able to relate to the narrative. However, over the years there has been a large section of society who have not been represented within a

‘grounded reality’, and are, in some ways, erased from existence in terms of film. This makes immersion harder for minorities and may alienate them as they have less in common with protagonists and narratives, despite having the same fundamental experiences, such as love, death, pain and joy.

‘Typification is the process of relying on general knowledge as a way of constructing ideas about people and the social world.’ (Crossman, 2017) Crossman continues to explain ‘...most of what you know of other people does not take the form of direct personal knowledge, but rather general knowledge about the social world.’ According to Dyer (1993) ‘there are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person’s person alone does not show. The he or she is gay.’ (p.19) This form of representation through typification caters to visual storytelling, in which narrative points and ideas are presented through visual cues rather than dialogue and exposition, however such a theory may lead to the use of stereotypes in queer representation becoming offensive. Christian Metz (1974), an early pioneer of semiotics in cinema argued that films communicate visually as an artform almost like a language. Audiences view a signifier and assess the denotive semiotics, what they literally see or hear, but all signifiers also hold connotative semiotics, information that is implied based on the presence or form in which it is presented. For example, a bouquet of flowers in a bin, the denotive reading is simply that there are flowers in the bin however the connotative reading fills in more contextual information, such as the flowers were likely a gift, whoever received them did not want them suggesting perhaps quarrelling lovers or a failed attempt at a relationship. Queer typification has both positive and negative consequences which lead to both queer visibility and negative stereotypes, sometimes at the same time. Dyer (1977) refers to stereotyping not only as a negative and oversimplified assumption about groups and cultures, a definition many people believe to be the sole

definition of the word, but also the unconscious sociological use of stereotypes that help us interact with those around us, many people don't even realise that they implement stereotyping every day. Donovan McFarlane (2014) explains, through his study into useful stereotyping, that whilst stereotypes are often incomplete and maybe even incorrect, they are created as a method to better interact with cultures we have little to no first-hand interaction with. He states that as humans 'we depend tremendously on our ability to speculate and make assumptions, to generalize and guess at things which are currently not within our body of knowledge, learning, and experience.' (McFarlane, 2014, p.144) We need these assumptions to help us interact with different groups of people and environments, they help us understand how to approach people and avoid social blunders, however this implies that the assumptions we make are altered within our mental stereotyping once we interact with said groups. This stereotyping is our brain's way of grouping information about different cultures and environments in place of information learned through first-hand interaction.

Dyer, in his essay *Stereotyping in Gays & Film* (1977), relates queer stereotyping in film to a sociological theory of characteristics and typification. As a member of society, a person identifies and characterises others through a four-stage process, Role, Individual, Type and Member. Based on initial visual assessment people identify sociological variables such as occupation, age and gender with Dyer's additional factors of dress, speech and gesture, this is known as the "Role". This is the base level information we receive, understanding a person's role in society and their interaction with the world. Then we take into account the context and specific factors of the situation in which we see the "Individual". Following these assessments, we make assumptions based on the characteristics we expect of those who perform the identified roles, formulating the "Type". The final assumption considers the influence of cultural groups and societal conventions with regards to groups. This is identified as the "Member", considering the influence of elements such as class, race, gender

and sexuality. The “Role” and “Individual” stages involve identifying with information we can see or hear; we use this information to associate the focal figure with a certain stereotype. This stereotype allows us to fill in any information we cannot ascertain from what is presented (Type). For example, to apply this theory to queer characters in media, this can be seen in the reading of Mr Humphries from the British sitcom *Are You Being Served?* (BBC, 1972-1985). The show follows the working lives of employees at Grace Brothers, a fictional department store. One of these employees is Mr Humphries, a camp older man who works in the men’s department often advising his colleagues on fashion and making veiled innuendos about his homosexuality. Following Dyer’s (1977) model, the “Role” is the process of the audience identifying traits and mannerisms such as the character’s camp walk, stylish dress and inflection in his voice. The “Individual” then takes into account the context in which we see him, a man choosing to work in a fashion driven job serving other men, understanding what would have been considered at the time as ‘feminine things’. Particularly in contrast to one of his colleagues in the men’s department, Mr James, who is not only a womaniser but speaks of little other than his sexual interest in women. Based on these factors the audience associates this with the period typical stereotype of an effeminate gay man, making other assumptions about his lifestyle and character based on this stereotype, such as living with his mother, having secretive exploits with other men and making assumptions about what sexual position he prefers etc. Then finally the audience takes other secondary factors into account, such as that he is older, adjusting their assumptions on his lifestyle based on the stereotypes of those secondary factors. Whilst it is never stated in the show that he is gay it is heavily implied, and the basis of many punchlines come from the reader’s assessment of Humphries as a homosexual. For example, in the episode *By Appointment* (Season 6 Episode 1, 1978) as the team excitedly discuss the potential for the Queen to visit the store Captain Peacock states ‘well of course we have had a queen here before’. This is followed by a close up of

Humphries who turns to look at him in response, therefore creating the wordless punchline for the audience as they understand Humphries to be a homosexual or 'queen'. This structure is very common in this show, many of the one-liners relying heavily on the information filled in by the audience based on the character stereotypes. Dyer distinguishes between stereotypes, which 'refer to things outside one's social world... [and] tend to be conceived as functionless or dysfunctional' (Dyer, 1984, p.355), and social types which 'refer to things with which one is familiar... [and] serve the structure of society at many points.' (Dyer, 1984, p.355) This exemplifies how media can use these stereotypes of how a certain demographic understands homosexual characteristics and mannerisms, using this as a method of portraying meaning, in this case inferring a punchline. An issue with this kind of stereotype is that it is created by heterosexual people for heterosexual people to understand, further playing into potentially misguided or overexaggerated character traits and mannerisms. Dyer highlights that 'what we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of 'ideal' of heterosexuality... ' (Dyer, 1984, p.357)

One positive outcome of queer typification in visual media is that queer culture and lifestyle is on display throughout. Whilst a character is talking about something unrelated to their sexuality the audience still has to face and embrace it as it is constantly visually presented whenever the character is on the screen. However, this is a double-edged sword as this can also lead to characters being reduced to their sexuality alone, making them a one-dimensional character. There is the fine line when typification crosses over to stereotype that can lead to having a negative impact on the queer community and/or the viewer. This opens a debate as to how much a character's personality and behaviour should be influenced by their sexuality. If a character is clearly queer coded throughout in a way that is undeniable many may consider this to be stereotyping and denounce the film or character for having negative queer

representation. And yet if a film did not use any queer coding or typification when portraying a character and have them simply state their queerness in dialogue, people would then consider this to be too little representation as the character has no consistent visual signs of being queer. This conflicting audience response can be boiled down to subjective personal opinions on how much your sexuality affects your personality and lifestyle. It also raises the question, is there a clear distinction between a 'heterosexual lifestyle' and a 'homosexual lifestyle' in 2020 due to increasing normalisation and equality for queer people?

Stereotyping, whilst it can lead to negative reception, is to some extent always necessary in representing types. According to implicit personality theory, the subconscious connection of certain characteristics with linked traits form a prototype. We create mental prototypes based on a mixture of traits considered typical within identifiable groups. For example, if someone is described as bookish, quiet and dedicated we may make other assumptions such as that they are intelligent and introverted based on the association of these characteristics in our mental prototype. Whilst this is both inevitable and necessary for us to read the world around us quickly, it can lead to rigidly set prototypes and stereotypes that can be very difficult to change. Often when a character is exhibiting some of the traits of a certain prototype, the viewer may not only miss but ignore other traits that don't adhere. However, it is arguable that this breaking of mental prototypes is necessary for them to evolve them into something more accurate for those subcultures and minorities. This is particularly important where an individual may not have enough real-world experience to form an accurate or positive prototype. For example, if a male character is presented as physically attractive, sporty and heroic the majority of viewers would be more likely to mentally associate him with traits such as being a ladies' man. If, for example, he had these characteristics and is then revealed to be queer, this could help evolve the viewer's perception of queer people. However, in some cases, the viewer still may not carry this connection from fiction to reality as it doesn't

fit their mental prototype. This is a reading subjective to the viewer so should media be trying to represent queer people through the breaking of stereotype by presenting queer people as the same as everyone else with the exception of their sexuality or will this effectively straightwash queer culture and erase some of what makes queer an identity and lifestyle rather than just a preference? Straightwashing is a fairly new term used to describe the representation of queer people fitting heterosexual cultural norms and even changing the sexuality of established characters fully. Lydia Smith writing for Pink News (2018) explains 'it's the practice of portraying non-straight people or characters as straight' and therefore 'perpetuates the idea that films or shows need to be made "straight" to appeal to a wider audience' (Smith, 2018)

This way audiences are presented with straight characters and queer characters that are always more likely to be read as heterosexual through a heteronormative lens of the audience. Due to ingrained societal heteronormativity an audience begins watching show with the assumption that characters will be heterosexual. This is not a conscious decision on the audience member's part, it is simply a product of the collective assessment of heterosexuality as the standard, a kind of default setting. This line of thinking could be an explanation of how certain historical queer figures rose to popularity. For example, despite being less than careful in his dealings with male prostitutes and Bosie, Oscar Wilde rose to popularity as both a playwright and a socialite with some of the same people who would demonise homosexuality. This group viewed him through a heteronormative lens, assuming him straight as befits what they believe as standard. This is particularly the case for those who hold homosexuality as a negative or immoral trait as people don't typically assign traits they perceive as negative upon first meeting when they use their 'normal person' prototype. This exemplifies why everyone needs exposure to all different kinds of 'normal people' to learn to

see traits such as sexuality in a neutral way. The reach of the media is an extremely effective way to alter how we categorise each other as it directly links to how we interact in real life.

In theoretical terms “stereotype” identifies a set of types associated with a group based on the mental prototypes, however in colloquial speech the word stereotype is often used to mean only negative stereotypes. This may be due to a general misunderstanding that stereotyping is solely negative and not, to a degree, necessary in society. However, it could also be due to the frequent correlation of stereotyping and prejudice. Dyer (1977) explains that a figure can choose their social type to an extent however a stereotype is set by society. This refers to a person’s ability to choose the way they present themselves to the world, such as styling and mannerisms, in contrast to the characteristics associated with them based on something out of their control, such as race, gender or sexuality. Arguably stereotyping is applied, sometimes unknowingly and without ill will, in a negative or reductive manner that robs people of their capacity to be assessed and treated as individuals. The assumed characteristic may be all encompassing or may be fairly minimal, all of which is covered within stereotyping. Any assumption that groups individuals based on one identifying factor is condensing that group to a simplified character type that doesn’t relate to their broader personality. This implies the pejorative assumption that, for example, a gay man would share many identical character traits, likes and dislikes with another gay man based solely on the fact that they are both androphillic and identify as male. Queer stereotypes can influence individuals within the queer community as media presents the characteristics of a queer prototype, this can lead to young people perpetuating the stereotype.

The queer community is in many ways an invisible minority, whilst cultural and stereotypical codes can be read to identify queer people, it is often possible to ‘pass’ as part of the heterosexual and cisgender norm. You cannot simply identify a queer person by their



physiognomy as you may identify sex or race. This has helped queer people avoid persecution historically, however it also led to the need to create certain visual and verbal signifiers and codes to make it possible to more easily identify other queer people. Following this theory, this means that visual signifiers that identify queer people are based on personality, mannerisms and characteristics, leading to issues for filmmakers and creatives in having to follow these stereotypes to signify a queer character visually. This raises the question to what extent this is the representation of negative and simply antiquated stereotyping vs necessary sociological typification led stereotyping. Some viewers may feel that this reduces queer people to caricatures such as the camp homosexual man or the butch lesbian eliminating anything else about the character other than their sexuality.

Samelius and Wågberg (2005, p.64) argue that ‘sexual orientation means different things to different persons, from sexual desires, feelings, and practices to identifications.’ They continue to explain, ‘for some people it is a basis for identity and for others it is a practice...’(2005, p.64) As their comments suggest, the extent to which the queer individual believes their sexuality influences other areas of their life and personality is subjective to the queer individual regarding the extent they believe their sexuality influences other areas of their life and personality. For some it is a ‘basis for identity’, their queerness influences their life choices and the way they present themselves through styling, mannerisms and language. However, others may view their sexuality as more of a ‘practice’, relating their sexuality to their partner choices and desires rather than their personality. Queer filmmakers themselves will also have different perceptions of what it means to be queer, meaning their subjective opinion could be considered to be incorrect or offensive by viewers, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual. Some filmmakers, depending on genre and media type, may consider their representation to follow a reflective view, mirroring reality of queer identities and cultures. However, reality is in itself subjective, this means that their representation could also be

categorised as a form of intentional viewing. Here the creator is presenting a representation without the intention of mirroring reality but as a means to present a specifically intended reading as a creator's perception of different types may be biased, corrupt or ignorant. This style of viewing does not consider the audience member's own individual, subjective input to the information they receive. The viewing acknowledges the ideology of the creator, the ideology of the viewer based on their culture, personal experience and opinions, and the conventional assumptions following said type.

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of parasocial interaction, a one-sided psychological relationship in which someone forms a real emotional connection to someone they have never met, and are unlikely to ever meet, such as celebrities and fictional characters. This relationship triggers the same neurological and emotional effect as a physical interpersonal relationship. Whilst these relationships can sometimes be destructive, due to their one-sided nature, this theory can be useful to explain the positive influence of queer representation in mainstream media. Many people of all ages, but particularly young people and children, may not know any queer people in reality but are able to connect with celebrities and fictional characters as role models or as examples of normalised queer people. Forming a parasocial relationship with a positive, which is not to say unflawed, character can have the same effect as forming a real relationship with a queer person. For those who see themselves in these characters, this can be a foundation of self-discovery in their own sexuality. For others their perspective may be altered for the positive, meaning their first interaction with a queer person will subconsciously relate to the relationship they had with the character.

Evans (2007, p.10) explains the importance of representation 'for gay and lesbian youth because, unlike racial and ethnic minorities, they are not usually born into a family of others

like them, and they cannot easily distinguish gay and lesbian individuals within society.’ In most cases in which children are born into social, racial or cultural minorities they are surrounded by family members that serve as a role model and close physical representation of that culture. For queer youth it is not guaranteed that you will have a closely related openly queer family member, especially during periods of history and in places where homosexuality is criminalised or considered socially reprehensible, meaning that their main source of queer representation comes from media. If a closeted or questioning child has no queer role models, they are likely to succumb to dogma from those around them who may hold prejudice towards the queer community, displaying internalised homophobia and horizontal prejudice. Internalised homophobia, or internalised oppression, is described by the Rainbow Project (accessed 2019) as the mental effect of an environment in which ‘LGB people may be socialised into thinking that being non-heterosexual is somehow “mad”, “bad”, “wrong” or “immoral”.’ The issue with this negative association with homosexuality, that young people can be particularly vulnerable to, is that it ‘...can lead to feelings of self-disgust and self-hatred.’ Homosexuals who are raised in a society of homophobia and discriminatory culture often pick up negative ideas and stereotypes about same-sex attraction as a form of learnt behaviour. These attitudes are learnt from many different social situations, such as familial interaction, schools and other youth etc. In learning that heterosexuality is the norm and other forms of sexuality are not accepted or immoral, queer people can often become confused and depressed as they battle with their natural emotional instincts and urges vs their learned attitudes from society and media. This can also lead to varying degrees of the abusive cycle of horizontal oppression that can have negative emotional and psychological effects on not only those who enact horizontal oppression but the victims of that person’s actions. Horizontal oppression is when someone, who may be out of the closet or oppress their homosexuality, is ‘subjected to homophobia / biphobia / heteronormativity, [therefore] begins

to discriminate against other LGBTQ people, thereby colluding with and [the] perpetuation [of] heterosexism' (Revel and Riot, Accessed 18/11/19). Media can have a prominent influence on internalised homophobia as it can contribute to teaching and perpetuating negative characteristics or archetypes through caricatured and stereotypically queer coded representation. This does not mean that there should be no negative queer characters or character traits portrayed on TV or in cinema, but it should not be the only portrayal available to viewers. Queer youth need positive and unapologetic role models in mainstream media to provide them with someone to relate to. Media needs to normalise queer people in a way that a viewer can identify them as queer without the addition of shame, villainising narratives or ugly stereotypes.

This kind of positive representation would allow young people to follow Stuart Hall's (1980) positive dominant mode of decoding, allowing them to connect with a filmmaker's queer positive message. Hall wrote about six different forms of decoding in which the viewer can choose to accept or denounce the filmmaker's message and the media's social relevance in either a positive or negative way. This is again where stereotyping can become an issue.

There are certain queer codes that are obvious and others that are much more subtle or niche.

Filmmakers may include queer coding that is easily identifiable to queer viewers but not to heterosexuals who may be unaware of the connections between the said code and queer people and/or culture. This can lead to debate as to whether the character is actually queer and if they are, are they sufficiently queer coded? As heterosexuality has become the social norm throughout the years, most characters are considered straight until proven otherwise.

The less stereotypical uses of queer codes can lead to two completely different ways of queer decoding by queer and heterosexual viewers regardless of the filmmaker's intentions. A queer viewer is more likely to follow Hall's theory of positive dominant decoding as explained by Dyer, in which they 'accept wholesale the terms of reference of the text; that is

to say, it is reading entirely within the text's hegemonic project.' (Dyer, 1993, p.85) The viewer both understands the filmmaker's message through decoding and agrees with it, accepting this reading. Whereas a heterosexual viewer may be more likely to experience oppositional decoding, whether positive or negative, in which a reader, with a social experience that presents them in an oppositional relation to the dominant code, can understand the preferred interpretation of the text but doesn't share the text's code and further rejects said reading as they bring their own references and perceptions to the text. Heterosexual viewers, who do not look at situations and interactions with the same perspective as a queer person, may, therefore, have a completely different reading. For example, there may be a scene in which two men are joking and flirting, whilst a queer viewer may read this, a heterosexual viewer may not, as their mind is not pre-set to identify male flirting with other men. A male homosexual is likely to accept and understand this reading far more easily as he is conditioned in social situations to identify male flirting, as he desires romantic interaction from others and he has likely done it himself.

A GLAAD 'Accelerating Acceptance' Report, published in 2019 in partnership with The Harris Poll, noted that their yearly studies had found a 'positive momentum year-by-year' in Americans stating they were more comfortable with LGBTQ people and more supportive of LGBTQ issues paralleling notable progress in LGBTQ visibility in legal rights, such as marriage equality. Their 2019 study found a decrease in comfort of non-LGBT US citizens in certain social situations containing a queer individual. This Report differentiates three categories of non-LGBTQ respondents; allies, detached supporters and resisters. Allies report themselves as either 'very comfortable' or 'somewhat comfortable' with all the situations provided. A detached supporter is a respondent who's comfort level varies between different situations. The resistor described themselves as 'very uncomfortable' or 'somewhat uncomfortable' in all situations. This Report found an increase in resisters of all ages in some

of the tested situations, the most notable of which being the five percent increase in those uncomfortable with the situation ‘Learning my child has a lesson on LGBT history in school’ (GLAAD, 2019). This supports the issue that many young queer and questioning people face, in that education on queer history is still on many levels controversial, leading these young people to perhaps believe rhetoric that suggests that queerness is new or a fad. It is important for all queer people to be able to learn about and connect with other queer historical figures, not only to support the thinking that queerness is written in our DNA but also to present queer people with role models who may have for example courageously lived as their authentic selves amongst societal adversity. The teaching of LGBTQ history in schools however may not be quickly accepted in all classrooms as this study reflects that over one third of the 1,054 respondents found themselves either very or somewhat uncomfortable about learning their child had an LGBTQ history lesson.

Whilst younger adults, in the age range of 18–34, ‘has traditionally been thought of as a beacon of progressive values...’ according to the GLAAD report, ‘We have taken that idea for granted and this year’s results show that the sharp and quick rise in divisive rhetoric in politics and culture is having a negative influence on younger Americans.’ (GLAAD, 2019, p.2) The report further detailed the decrease in allies amongst this age range between 2016 and 2018, highlighting a total decrease of eighteen percent (63% to 45%), a thirteen percent decrease in female allies (65% to 52%) and a staggering twenty-seven percent decrease in male allies (62% to 35%). Not only did the number of allies decrease but the number of 18-34 resisters increased in certain social situations, the most dramatic change of a 12% increase was found in the situations ‘learning a family member is LGBTQ’ and ‘learning my child had a lesson on LGBTQ history in their school’. The other two situations that displayed an 8% increase in resistor respondents with regard to queer people in respected roles were, ‘my child placed in a class with an LGBTQ teacher’ and ‘learning my doctor is LGBTQ’. It is possible

that respondents find themselves uncomfortable in situations such as having a LGBTQ doctor or teacher as both of these professions entail interaction with vulnerable members of society, children and the sick. This may reflect the stereotype of LGBTQ people as mainly sexual beings unable to see their own sex in a non-sexual way, however despite the categorisation of queer by sexual preference, such as gay, lesbian or bisexual, this does not mean that sexuality is all about sex. It's not possible to succinctly pinpoint where this association between queerness and a sole focus on sex comes from, whether it be the association between sodomy and depravity many decades ago or a simple misunderstanding of how queer relationships compare to heterosexual relationships. Either way it overlooks the significant portion of queer relationship that is love, much the same as a heterosexual relationship. Studies such as this highlight how important it is for young people and adults to be exposed to positive queer representation, so as to shift their levels of discomfort when interacting with LGBTQ people in life. A larger proportion of the target audience for cinema is teenagers and younger adults as they are the demographic with the most expendable income and the most free time. Therefore if cinema continues to negatively portray or misrepresent queer people, or simply not represent them at all, then it is far easier for young adults to perpetuate and accept the idea that LGBTQ people in trusted respectable roles such as doctors and teachers, will make their patients or students feel less comfortable simply based on their sexuality. This thought process seems to perpetuate a stereotype of queer people as immoral and sexually perverse, leading to lack of professionalism in a role in which they work closely with vulnerable people. Young adults, especially young males, need to understand that the presence of a LGBTQ person does not cause less comfort than that of a non-LGBTQ person and if it cannot be achieved by interaction with an actual LGBTQ person through social interaction, LGBTQ in the media is the next best way to influence their views. The thoughts of these 18–34-year-olds will directly influence the next generation and their acceptance of queer people.

## **Censorship**

Whitaker, in her introduction to *Film Censorship* (1997), defines censorship as in its 'most unambiguous form – the refusal of the relevant authorities to allow a film or films to be seen.'

(p.1) This limitation of access to certain media has existed for many years from censorship of art displayed in galleries, to crude language in radio programming to violence in video games. Whilst the reason for censorship can vary, along with the morality of the decision to censor, it is generally considered that the aim of censorship is to protect and influence the thinking of the audience. Throughout the last century what is considered acceptable in the media has changed as a result of social progressivism and a change in what is considered morally acceptable within the majority of society. Growing access to media, from film and TV to web-based media, it has become increasingly important that sensitive or vulnerable viewers are protected from content that could cause harm. In response to this, media censorship has restricted access that is considered by censors to be obscene or objectionable. This can include the representations of themes such as pornographic content or nudity, violence, substance abuse and swearing. Each country with media distribution has an organisation in place to control and prohibit certain content for the protection of its citizens and country's social values. The line at which content themes become acceptable for viewership by ages differs between countries is tied to political, social and religious national opinions. Censorship is necessary in society to protect vulnerable viewers from sensitive content, protecting children from content that may frighten or traumatise them and ensuring not to expose them to sexually mature content they are not old enough to understand. Whilst this process is necessary, censorship can be over-extended by some associations, limiting access to themes that others find acceptable.

In the aftermath of some very public criminal trials and scandals surrounding Hollywood in the 1920s, the film industry faced a lot of backlash. Will Hays, president of the Motion



Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which would later become the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), chose to self-regulate the film industry in a hope to control the output from within. In 1927 Hays proposed the pre-code list of eleven ‘don’ts’ (topics that would not appear in any media produced ‘irrespective of the manner in which they are treated’) and twenty-five ‘be carefals’ (topics that should be handled with special care and in ‘good taste’). (MPPDA, 1927) Some of these eleven banned specifications can still be found in modern guidelines, such as the display of ‘children’s sex organs;’ and ‘wilful offense to any nation, race or creed’, whilst others are no longer considered offensive or immoral, such as ‘miscegenation (sex relationships between white and black races)’ and ‘ridicule of the clergy’. Following this the MPPDA Production Code became mandatory in 1934. The impact of this code was so striking in comparison to the cinema produced pre-1934, that in the study of the Golden Age of cinema there’s generally considered to be two separate stages: pre-code and post-code. The three general principles of this code stated:

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

(The Production Code, 1930)

These general principles could be applied to any decade or country and mean different things based on social opinions and standards at the time, for example what was considered a ‘correct standard of life’ in 1930 is quite different to what was considered a ‘correct standard

of life' in 1990. This is due to social progressivism and changing social opinions linked to education and the efforts of minorities fighting for acceptance. Whilst filmmakers do not follow the twelve categories that were controlled by the Production Code, even now films are influenced to some degree by these ninety-year-old regulations, as they are ingrained within Hollywood cinema's formative years. In the era when many film genres were born, or at least popularised, these regulations played a part in structuring the genre code and conventions of Hollywood genre cinema. This code further explains the lack of representation of certain minorities, as even filmmakers who were more progressive or in a minority themselves could not make films that broke the ingrained regulations. From the ban of sexual relationships between people of different races, to the dismissal of displaying white slavery, implying that all slavery portrayed must be those of other races, this enforced the concept of white superiority. Whilst there are no direct references to the term 'homosexual' in either Hays' list or the code, both refer to 'sexual perversion' or any inference of which as forbidden. During this time queer relationships and sexual activity were considered a form of sexual perversion, and often queerness is simply referred to as sexual perversion. Also, at that time queer sex and relationships were illegal, due to the sodomy laws that had been brought with settlers during the colonisation of the Americas. These laws would not be rectified in California until the 1970s, other states decriminalising between 1962-2003. Therefore, the code does not only prohibit the representation of queer sex but it prohibits the portrayal of sympathy for those committing 'crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin'. (The Production Code, 1930) Filmmakers were not to display queer people especially not in a sympathetic way.

An example of this pre-code freedom can be seen in the 1933 release, *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian, 1933) starring Greta Garbo as Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689). Christina, a monarch who was known for her masculine dress and being educated in what were considered to be 'masculine' areas of study. At the age of eighteen she met and fell in

love with her handmaiden, Ebba Sparre. Surviving letters from the Queen emphatically stated her beauty and are clearly romantic in nature. In 1654 Christina abdicated due to her religious beliefs and moved to live in Holland. Garbo, a Swedish bisexual herself, worked with close friend and rumoured lover Salka Viertel, co-writer, on the production of this story. ‘Gay and lesbian critics in particular have suggested that both Garbo and Viertel may have been attracted by the homoerotic possibilities of the story.’ (Waters, 1994, p.50) The film contains a brief kiss between the Queen and Ebba and the promise of a weekend away together. She shortly enjoys a brief steamy romance with Spanish Envoy, Antonio, after a seemingly quickly forgotten relationship with Ebba. Much to the disapproval of her court and people Christina abdicates the throne and leaves by ship. Whilst there are clear queer elements in the beginning of this film, that would conflict with later production code guidelines, the representation of the queer monarch is still severely lacking. Garbo, quoted by Sven Broman in *Conversations with Greta* (1992, p.124), stated that ‘just imagine Christina abdicating for the sake of a little Spaniard.’ It seems that perhaps Garbo herself was unimpressed with the queer masculine dressing queen becoming ‘heterosexualised’ by a man, switching to feminine dress and leaving the throne for him. Whilst this film was in some ways ahead of its time with a queer onscreen kiss and gender nonconforming dress, it still suffers from a heteronormative bias.

In his book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed History*, Custen highlights the change in approach to presenting figures in Hollywood biopics, stating ‘... the ways in which their lives are explained shifts subtly, so that a life depicted in one way in 1930 might be a very different thing by the mid-1950s.’ (Custen, 1992, p.7) He further highlights a historian’s concern as to ‘what gets lost in the translation of the event from its verbal state to a visual/pictorial one; how condensation and narratization alters the facts deemed “not essential” to the narrative to fit both a medium and the conventions of genres (e.g romance).

(Custen, 1992, p.9) What is considered a non-essential or perhaps undesirable element of a figure's life changes, and the way in which a figure may be represented by a filmmaker in one period of time can contrast from another. This highlights how the story of a figure can seem very different depending on the representation. This can be seen in the depiction of Oscar Wilde through the decades, in *Oscar Wilde* (1960) and *Wilde* (1997). *Oscar Wilde* predominantly focuses on the trial of Wilde, condensing the meeting and relationship between Bosie and Oscar into a thirty-eight-minute segment of the ninety-eight-minute run time. The 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde, in which he was convicted for his homosexual practices, often feature in the depictions of the writer, but it's the representation of moments aside from the trial can be used highlights the differing attitudes towards explicit queer representation over time. *Oscar Wilde* has repeated references to the 'friendship' and a brief mention of a 'not entirely platonic relationship' between Wilde and Bosie. *Wilde*, however, not only features elements of nudity, queer kissing, and queer sex scenes but there is a much more open discussion of Wilde's queerness. Whilst Wilde's queerness has been public knowledge since at least 1895, the 1960 film toes the line with vague references to the relationship between Wilde and Bosie and eradicates Robbie Ross' queerness entirely.

The Production Code was in practice if gradually less enforced until 1968 when the MPPA created the rating system that would allow the viewer to decide the content they wish to view if they are within the specified level of maturity. The Production Code faced a lot of backlash, particularly in the years running up to the introduction of the rating system, especially from filmmakers who found the regulations restrictive in terms of artistic expression and quality film making. These ratings G, M, R and X, follow a similar structure to the ratings systems that the MPPA currently upholds. General audiences (G), mature audiences with parental discretion advised (M), aged sixteen or under allowed only when accompanied by an adult (R) and must be sixteen or over (X). In the UK all media content is

assessed and rated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), a non-government organisation founded in 1912, in which every film, TV, video game etc. is assigned an age restricted rating based on any content that is considered to be unsuitable for certain age groups. These ratings range from U (Suitable for all audiences) to 18 (adults only), to protect each age category from content that may negatively impact their thinking or feelings based on emotional and mental developments associated with the specified age group. Whilst some countries, such as the UK, provide a more detailed outline of the qualifiers to which a film is assigned an age rating, other countries such as the USA, don't provide particularly clear general guidelines and simply details some of the reasons each film has received its rating in the certification details. Complaints could be made as to the subjectivity of age certification, as what one person finds to be inappropriate or objectionable another could feel to simply be accurate or even rated too low based on their own subjective reality and reading that each individual viewer brings to a film. It could be argued that a certification guideline cannot be too specific as each film has its own individual combination of various vague or clearly 'objectionable' or 'inappropriate' elements.

Whilst many scholars and queer individuals can agree that clear unquestionable queer content in media has a positive impact on both LGBTQA+ and heterosexual youth with regards to understanding their own and others' sexualities, it can still be difficult to find this representation in general release cinema. This lack of visibility can be directly linked to the effect of censorship pre and postproduction. Whitaker (1997) highlights that there are different forms of censorship that are not as obviously identifiable as banning films from distribution or viewing. She suggests two forms of censorship that are important to consider with regard to film, prior censorship and post censorship. Prior censorship is described as the 'refusal by a dictatorship to permit a film to be made or, as happens in western 'democratic' societies the refusal of funding.' Post censorship is considered the 're-editing and/or cutting

of a film's original version.' Both forms of censorship are key to queer representation in terms of queer content not being produced and existing queer content being edited out or limiting the audience through a high age certification.

A recent example of the different kinds of post censorship can be seen in the release of *The Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), a live action remake of the 1991 cartoon movie. Prior to release the director announced that the film contained a queer character and a 'nice, exclusively gay moment' (The Guardian, 2017). During the promotion of this comment some were praising Disney for being progressive and finally portraying a queer character for children to look up to, others were vowing to boycott the film suggesting that these views had no place in children's cinema and were morally wrong. This announcement led to censorship boards across the globe requesting that the content be edited from the general release or that the film would be banned, as was almost the case in Malaysia and Russia. Despite the uproar over what proved to be a two second scene in which LeFou, Gaston's adoring side companion, dances with an unnamed male character, the film was still released in Malaysia and Russia. The release came with a remarkable 16+ rating in Russia due to its 'gay propaganda', paling in comparison to the UK's PG rating, and making it impossible for any children to actually view the live recreation of the children's film in the cinema. Whilst many age certifications did increase from the 1991 release to the 2017 release, for example, the cartoon received a U rating followed by a PG rating for the remake in the UK, this also correlates with the increase of onscreen violence and threat as detailed on the BBFC website. Also, it is worth considering what other films were categorised within the Russian 16+ certification alongside *Beauty and the Beast* in recent years. It is perhaps shocking to some that *Beauty and the Beast* is given the same certification as *Zombieland* (2009), a comedy horror film set within a zombie apocalypse, that is described by the BBFC to contain 'frequent strong language', 'sexualised nudity in a scene featuring a topless female zombie',

‘scenes in which zombies feast on the flesh of dead people’ and ‘frequent scenes in which zombies are slain by people using automatic weaponry, and which are accompanied by blood spurts’. (BBFC, accessed: 1/11/20) It is key, however, to consider that this reaction to queer representation is not only found in countries with strong legal and cultural stances against queer freedom.

Whilst it can be more difficult to find examples of concepts or screenplays that did not achieve funding due to queer content censorship, as they were never made, examples can be seen in the impact of producing queer content in media that is categorised within a young demographic. It is also important to consider that it’s not only country specific organisations who limit the production and distribution of certain content but large companies, such as Disney. An example of this can be seen in the American conservative non-profit organisation, One Million Moms, a division of the American Family Association. This organisation creates online campaigns in the effort to boycott and urge companies to cancel content with the goal to ‘stop the exploitation of our children, especially by the entertainment media’ (One Million Moms, accessed: 07/9/19) based on a biblical family-focused agenda. They particularly focus on content they consider over sexualised and queer content, from the queer couples on television to pro-LGBTQA+ cereal packaging. One of the many campaigns this organisation enforced was the boycott of the show *Good Luck Charlie* aired on the Disney Channel, a show surrounding an American family with a new-born. One particular episode caused uproar in this group as it featured a child with two mothers. The episode was described by a Disney spokesperson as ‘developed to be relevant to kids and families around the world and to reflect themes of diversity and inclusiveness’ (GLAAD, 2013). The organisation wrote in an open letter; ‘Just because something may be legal or because some are choosing a lifestyle doesn't make it morally correct...’ continuing to state that ‘Disney should stick to entertaining instead of pushing an agenda...’. (One Million Moms & Nichols, 2016) Whilst

this does not reflect the views of all, viewers groups such as this apply pressure to production and distribution companies along with advertising companies that are attached to certain programming.

This kind of response to relatively small queer inclusivity in media can often lead to filmmakers' and production companies' lack of willingness to risk loss of revenue by displaying clear queer main characters and undeniable content. Despite non-heterosexual identities and lifestyles becoming more widely accepted in many countries in current western society, the topic is still hotly debated in several countries across the world due to political, religious and cultural opinions. Therefore, presenting an undeniably queer character in films as non-sexualised and non-political as a children's film, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), can be seen as a form of political statement leading to uproar, outrage and loss of revenue. Gross (1989) states that non-heterosexuals are still often considered 'objectionable' as they do not adhere to heterosexual norms, therefore it is easier for films to be produced with little to no objectionable content to ensure no loss of revenue on high budget releases but that does not stop production companies from taking risks, however small they may be revealed to be.

China, unlike many other countries, does not use an age certification method at all in its film censorship, following the concept that all films if viewable should be viewable by all. In 1998 The People's Republic of China (PRC) created the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV (SARFT), which then became the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV (SAPPRFT) in 2013, a ministry level executive agency working directly under the state council of the PRC. The SAPPRFT produced a document detailing the legal elements of film production, importation, distribution and exportation. In China a film's script must be passed through the SAPPRFT to decide if they will provide the filmmakers a 'film release



license'. Any films made, produced and distributed without a license are considered illegal and filmmakers can suffer punishment such as fines, bans from industry work/production and removal of the film from distribution. Article 25 of the SARFT 2002 Regulations states the contents that will lead to a refusal for a 'film release license'. However, this documentation is particularly, and perhaps purposefully, vague. The sub-clauses that could be most closely related to homosexuality are '(7) propagating obscenity, gambling or violence, or abetting to commit crimes;' and '(9) jeopardizing social ethics or fine national cultural traditions;' (XU, 2017, p.44). The vague nature of these sub-clauses means they can be applied to most any situation the SARFT see fit however this also arises the arguments that to say China has specific censorship laws with regard to homosexuality is baseless as it is not specified in the sub-clause. The Movie Script (Outline) for the Record, the Provisions of the Film Administration further details these regulations in 2006. In Article 14 of Chapter 3- Film Examination it is stated that 'films containing any of the following content must be cut or modified: ... (3) Showing obscene or vulgar content, exposing scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality...' (XU, 2017, p.44) In this writing not only is homosexual content considered necessary of modification, but it is grouped with words such as 'vulgar' and 'rape'. The SAPPRT was abolished in March 2018, leaving the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD) in charge of film and TV censorship and approval. I was unable to find any specific guidelines or articles stating how films can or cannot reach board approval, however I feel it is safe to assume they follow similar guidelines to those produced by the SAPPRT. (XU, 2017)

As this establishes China's perception and production of gay content, or lack thereof, it begs the question, what about imported films from more liberal countries containing homosexual content? According to regulation either a screenplay or finished film must be presented to

the censorship board who will assess the film and provide a response within thirty days. These responses can vary in detail but will often request for certain elements of the film to be cut for the China release. This was evidenced in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018), the uncut theatrical release depicting the life of the band Queen, with special focus on their lead singer Freddie Mercury who is famously known to be queer, contained some tame yet undeniable homosexual scenes. The edited version released in China lost just over three minutes of run time, removing a kiss between Mercury and his later life partner Jim Hutton, a scene in which Mercury tells his fiancé he's gay and a scene in which he informs his band mates that he has AIDS. The Chinese censorship board should not solely be considered at fault for the film's censorship. Studios often give in, distributing edited censored versions of their releases for the sake of revenue and box office ratings.

## CHAPTER 2

### Understanding the role and structure of the Biopic

Now that queerness has been contextualised, it is important to look at 'the biopic' as a genre, and its structural and narrative conventions. The impact of queer representation, especially that of historical queer figures, is influential to society and personal development. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the techniques and structures filmmakers employ within the production of biopics and the impact of such decisions on both the audience and the subject of the biopic. Covering the legality of authorship and the narratology of the biopic genre, this chapter assesses the benefits and pitfalls of representing real people. Further considering the established theory of the biopic, such as the debate regarding its categorisation as a genre. This thesis considers the biopic to be subdivided into three categories; 'The Life Story', 'The Crusade Story' and 'The Redemption Story'. This process of categorisation breaks down trends in narrative structure, intention and message, highlighting correlations between the reputation of the chosen subject, the narrative timespan and characters in the film.

In her writing, '*Biopics- A Life in Pictures*', Ellen Cheshire (2015) defines biopics as 'biographical pictures- a film that depicts the life of a real person's past or present.' (p.1) This definition highlights the wide range of films in this category. From films detailing a royal figure in a medieval setting to an inventor of technology, to an 80's rock legend's music career. Biopics can be treated with many different tones, styles and timespans but are still easily identified as a biopic. Writer and film critic Phil Hoad further categorised the biopic into two categories with different focuses: the traditional cinematic biography and the high-definition biopic. The 'traditional cinematic biography- established in the 1930s when the studios liked to educate and elevate with "great man" stories about scientists and politicians,' (Hoad, 2014) This style of biopic faded in and out of popularity throughout the 1900s, whilst

audiences enjoy seeing the successes of those who have achieved greatness this can lead to a less emotionally impactful film. Audiences like to see the struggle of the character, their rise against adversity, and strength. One of the main aims of a biopic cinema, alongside education, is inspiration. The 'high-definition biopic goes for the essence, rather than a chronicle of events,' (Hoad, 2014). Filmmakers most frequently retell the stories of those who have achieved personal growth, this more modern take on the biopic aims to capture the struggle behind the achievements. The high-definition biopic often still elevates the subject to a degree; however, it is often much more critical of its subject, creating a less idealised account of the portion of the subject's presented life.

The earliest example of a biopic film is *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Tait, 1906), an Australian film following the exploits of Ned Kelly, a famous bushranger and outlaw known for wearing a full suit of armour as he conducted raids. Kelly robbed, murdered and fought several gun fights against police, however despite his immoral and illegal behaviour he became the subject of the very first biopic. This pre-code film was an interesting choice for the newly created genre, especially when compared to the post-code biopics made during the 1930s. Kelly's story was most likely chosen because it is exciting and dramatic, lacking any aim to humanise or explore his character in any way, unlike more modern biopics (for further study see Bertrand and Routt, 2007). This evolution of the genre, from exciting stories that happened to be true to star-driven post-code historical biopics, to the high-definition explorations into the figures' 'essence'. Biopics increased in popularity during the post-code Golden-Age of Hollywood as the concept of celebrity became accessible. Hardie highlights that 'Studios have looked to the ever-increasing obsession with 'celebrity' and justifiably assumed it translates to, if not guaranteed success, then at the very least a big head start. They have some great figures to back that up too.' (Hardie, 2013) Biopics often take advantage of an established audience, similarly to films based upon novels, garnering an audience based on

the stories and lives of those who have achieved fame, renown, or impacted the world in some way. The goal of a biopic can vary from a hagiography, a biographical that treats its subject with undue reverence, to an exposé, uncovering elements such as secrets, nefarious dealings, deceit, or immoral behaviour.

### **Who owns *your* story?**

The hagiographies and exposé styles chosen by filmmakers are influenced by law surrounding ownership rights of a person's life story and information. There are limitations on the content that can be portrayed but also limitations on the person's, and their families, control over the story. In UK Law it is not explicitly stated that a person has ownership of their own life rights, in any part of trademark, copyright or intellectual property law. With the exception of unlawfully obtained information, there is nothing in the legal justice system to prevent a producer from making a film about someone's life or events. Despite this, producers almost always enter into legal agreements with those whose lives or experience they wish to recreate by purchasing life rights for a specific period within their life. This preventative measure ensures that the producer and/or filmmaking company are not sued by the individual for defamation or invasion of privacy. Defamation 'can usually be considered to be an untrue spoken or written expression, referring to a person, which when published, is deemed harmful or likely to harm the reputation of an individual' (DAS Law, 2019). This is considered when the product:

- is a 'discredit to the person',
- 'causes the regard to which the subject is held by others to be lowered',
- 'causes the person to be shunned or avoided'
- 'causes the person to be subject of hatred, ridicule or contempt'

(DAS Law, 2018).

Defamation is considered legally only if the product has any of these effects on a 'right-thinking' member of society or community generally but cannot be included if it applies to a specific section of society. This defamation also must be evidenced in court by third party material to evidence this effect. Due to the cost of legal battles, and the potential for losing the court case, it is often considered better practice to pay for someone's life rights rather than risk the cost of being sued for defamation or invasion of privacy. Following logical reasoning, it can be assumed that the purchase of life rights, and the risk of defamation claims, should not be necessary if what is being represented is the truth. The legal rights of Article 10 of the convention states that 'everyone has the right to freedom of expression', and that in order for information to be defamatory, it must be incorrect (Human Rights Act, 1998, p.24). This argument would be relevant if it were possible to ensure that the product, in this instance a biopic, could portray nothing but objective, accurate truth but, in fact, it can never avoid subjectivity, nor would filmmakers necessarily want to. There is an important distinction to be made between the truth of seeing an event happen and the limitations of truth in events later reproduced in film. Everything created for filming, from costumes, to set design, to lighting, no matter how accurate to historical record, is artifice. The best a filmmaker can do is achieve realism and factual integrity in the film's narrative. Furthermore, as creatives, most filmmakers do not consider defamation lawsuits, or any legal proceedings, predominant over the production of entertaining well-made cinema. This leads to facts becoming warped or exaggerated for the purpose of entertainment, and whilst the filmmakers may not intend to, they may be setting themselves up for a defamation claim. One of the only instances, where this is not an issue, is in the portrayal of the dead, as no one can sue on the behalf of another for defamation.

When addressing truth in recreating events in film this issue can become very difficult to pinpoint, especially in terms of historical productions, most evidence and accounts are to

some extent anecdotal and subjective. Mark Bevir noted in his writing that we ‘cannot have objective historical knowledge because we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations’ (Bevir, 1994, p.328). Much of our knowledge of history is a result of anecdotal evidence. Stories evolve as they are passed on by others, as commonly people intake a story with their own perspective and mindset, likely altering the original account. Despite this strong potential for variation in stories of the same event, researchers often use cross-referencing to weed out the factual events from the interpretations. Biopics often focus on portraying factual events as plot points; however, the intention is more often an attempt to portray the truth from specific perspectives. This creates an interesting point of study through which biopics are considered for their representation of ‘experienced truth’, such as the historical figures’ feelings, perspectives in conflict and values, and the ‘factual truth’, such as historical events, people involved in the figure’s life and elements of a period setting such as dress and décor. In *Past Imperfect-History According to the Movies*, Carnes highlights the importance of presenting history in film, ‘...movies inspire and entertain. They often teach important truths about the human condition’ however, ‘they do not provide a substitute for history, which has been painstakingly assembled from the best available evidence and analysis. But sometimes filmmakers wholly smitten by their creations, proclaim them to be historically ‘accurate’ or ‘truthful’, and many viewers presume them to be so.’ (Carnes, 1996, p. 9-10) Custen suggests the ‘Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar’s palace is to architectural history: an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity.’ (Custen, 1992, p.7) Whilst a biopic is a distortion, by its very nature, of an historical event or life story, it becomes a form of historical education despite its artifice. The elements of recognisable history, such as events, iconography, or figures, can convince the audience of a blanket level of authenticity that can allow any distortions to be accepted as historical fact. Custen further explains ‘While most

biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era, they are often the only source of information many people will ever have on a given historical subject.’ (Custen, 1992, p.7) The contrast between proven truth and the crafted truth of the film allows theorists to draw correlations to see what is neglected in the representation of specific groups of historical figures and cross-reference this with historical accounts. Through analysis, examples can be identified in which filmmakers and studios have neglected aspects of queerness in a historical figure, to allow focus on the reproduction of elements of the figures’ life that they may believe are more important or more acceptable to a mainstream audience. This draws attention to the impact of authorship in film and how it can affect the general public’s perception of a figure.

In its simplest form, there are three genres that create a spectrum of actuality and accuracy in fictionalised historical films: biopic, docudrama and historical period drama. ‘Docudrama’ is the re-enactment of historical events with as much contextual accuracy as possible whilst still being a created text and would be classed as one end of the spectrum. It is considered that a ‘true docudrama does not abuse dramatic license to create a piece of work that is highly entertaining...’ (Entertainism, accessed 05/01/20) Hoffer and Nelson describe the docudrama as the ‘unique blend of fact and fiction which dramatizes events and historic personages from our recent history... [It’s] based on fact though it relies on actors, dialogue, sets and costumes to recreate an earlier event.’ (Hoffer & Nelson, 1978, p.21) This genre’s goal is to reflect as much accuracy as possible, within recreated content, with less concern for narrative and character changes for entertainment. The biopic has similar concerns over historical accuracy, using real-life events of figures and their identities; however, a biopic often contains more dramatisations and fact-warping to create a more interesting and enjoyable narrative. Historical period drama is a fictional film in a historical setting, in which some real historical figures may be used or mentioned but tend not to take leading roles. In comparison to the



docudrama, historical period dramas greatly favour a dramatic narrative over historical accuracy and with primacy of entertainment over education. Historical period dramas often restrict themselves to fictional characters and events in historical settings, however, sometimes these films can contain historical fact to an extent that it muddies the water between historical accuracy and fiction. This leads some historical period dramas to merge slightly in the biopic genre with both positive and negative results for audiences and filmmakers.

In films with keen historical detail, such as the 1997 blockbuster, *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), the level of historical accuracy in some elements, such as careful reproduction of sets, the technicalities of the sinking and costume, not only entertain the audience but can also educate. Cameron and his film crew underwent an expedition in 1995 to the wreckage of the real Titanic ship, filming both reference material and shots for the film. Cameron stated that ‘the sets, and costumes, and everything all had to live up to the level we had set by filming the real set.’ (Cameron, 2005) This can educate an audience on a specific area of history that they may not have chosen to watch in documentary or docudrama form. The dramatic elements then assist in evoking emotion, creating a potentially newfound level of empathy for the victims of the historical tragedy. Whilst the attention to historical detail and accuracy are acknowledged, an issue arises with the quantity of fiction included, which is then masquerading as fact for the viewer, whether intentionally or not. For example, the character of William McMaster Murdoch, the First Officer of the R.M.S. Titanic, which is based upon a real officer with the same name. Whilst some elements of his story, such as being the officer in charge when the Titanic hit the iceberg, are factually accurate the film also presents him taking a bribe for a place on a lifeboat, shooting two unarmed 3<sup>rd</sup> class passengers and then shooting himself, all of which are not factually evidenced. Murdoch’s family, unable to sue 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox for defamation due to Murdoch no longer being alive, protested this

portrayal of their relative as it had little-to-no basis in truth. Murdoch's nephew stated, after a personal apology from the Vice President of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, that 'in three or four years people will have forgotten about this ceremony but the film and video will still portray my uncle as a murderer when he was a hero and helped save many passengers' (S, Murdoch, 1998). This is an example of issues that arise from fictionalised stories mixing with historical events and figures without caution, and the impact this can have on real people and memories of the dead.

This issue is sometimes avoided by using the phrase 'based on a true story' or 'based on real events'. This allows filmmakers to create films based on historical events without risks of defamation or misrepresentation because the character can be as dramatized however the filmmaker chooses as they are only 'based' on real people. There are instances in which filmmakers posthumously claim a film is based on a true story, often after some form of legal action. This can be seen in the film *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), a film detailing the story of the fictional Andy Beckett, a homosexual who hides both his sexuality and his AIDS from his employers at a large reputable law firm in Philadelphia. After a colleague spots an AIDS-related Kaposi sarcoma lesion Beckett's work on an influential case is sabotaged, providing the firm partners with an excuse to dismiss him. Certain that he had been sabotaged and fired due to his sexuality and AIDS hysteria, Beckett searches for legal representation to sue the firm for illegal dismissal on the basis of disability. Soon after the release of the film, there was outcry from the Bowers family as the story was incredibly similar to the story of Geoffrey Bowers, an attorney who was fired from Baker McKenzie firm and went on to sue for wrongful dismissal under a claim of AIDS discrimination. In 1988, a year after Bowers' death, producer Scott Rudin visited the Bowers family, interviewing them and promising payment for the use of the story. According to Rudin, after selling the idea for the film for \$100,000 to Orion Pictures, he had no further involvement in the production and did not

share the information provided by the family. Despite the family's insistence that a total of fifty-four scenes within the film reflected an uncanny resemblance to real events and moments in Bowers' life, Rudin insisted that any information used to write the screenplay was obtained through the publicity of Bower's story at the time. This led to a lawsuit between the Bowers family and TriStar Pictures, the company that obtained filmmaking rights from Orion Pictures and distributed the film. The lawsuit was settled out of court, however, the filmmaker did publicly claim that the film was 'inspired in part' by Bowers' story. It is therefore debatable as to whether this film counts as a biopic or not. Whilst Bingham explains that 'every biopic is supposed to have a basis in reality' (Bingham, 2010, p.7) to what extent this basis should be accurate, and the ethics of such a decision is down to the interpretation of the individual. On the one hand *Philadelphia* follows the key convention of portraying the true story of a figure, it details events that really happened in a narrative structure that is true to life. However, if it does not mention the figure by name it could simply be considered an uncredited inspiration. Bingham further states that 'the biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone's life' (Bingham, 2010, p.7). Following this statement, it could be concluded that *Philadelphia* still counts as a biopic despite the lack of specific detail in some areas, such as character names. However, this opens the debate as to where the line is drawn between a biopic and a fictional story inspired by true events. For example, many fictional blockbuster films feature elements of truth in their inspiration, such as Wes Craven, director and screenwriter of *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984), stated in a *Vulture* interview that the film is, in part, inspired by an L.A. Times story of a young Cambodian refugee who suffered severe nightmares as a result of his experience in the Cambodian Killing Fields. Craven recounts the family's statement that the boy was 'afraid that if he slept, the thing chasing him would get him, so he tried to stay awake for days at a time' (Craven, 2014). The boy died in his sleep, a death that some attribute to his nightmares. The film's

narrative of a sleep demon that chases young teenagers in their dreams clearly borrows from this story. This raises the question, what is the difference between a fictionalised account of a true story and a real-life inspired fictional story? *Philadelphia* could be considered a case of real-life inspiration for fictionalised stories with original characters and interactions; however, it could also be categorised as a biopic with fictionalised elements, something Bingham argues that all biopics are to some extent.

An issue, however, that arises in this form of real-life inspiration is that it can steal from the life story of an individual, which for some may be considered immoral and also steal the credit for an achievement that someone struggled for in real life or ignore the memory of those who have suffered. Whilst the impact on the subject and their memory should be considered, this approach could be viewed as a form of protecting an individual's identity or memory whilst still sharing their story to inspire or educate. Quite often we are presented with these stories so that we, as the audience, are not only inspired but achieve a greater understanding of the struggles of others who experience the world differently. Putting aside the potential legal repercussions of interpreting a figure's life story without credit or compensation, regardless of lack of specific reference to Bowers himself, his story as Andy Beckett still influenced audiences in terms of understanding the emotional and personal impact of social defamation due to a disease that not only you cannot control but is killing your friends and community. These messages of fighting against adversity, injustice and homophobia still reached audiences, awarding the film twenty-two award nominations and twenty wins, including two Oscars. The star-studded film raised over two-hundred-million dollars at the worldwide box office and Bowers' story reached millions of people. Some may feel that Bowers' name not being used or mention in pre-credit or post-credit notes is a triviality in comparison to the influence of his story, however, some, particularly his family, may find this to be a discredit to his memory, robbing the story from the real man who

struggled through it. This is the responsibility of authorship, an issue creatives of all kinds face when they recreate an event or person.

Whilst biopics are always based in historical truth, as they are the portrayal of a real person's life story, a biopic, or any film, TV show or text for that matter, cannot exist without some level of bias. 'A bias is a tendency, inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone' (Psychology Today, accessed 13/12/19). Whilst bias is commonly considered to be akin to prejudice in an inherently negative sense, bias can be both positive or negative and, in many cases, unintentional. Based on stereotypes and mental prototypes, the brain formulates biases from the assumed information. Positive or negative bias can vary in intensity and commonly leads to erroneous or arbitrary conclusions. Filmmakers, researchers, and writers all suffer from a degree of bias based on their own life experiences and perspective. Without realising it, many come to conclusions about the portrayed historical figure that may not be correct, despite potentially contradictory information or lack of evidence. Custen highlights that in terms of biopics, 'the producers of these films often filtered the content of a great life through the sieve of their own experiences, values and personalities.' (Custen, 1992, p.4) These cognitive biases are known as confirmation bias and attribution bias. Confirmation bias is the 'brain's tendency to search for and focus on information that supports what someone already believes, while ignoring facts that go against those beliefs, despite their relevance' (Psychology Today, accessed 13/12/19). In contrast, attribution bias involves the attempt to 'attribute reasons or motivations to the actions of others without concrete evidence to support such assumptions' (Psychology Today, accessed 13/12/19). Intentional or not, bias is a common human condition that stems from subjectivity. The act of bias is subjective to an individual and the perception of that bias by others is also subjective. There are degrees of bias that influence the retelling of someone's life story, often stemming from different subjective accounts. It is impossible to recreate a historical event or a historical figure in a

film that is a complete reflection of reality. Bingham states ‘... there is a certain kind of truth that you can get from a dramatized version of a person’s life, but it springs from the imaginations of the screenwriter, the director and the actors’ (Bingham, 2010, p.13). However, this concept extends further than simply the filmmakers Bingham refers to. For example, if a biographical film has been created based upon a book about a historical figure, then that character has gone through the subjective perception and imagination of the filmmaker, the author and the author’s sources before it reaches the audience. Whether intentional or not, every person who has contributed will have taken information, added their own subjective experience and imagination and passed it on. Even documentary cinema, a genre created solely for the purpose of educating audiences with facts, suffers from bias merely by how the director and filmmakers decide to present that information. Rosenstone takes this even further, highlighting the difference of reading based on the individual viewer, ‘like history, what you take away from a biofilm depends on what you bring to it’ (Rosenstone, 2007, p.24). Elements such as knowledge about the portrayed historical figure, opinions on certain events or issues and personal experiences of certain themes and values can all influence the way the viewer adopts the information and themes represented.

## **Genre and Subgenre**

The biopic often takes the form of a subgenre combined with genres fitting the subject’s life and the filmmaker’s intentions regarding style, tone and intended messages. Most genres, such as horror or comedy, contain a well-known set of tropes and conventions that are found in many films within that genre. This allows the audience to read the film more easily and identify the film’s themes and tone based on these signifiers. Although audiences aren’t specifically taught to read or notice these tropes, most people could name several tropes from certain genres without even realising that they can. These codes are often portrayed through methods such as mise-en-scene, character archetypes, cinematography etc. For example, in a

romance we would expect to see set decoration such as flowers and romantic settings such as candlelit dinners. We expect couples, soft-focus close-ups and long panning shots of a moonlit beach or countryside. Whilst not every film within the same genre has all the same specific genre tropes and conventions, they will broadly have similar elements of iconography. This presents a situation in which the iconography of a biopic should be considered. Whilst there are narrative structures that are regularly found in biopics, it is harder to identify the visual conventions of the biopic genre. Cheshire writes ‘Unlike other genre films the bio-pic seemingly shares no familiar iconography, codes or conventions. They can be set anywhere at any time. What links them is quite simply the film depicts the life of any important real person’ (Cheshire, 2015, p.4). Biopics construct a story closely following the life of a real person, told chronologically within the span of a lifetime, whilst not necessarily in a linear pattern, it must follow them throughout a period of their life that made them noteworthy. Lehtisalo states that ‘biopics are usually generic hybrids.... and the balance between the generic and cultural regimes of verisimilitude may vary.’ (Lehtisalo. 2011, p.102) Lehtisalo highlights that whilst biopics are often merged with another genre, the extent that these secondary genre’s impact the iconography and verisimilitude of the film varies due to features such as filmmaker intentions, the root of the figures fame and the mood of the biopic. In the interest of categorising biopics, these patterns suggest structural conventions of the genre and the visual conventions depend on the connected subgenres or type of biopic.

The impact of the combined subgenre on visuals is exemplified in the comparison between these two 2003 release R rated (UK 15) biopics, *Gacy* (Saunders, 2003) and *American Splendor* (Berman and Pulcini, 2003). Both films follow the certain structural conventions of a biopic however the visual iconography contrasts due to the associated subgenre. *Gacy*, follows the infamous serial killer John Wayne Gacy who murdered many young men whilst dressed as a clown, burying them in his basement. This film fits within the genre of crime,

horror and drama, achieving its R rating ‘for strong grisly violence, language, some sexuality and drug use’ (IMDB, accessed 11/10/19). This biopic’s subgenre contrasts with the comedic and irreverent drama of *American Splendor*, a film detailing the later life of Harvey Pekar, a comic book writer and well-known personality, featuring the use of comic book style animation. This film achieves its rating for profanity and minor nudity. These two films, sharing key similarities such as age certification, release year and a main biopic genre, differ greatly in tone and style based on the subgenres best associated with the subject and filmmakers’ intended readings of the individual. Brown and Vidal comment on the biopic genre in their book *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (2014), assessing the biopic as one of several subgenres within the historical film genre. However, Bingham (2010) argues that the biopic is a genre in its own right. Both of these perspectives are based in sound reasoning, however if the biopic is viewed in terms of structure instead of the visual elements it borrows from combined genres, I have concluded that there are three categories that should be considered when studying the biopic. These categories consider the thoughts and reservations of theorists such as Cheshire, Bingham, Brown and Vidal, whilst noting patterns and correlations within the genre. These three categories organise the biopic into: ‘The Life Story’, ‘The Crusade Story’ and ‘The Redemption Story’.

‘The Life Story’ biopic is by design a form of character study with the figure’s extraordinary life experience driving the narrative. The film covers several events and influential moments throughout their life. This kind of biopic can be considered closer to a filmic version of a biographical novel, portraying the milestone features of their life that shaped them into the notable figure that they became. This type of story lends itself to historical royalty, who are born into fame and notoriety, and certain political figures and creatives whose work is greatly influenced by their origins. This form of biopic is mostly intended to contextualise the figure, seeing our hero from their humble beginnings to the end of their eventful lives. This can be



seen in films such as *Malcolm X* (Lee, 1992), a film that spans a time just before the birth of Malcolm Little, better known as Malcolm X, to the aftermath of his death. These films aim to show you the change in the world, or specific section of a society, throughout the span of a lifetime. The context of Nebraska during the 1920s establishes the violent prejudice of the time as the audience sees Malcolm X's parents suffering racially motivated attacks, including the burning of their home by white supremacists and the murder of his father shortly after his birth. This contextualises the social climate he was born into and its impact on him as a child but also the necessity for progression of black human rights. After following his actions and struggles the audience is then presented with scenes displaying the impact of the man after his death. This allows the audience to have a clear view of the world before, during and after a figure and the impact of their actions on others. Whilst the 'The Life Story' tends to follow much of the life span of the figure the narrative does not necessarily have to cover the figure's death. There is less significance in a single specific event, even the figure's death, treating many moments as similarly important in the shaping of the figure and their impact on society. This focus on the figure can even lead to the omission of the figure's most notable contribution. This can be seen in *Tolkien* (Karukoski, 2019), a film detailing the life of J. R. R. Tolkien author of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1955). His two most famous works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, are estimated to have sold 150 million copies and inspired the creation of a six-film franchise with a total worldwide box office revenue of over five billion US dollars, however, the film timeline comes to an end before they were written. The narrative is driven by the portrayed individual, constantly following them throughout the allotted timeframe of the film, following Tolkien as his life inspired his writing. The film begins with Tolkien as a small child, listening to his mother telling him fantastical stories and ends as he begins to write *The Hobbit*. The film follows Tolkien as he is orphaned, his time studying at Oxford, falling in love and fighting in the trenches during

World War One. It follows the events that shaped him as a person and are thought to inspire his writing. The film doesn't cover the source of his fame, it simply covers the life events that influenced and inspired him to achieve his future successes.

In contrast to 'The Life Story', 'The Crusade Story' biopic presents a story of a figure throughout a specific event or period in history, often only spanning a small portion of a figure's life in which they achieved something extraordinary despite struggles. Typically, they enrich the world with their contribution, whether it be saving lives, political progress, or achieving justice on behalf of a marginalised group. An important feature for this type of biopic is emotional influence as the filmmakers not only urge the audience to care for the figure but believe in their cause. Quite often these films involve key social issues or injustice, something a modern audience themselves find objectionable such as sexism, homophobia, racism etc. The audience follows the figure as they battle against the odds to achieve justice. Whilst the cause of the figure is often widely considered a response to injustice the impact of the film can be related to the individual viewers' connection with the cause or injustice. This can be seen in *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008), a film following Harvey Milk, California's first elected openly gay official and gay rights activist during the Seventies. The film's timeline begins in 1970 as he first meets Scott, his boyfriend for several years, and ends during the aftermath of Harvey's assassination, as he is mourned by his community and supporters. This film has little to no reference to Milk's earlier life, beginning on his fortieth birthday. This film surmises a short period of time, focusing on Milk's work and achievements in civil rights rather than his entire life story. This enforces the importance of Milk's political and social achievements rather than the focus on Milk as a person and the elements that shaped him as he grew up. These biopics often span a shorter time frame in comparison to a 'Life story' biopic, focusing on anything from a few months to a couple of decades. This focuses the story on the achievement and a portrayal of the struggle directly leading to it. This can also be

seen in Mimi Leder film, *On The Basis of Sex* (Leder, 2018), a biopic following the story of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's first pivotal case that advanced her career leading to a thirteen-year long position on the U.S Court of Appeals followed by taking the position of associate justice on the U. S Supreme Court in 1993, the second woman, of the four, to ever be assigned the role. Ginsberg is renowned for her work in fighting for gender equality in law and fought to become a lawyer during a time in which society did not view women as being as capable of practising law as their male counterparts, creating a difficult environment for women to find work within firms. The film begins with Ruth as a first-year student at Harvard Law School, ending in 1970 whilst she and her colleagues await the verdict of the case whilst commending her performance within the courtroom. This film has a relatively short time span within the film, following a fourteen-year excerpt of Ginsberg's life. It focuses on a specific, and relatively short, period of time surrounding events that made a significant influence on the world and world view. Ginsburg has gone on to make significant contributions in the advancement of gender equality and women's' rights in the fifty years since the end of the film narrative that could equally be acknowledged and would likely have made good cinematic content. Choosing such a short time span in *On The Basis of Sex* (Leder, 2018) allowed for much more in-depth focus on the most influential events as a character-defining narrative. A potential issue with 'The Life Story' is that areas of a figure's life, such as people they knew, places they went, things they achieved, get condensed to allow the film to meet a conventional run time. 'The Crusade Story' biopic lends itself to figures that achieved something extraordinary within their life, they are often most famous for an event or moment in history and the narrative is allowed the freedom to explore said moment in depth.

'The Redemption Story' category portrays the subject's rise to success followed by the fall into excess, addiction, and self-importance. By the end of the film, the subject redeems themselves, by getting clean, regrouping with the band, utilising their wealth and status to

bring good into the world etc. Whilst these films often contain both negative and positive reflection of the subject they are not solely ‘unalloyed hagiography, simple simpering over celebrity’, as described by Andy Gill, nor are they ‘the cinematic equivalent of kiss-and-tell tabloid exposés, concerned with the sleaziest aspects of the life in question’ (Gill, 2004). In fact, they are both and neither at the same time. These films explore the darkest and ‘sleaziest’ moments of the figure’s life, displaying them in a negative light. And yet the figure is still glorified throughout their rise to power and eventual redemption. Whilst the sordid events are portrayed as the subject’s choice there is also a sentiment that the figure is a victim and undeserving of the darkness that has changed them. They are pulled from the selfish indulgence by an ally, such as a family member, members of the band or lifelong friend, leading them to personal growth through revelation. The goal of the ‘Redemption Story’ biopic is to portray a real-life example of someone, who is often revered by audiences, overcoming their personal darkness and flourishing. They show the audience that not only is the celebrity human but if they can overcome such struggles then the audience member can too. The audience connects to the seeming honesty of the film, seeing an unfiltered, uncensored reflection of the figure whom they have come to feel they know through media. It feels personal. The most common subjects of this kind of biopic are famous musicians, as highlighted by Toby Litt in *The New Statesman* (2007), ‘cinema is fascinated with rock stars. The trajectory of most music careers is the kind of rise and fall recommended by both Aristotle’s poetics and any cheap screenwriting manual you care to pick up’ (Litt, 2007). The filmic life of the musical celebrity begins with the humble beginnings of a dream and a talent. During these beginnings the figure or band are presented as having some kind of unique or genius gift. This natural creation of ‘their sound’ is treated with a reverence, catering to fans who adore the figure or band for that sound. Due to this unique talent, they are quickly discovered and achieve great success, often through montage, only to fall victim to fame and

excess. This ends with redemption through acts such as sobriety, charity outreach and reconnecting with loved ones. In this the redemption biopic follows the hero's arc.

Kermode (2021) suggests that pop music movies share many similar traits, in terms of structure, as the romantic comedy. Billy Mernit (2001) in his book *Writing A Romantic Comedy* adapts the classic conflict, crisis and resolution structure. This original structure follows the pattern of '1. *Conflict*: The hero takes on a problem. 2. *Crisis*: The hero can't solve the problem. 3. *Resolution*: The hero solves the problem.' (Mernit, 2001, p.15) Mernit suggests: '1. *Meet*: Girl and boy have significant encounters. 2. *Lose*: Girl and boy are separated. 3. *Get*: Girl and boy reunite.' (Mernit, 2001, p.15) Many band focused biopics also follow this structure, this could be adapted to 1. *Formation*: Band meet, connect and create together. 2. *Break up*: Band members become corrupted and disband. 3. *Reunion*: Band reform and settle old grievances, time for a concert. In biopics focusing on the life and legacy of a band, the key focal point is the relationship between the band members much in the way a romantic relationship is the key focal point of a romantic comedy. This kind of biopic relies heavily on the weight of homosocial relationship, a platonic relationship between members of the same gender. Whilst romantic relationships will likely feature in the film, they are more likely to take a secondary role to the all-consuming power of the homosocial relationship. After all if a film is marketed to the fans of a certain band what the audience cares about most is the band members, their closeness as a group and their music. Following a hero's journey narrative (a structure further analysed in *Narratology: Moulding Reality*) the band must form in humble beginnings, rise to power, struggle and then redeem themselves in the eyes of the other band members and their fans. The band must meet, form, and rise to success. Through this success the band will fall apart as the result of hubris, substance abuse and the corruption of fame. In the final act of the biopic the band will reunite in a performance ending the film on a celebration of the band, their music and their fanbase. Whilst the formation, inevitable

breakup and equally inevitable reunion tour is a common trope in the music industry, rock music biopics can often simplify events to create a narrative in which this three-act structure can be more closely adhered to. Mernit also notes a seven-beat structure for the romantic comedy. These beats include:

- The Chemical Equation - setup,
- Cute Meet – catalyst,
- A Sexy Complication - the turning point,
- The Hook - the midpoint,
- Swivel - second turning point,
- The Dark Moment - the crisis climax,
- Joyful Defeat - the resolution.

This can be seen in *The Dirt* (Tremaine, 2019), detailing the story of the band *Mötley Crüe* and their party lifestyle. The film begins by introducing the band members and exploring their origins before joining. Each member is introduced as someone who is incomplete or unfulfilled in their life, career or music. The formation of the band is presented as a magical moment, ‘When Tommy sits behind his drums, Nikki picks up his bass, and Mars plugs in his guitar, something happens, man. It's like a weird kind of electrical humidity. You don't just hear it, you feel it.’ (*The Dirt*, Tremaine, 2019) The band rise to fame through sold out shows and quickly find themselves signing a record deal. when the excess of the rockstar lifestyle, such as substance abuse and infidelity, begin to destroy the individuals, the band begins turn against each other, all focused on their own issues. Soon Nikki Sixx who suffers a near fatal heroin overdose, has a moment of enlightenment, and redeems himself in acknowledging his hubris and getting the band back together through emotional vulnerability, apologies, and heartfelt gestures. In this film the moment the band agrees to get back together is focused on

emotional vulnerability and the importance of found family, whilst this is not how the lawyer filled agreement actually happened it highlights the film's focus on the band's relationship. The film ends with a slow motion shot of the band walking together down a hallway towards the steps to the stage. Each of the band members gushes about the band in voice over, highlighting the power of homosocial love and brotherhood stating '...somehow, we're still here, in it together. That's fate. That's family. And that's Mötley fuckin' Crüe.' (*The Dirt*, Tremaine, 2019). In this film the moment of 'The Chemical Equation' is the opening sequence in which we are introduced to Nikki Sixx and Tommy Lee as they establish their dreams. In true 'Cute Meet' style Tommy Lee and Nicky meet in a restaurant and share a common vision of a band. During this stage, the pair meet Mick Mars and Vince Neil and the band forms. Then follows 'The Sexy Complication' in which the bands have their first show and soon sign to a producer. In 'The Hook' the band begins to rise to more and more renown however, personal issues between the band members particularly with Tommy and Nikki as Nikki attends Tommy's wedding whilst high and inebriated. In 'The Swivel' the band decides to get sober together and whilst their music and recording is better, they begin to experience more internal conflict with each other. In 'The Dark Moment' Vince, who is struggling with guilt due to the death of their friend which he caused due to drink driving, quits the band. Vince struggles with his family and soon suffers the loss of his young daughter to cancer. In 'The Joyful Defeat' Nikki has a form of epiphany and reaches out to the other band members to apologise for his previous actions. Nikki, Tommy and Mick find Vince in a bar and have a heart to heart in which Nikki passionately states 'shit changes, people change, but I don't fucking care if Mötley Crüe never plays another note. All I want is my fucking brother back. Because this is the only family that I've ever known.' (*The Dirt*, Tremaine, 2019) Following this the band reform and go on to perform together for another twenty years.

## **Narratology: Moulding Reality**

As highlighted by Cheshire (2015) ‘a problem for the bio-pic is that real life does not always fit the dramatic structure needed for a mainstream movie.’ (p.11) In the interest of entertainment filmmakers often put a predominant focus on following a relevant narrative structure, changing chronology and fact to allow the story to fit into the narrative structure that best reflects their goals. In narratology, theorists have found several links between narrative structures and an audience's emotional connection to the story and its messages. Joseph Campbell presented a theory surrounding what he called the ‘monomyth’ or ‘hero’s story’. This is an incredibly common narrative structure that can be traced back to the hunting stories of early man. This structure follows a pattern of; ‘A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man’ (Campbell, 2008, p.23). This narrative structure, whilst very common in fictional stories, can also be found in many stories based in fact. This can be seen in films such as biopics, films following one character, our hero, as their life begins in a somewhat ordinary state only to be transformed by some form of intervention, whether it be their big break, fame or tragedy, as they begin their journey to achieve their goal and lead to the change for which they are famous. In some ways, this hero’s journey narrative scheme is even more consistently present in biopics as the function of a biopic is to catalogue the journey and success of a person or hero’s life. There are many theories on the ideal structure for the perfect narrative schema, from the simple three-act structure encouraged by Michael Hauge in *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, to Story Executive and Hollywood Consultant, Christopher Vogler’s ten-stage hero’s journey narrative. Whilst this structure can be evidenced in many fictionalised films, easily identified in fantasy sagas such as the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-2020) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003),



this structure can be found in many biopics, evidencing the role of fictionalisation in the story of a factual life for the purpose of emotional influence. These stages within the journey also rely heavily on the use of Vogler's (2007) archetypes and their interaction with one another. This includes the Hero, the Mentor, the Threshold Guardian, the Herald, the Shapeshifter, the Shadow, the Trickster and the Ally.

This structure can be seen in the triple Oscar-winning biopic detailing the later years of the life of Ron Woodroof, *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2014). Ron Woodroof (1950-1992) was a Dallas electrician who was diagnosed with HIV in 1985, in an effort to recover Woodroof illegally sourced azidothymidine (AZT) only to find it was in fact making him sicker. After some of his own research and the advice of certain doctors, Woodroof found medication that was not FDA approved. He not only used this medication on himself but created the *Dallas Buyers Club*, a club that AIDS sufferers could subscribe to receive medication to treat the disease. Woodroof fought several battles not only with the FDA, who tried to stop the club from distributing non-approved drugs but with his own health. The structure of this film follows Campbell and Vogler's theories, whilst changing factual elements of the story to support this structure.

The film begins with Woodroof in the ordinary world, showing his work and social life with his friends, quickly establishing him as a closed-minded cowboy with a penchant for gambling, drugs, drinking and prejudice towards AIDS sufferers and the LGBTQA+ community. Woodroof's Call to Adventure begins as he is first diagnosed as HIV positive by Dr Eve Saks and Dr Sevard after hospitalisation due to an electrical accident at work. His refusal to the call becomes clear as he rejects their diagnosis and thirty day predicted life expectancy, claiming 'I ain't no faggot, motherfucker. I don't even know no fucking faggots.' Woodroof's Mentor shows itself in the form of Dr Saks, his local library and a Doctor in a

Mexican medical hospital, educating him on the causes and medical trials of drugs hoping to cure or improve the health of AIDS sufferers. He crosses the Threshold as he begins selling medication to sufferers within the gay community, entering a new world of the queer subculture but also the new world of an AIDS sufferer. Along the way, his tests, Allies and Enemies show themselves in the form of Rayon, a trans woman who assists him in gaining the trust of the community, the FDA who try to stop him from selling illegal drugs and carrying them over the border, and Dr Sevard who is presented as a doctor who is not only unwilling to listen to patients and facts but pushes a drug that is harmful to people who are already suffering. The approach to the inmost cave comes when the FDA changes regulations making it illegal to sell any drug that is non-FDA approved and the club begins to lose money. Rayon, a character who works closely alongside Woodroof for a large portion of the film succumbs to her illness and dies. Woodroof suffers the ordeal in dealing with her death whilst also himself becoming sicker. Woodroof's Reward comes in the improvement of his character. He is seen to defend and respect the queer community in a way most contradictory to his portrayal in his ordinary world. Not only does he become more compassionate and accepting but he contributes to the elongated lives of the members of the club. The Road Back can be seen in the ensuing lawsuit between the FDA and Woodroof, with Woodroof's aim being that he is allowed Peptide T, a non-FDA-approved drug derived from HIV envelope protein gp120, for personal use. He loses the case but gains not only the sympathy of the judge but the respect of the others who run and work for the club. His Resurrection is seen as he fights AIDS, enjoying bull riding as a symbol of not living the life of a sick person but the life he wants to live. The Elixir that Woodroof receives and shares with the world is living a whole seven years longer than he was originally predicted, gaining the respect of figures involved in the club and educating some of his friends who originally rejected him. Not only this but it is heavily implied in the closing title cards that Woodroof had a causal

link to the distribution of AZT at a lower safer dosage, stating ‘A lower dose of AZT became widely used in later drug combinations that saved millions of lives’ (*Dallas Buyers Club*, 2014).

Aristotle’s *Poetics* explores how narrative structure influences emotion to create the ‘perfect story’ (Hiltunen, 2002, no page numbers provided). According to Aristotle, fear (Phobos), caused by an expectation of future impending danger, drives an audience member to connect deeply with a character. The audience feels not only fear but hope for the hero’s safety, placing emotional weight on the outcome of the character’s goal. In Hiltunen’s analysis of the application of Aristotle’s theories within Hollywood she explains ‘if we are able to identify with their plight, we are able to feel both fear and pity for them even though we are sitting safely in the audience’ (Hiltunen, 2002, no page numbers provided). However, it is not solely this fear that creates this connection; it is pity (Eleos). An audience only feels pity for those whom they deem undeserving of their specific danger, for example, if a character is inherently morally good or innocent, even if the character performs immoral acts without immoral intent. The audience member must see the character with the same morality they believe they have themselves. The plot, therefore, must be formulated so that the audience is able to feel the threat to a fictional character as if it was directed towards them. Most people view themselves as morally good and undeserving of negative situations therefore when an audience experiences the suffering of a character they see as moral, they experience empathy, placing themselves in the mindset of the character. Hiltunen highlights Aristotle’s theory that ‘Anticipating the undeserved suffering of a morally good character induces pity and fear’ (Hiltunen, 2002, no page numbers provided). The audience member feels the emotions they would feel in the character’s situation, but they also feel fear for the character due to their ‘superior’ knowledge, knowing exposition from scenes that a specific character wasn’t present for, being able to see the killer in the background, expectations due to genre

conventions etc. According to Hiltunen most modern drama applies the methods of ‘identification’ and ‘empathy’. ‘Identification allows the audience to experience the same emotions as the character in the drama. However, empathy creates anxiety on the part of the audience for the character when they know that the character is approaching danger’ (Hiltunen, 2002, no page numbers provided). This presents a question as to how much an audience member must share with the hero to create this empathy. Perhaps the shared characteristics between audience and character are linked to a more primal human drive, such as love, family and success. If this is the case then this may be used as an argument for the success of minority or underrepresented communities in lead roles in cinema, as an audience connects to the hero’s goals of love, family and success whilst connecting to someone they share personal differences with, such as queer characters for heterosexual audiences, women for male audiences etc.

In *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2014) it is possible that the representation of Ron as a heterosexual man may be an implication of Aristotle and Vogler’s theories on the hero. Following Aristotle’s theory that audiences have to relate to elements of a character to achieve the most effective empathy, it is possible that this could apply to a character’s sexuality. This would imply that based on a heteronormative assumption that the majority of a film’s audience is heterosexual, then a majority will have a shared life experience with the character and therefore greater empathy. However, some may feel that whilst a person’s sexuality does change that person’s subjective experience and perspective on the world, what is shared is not based on the sexuality of the people we love, rather the fact we love in the first place. It is possible that Aristotle is merely referring to the experience of life rather than anything more specific that alters that experience but does not fully change it or the sentiments behind it.

Whilst the structure of *Dallas Buyers Club* evokes emotion from the audience and reflects the positive themes, such as triumph against incurable disease, personal growth regarding acceptance and the battle for justice, it does present the issue of fictionalising for the sake of said messages. If a filmmaker changes history in their presentation of a message, in some cases this can be a disservice to the figure whose story they are telling. A key feature in the hero narrative in *Dallas Buyers Club* is Woodroof's homophobic beginnings, leading to the elixir of learned acceptance, a greater character and the respect of many members of the local queer community at the time. This creates a character arc, in which a main character begins with a selfish goal, however, the hero soon suffers, learning the error of their ways, their goals and desires change to become more selfless. Much like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843), the character begins uncaring and even cold towards others, entirely focused on their own success and problems. They are exposed to a new environment and new people; they experience the suffering of those less fortunate than themselves or those they once considered less than themselves. Through this a mirror is held up to the character, they realise their flaws and approach life with a more considerate and humanitarian way of thinking. This journey leads to a glorified hero, viewed as morally good by the audience, they have corrected their immoral and selfish ways. Woodroof in *Dallas Buyers Club* is a good example of this character arc in action, however, in reality, it is evidenced that Woodroof did not have the kind of character development that the film would suggest. Ron is represented in the film as a single heterosexual man, seen in many sexual and romantic encounters with women. In actuality, Woodroof was in fact married and according to reports from sources such as Steven Ponders, Woodroof's primary doctor from 1989-1992, and nurse Penny Krispin, Woodroof was queer. Krispin stated to that 'Ron was one of my gay patients. I never knew anyone who thought Ron was straight' (*The Telegraph*, 2014). Ponders stated, 'I never thought of him as straight in the least. His wife [Brenda] told me he was bisexual. I've seen the movie with her.'

I've had dinner with her, and she said he was never embarrassed about his bisexuality; Ron felt comfortable with who he was' (*The Telegraph*, 2014).

Whilst writer, Craig Borten argues that 'Yes homophobic—yes, his arc is real yet told in a dramatic way for the film and conveyed through his relationship through Rayon which is a composite character. Yes, the [Dallas club] and his diagnosis changed him' (Slate, 2014), this is evidence of a fundamental change in a figure's personality when translated into a character that sacrifices truth for the purpose of emotional manipulation and entertainment. Without the character's heterosexuality mixed with their blatant prejudice and homophobia an arc cannot be achieved in the same way, Woodroof is diagnosed to his surprise in 1985 and that moment begins his narrative journey. This disregards accounts that it had been suggested to Woodroof that he may be HIV positive before his final diagnosis in 1985, not only this but if Woodroof was in fact bisexual and had relations with male partners the concept of contracting AIDS during the mid-eighties as a queer man is not as shocking as it is presented in the film. David France, producer of *How to Survive a Plague* (France, 2013) a documentary detailing the early years of the AIDS pandemic, stated that 'It turns on some of those old tropes that you really need to see the transition of a straight man's journey in order to be able to understand gay people' (France, 2014). He continues to state that 'we don't need that anymore. We don't need to ride the coattails of bigotry to get into mass culture' (France, 2014). This presents an argument for straightwashing that may not often be considered, whilst as a society, it would be nice for all heterosexual viewers to connect with queer characters and place themselves in their position, it is possible that this could limit the impact of the film's messages for some viewers. In a society in which queerness is less common or ingrained in culture, an environment in which people can live without encountering queerness, a heterosexual lead for the viewer to connect to who goes on a journey to further understand queer people is more likely to lead to the viewer experiencing the same journey through this character they can

fundamentally connect to. However, France's statement is correct that, within certain areas of the world, we no longer need this form of mediator as it is becoming far less likely that the film is the viewers' first introduction to queer people or culture. This form of representation becomes an issue when filmmakers alter the sexuality of the figure for the purpose of narrative. This takes away the visibility of queer people, especially in underrepresented sexualities such as bisexual men, and can cultivate the notion that history is not full of queer people who have positively influenced society throughout history. Viewers who enter the film knowing nothing about Woodroof and leave with no intention of further research will always consider Woodroof as an unlucky heterosexual man who eventually reformed his negative attitudes and opened his heart to unfortunate queer people, instead of a bisexual man who fought to save the lives of those within his community. Whilst one arguably displays better storytelling, it should be considered as to whether Woodroof himself would have appreciated the way he was presented on screen.

Swiss psychologist, Carl G Jung, introduced the concept of archetypes as patterns of personality that can be found throughout the human race. Archetypes can be found consistently throughout myths and fairy tales from many different cultures and time periods. The archetype of the Hero is the protagonist of the story and we commonly follow their story aligned with them, the 'Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others' (Vogler, 2007, p.29). He continues 'the Hero archetype represents the ego's search for identity and wholeness' (Vogler, 2007, p.30). The Hero, despite their willingness to sacrifice for the good of a cause, cannot complete their journey and achieve their goal without the help of other key archetypes such as the Mentor. The Mentor is 'usually a positive figure who aids or trains the hero' (Vogler, 2007, p.39). This character teaches and prepares them so that they are equipped to understand and thrive in the new world they have entered.

Another important pair of archetypes who help the Hero achieve their goals are the Ally and

the Trickster. These characters support The Hero, providing support both physically, such as fighting alongside the hero, and emotionally, providing a conscience to the hero if they lose their way. The Trickster, also known as the comic relief, often performs many of the same functions as the Ally but they also highlight hypocrisy, commonality between the hero's life and the audiences as humanised characters, just as jesters are used in Shakespearean writing, they use humour to provide exposition and emotional influence. One of the most important archetypes for the action of the story is the Herald, this character is the hero's call to adventure, they provide the Hero with the change that causes them to leave their ordinary world and venture into the new world.

The Hero must also face challenges at the hand of three other character archetypes. The key archetype to rival the Hero and create dramatic conflict is the Shadow. 'The Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something.' The Shadow is the force of evil or negative energy, within which the antagonists, villains and enemies are the preventives, they are dedicated to the cause of the Shadow, threatening the hero and the ordinary world in which they are seeking to protect. Vogler explains that 'Antagonists and heroes in conflict are like horses in a team pulling in different directions, while villains and heroes in conflict are like trains on a head-on collision course' (Vogler, 2007, p.65). This use of simile helps to reflect the different types of conflict caused by certain types of character. The antagonist and hero experience conflict through fighting for conflicting causes, both trying to sway favour in direction of their motive and cause. Whereas the villain and hero wish to fight and defeat one and other, the only way to serve their cause is to eradicate the other and enforce their will. Both of these methods create exciting dramatic narrative for cinema however they create a different rhythm of action, the antagonist and the hero's actions follow one and other in a much more drawn out fashion, each reacting to the other and then acting. The villain versus the hero leads to more built-up tension, as we expect



the final dramatic conflict toward the end of the film. The Hero's first interaction with the mercenaries of the Shadow comes from a meeting with the Threshold Guardian, this character archetype acts as the guardians of the threshold to the new world. 'Often, they will be lieutenants of the villain, lesser thugs or mercenaries' (Vogler, 2007, p.49). The final archetype found is that of the Shapeshifter. This character, sometimes the love interest, represents a character that is untrustworthy or confusing to the Hero. Their loyalty is often questioned, and they can cross over and back between fighting for the hero and for the shadow.

It is possible that writers Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack made changes to the figures portrayed in *Dallas Buyers Club*, creating characters better suited to these suggested narrative techniques for the purpose of creating a more entertaining and popular film. This can be seen in the characters of Rayon and Dr. Eve Saks. According to Borton and Wallack, the pair interviewed several transgender AIDS patients, AIDS activists and doctors, the two characters representing the thoughts and feelings of the people they interviewed. Whilst they do fulfil this role, personifying the collective experience of several accounts of real-life experiences, it cannot be ignored that the characters also have a large role in the narrative structure and the representation of Ron. The pair both fulfil the role of Mentor and Ally. Rayon introduces Ron to the queer community, showing him where to sell, who to sell to etc. Not only that, she is also portrayed as guiding him towards acceptance of the LGBTQA+ community, whilst this point is debated as to its basis in fact she plays the role of mentor and ally to support the narrative arc we are presented. Having a consistent ally throughout a large portion of a narrative allows the hero to voice his concerns, creating seemingly natural exposition, but it also allows scenes to portray more emotional weight as characters can mourn together, celebrate together and suffer together. Similarly, Eve acts as a mentor and ally, educating Ron about the AZT testing and supporting him as the FDA attempts to shut

down Ron's operation. Eve is also presented as part of a romantic subplot, who finally agrees to dinner with him after several invitations from Ron. Despite the fact that this subplot is not fulfilled to a point of a kiss or suggestion the pair entered a romantic relationship, she further enforces Ron's character as a womaniser.

It would seem the solution to solving some of these issues; what is and isn't portrayed, and subjective filmmaker perceptions of a figure would be for historical figures to be involved in the production of their own biopic, when possible. There are even a few instances in which historical figures have played themselves within a biopic, creating an auto-biopic. For example, the 1977 film *The Greatest* (Gries, 1977) starring Muhammad Ali and portraying a period of his career for 1960–1974. Whilst this approach presents logistical issues, for biopics where the subject is already deceased, it can also present personal bias and omitted facts in a lack of willingness to portray negative elements of their own life and character. This creates the question as to what extent the involvement of the portrayed individual/individuals helps or hinders the representation of reality and experienced truth? Furthermore, does this impact the representation of minorities, such as queer people? This will be further studied in the films *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019) in which Elton John is an executive producer and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018) in which guitarist, Brian May, and drummer, Roger Taylor, were executive music producers and *Behind the Candelabra* (Soderbergh, 2013), based on the novel by Scott Thorson.

## CHAPTER 3

*Rocketman, Bohemian Rhapsody,*

*Behind the Candelabra* and the Representation of Queer Reality

Having established the context of queerness and the biopic genre, it is now important to consider how these two elements intersect in recent media. Understanding how authorship can impact the reproduction of history the celebrity biopic is considered. Furthermore, the role those who personally benefit from the biopic's success must be scrutinised. What impact can these motivations have on the retelling of certain events and the portrayal of certain figures? Litt (2007) notes the common relationship between fame, particularly that of the musical celebrity, and cinema, stating 'Hollywood likes large stories and mythic characters, which rockers by necessity are.' Movies have played a role in the marketing of performers for years, from Elvis' early roles as a heartthrob of Hollywood movies to bands such as the Beatles playing themselves. *A Hard Day's Night* (Lester, 1964) is a scripted movie following the Beatles on their fictionalised adventures with interjections of both diegetic and nondiegetic performances, including every song from the A side of the album of the same name. Naturally '... the way the band was to be portrayed in the film was being considered very carefully by the producers as well as by The Beatles and their management.' (Reiter, 2015, p. 42), with scripted scenes not only used to cultivate the image of the band, but also the Beatles as distinct individuals. "the British and American publics had only the vaguest notion of individual Beatles. Their defining qualities, to most adult minds, were the identikit Mop-tops and peculiar accent" (Du Noyer 2002: 74) The scripted wisecracking and playful boyish antics are used to present them as a good clean group of lads who are likeably normal despite the madness of Beatlemania. To quote the film 'Aha it's a laugh a line with Lennon...' (*A Hard Day's Night*, 1964). This film not only advertises the Beatles as

personalities but also their album released just ten days earlier. Reiter highlights that ‘their new image had quite some impact on the way they were perceived by the media and by the public.’ (Reiter, 2015, p. 43) Films like *Spice World* (Spiers, 1997) and *Purple Rain* (Magnoli, 1984) borrowed this method of marketing their musicians. This focus from management, and sometimes the stars themselves, on popularising their brand through film carries over to the music biopic. Those invested in the figure’s success aim to increase the figure’s popularity, brand, and work for the purpose of revenue and fame. For example, these films littered with hits often lead to increased purchase or streaming of the figure/band’s music and increased ticket sales for those who still tour. Lehtisalo suggests that ‘a biopic builds a fictional character out of a public figure through narrative and cinematic means.’ (Lehtisalo, 2011, p.101) This fictional character shares traits with the real figure but this representation is often far from accurate. Filmmakers create this fictional character, aligning the audience with them and creating a bond disguised as a bond to the real figure. If a viewer watches a biopic of a performer and forms a connection and parasocial relationship with that character, they likely will then consume the real figure’s content, believing they have connected to the story and personality of the real performer. Therefore, this creation of a fan, something beneficial to both the figure and their management, is based on the version of the figure the film chooses to present. Knowing this connection is important filmmakers can often present a glorified or more charming representation of that figure. It should be considered not only who benefits from a biopic but how this can impact filmmaking, particularly in terms of imposed morality and cherry-picking. Furthermore, are biopics, especially the celebrity/musical biopic, predominantly motivated by financial gain and does that border on deception? In his *BBC* show *Secrets of Cinema: Pop Movies*, Mark Kermode highlights that ‘As is often the case in pop movies the boundary between biography and invention, between fact and fiction, can be profitably blurred.’ (Kermode, 2021)

The predominant case study throughout this chapter is a comparison between Redemption Story biopics: *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018), a biopic about the band Queen, with a particular focus on lead singer Freddie Mercury, *Behind the Candelabra* (Soderbergh, 2013) a biopic portraying the relationship between famous pianist Liberace and his lover Scott Thorson, and *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019) the arguably autobiographical film about the performer Sir Elton John. Both *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman* represent the stars from their childhoods through to their fame in the seventies and eighties rock 'n roll scene, both battling with their sexualities, drug and alcohol abuse, and fame. Whilst *Behind the Candelabra* has a much shorter addressed time scale, similar topics, such as drugs, fame and sexuality, are explored in both the character of Liberace and Thorson. Despite the many similarities between these films in terms of topic and themes, they differ greatly both in their approach to filmmaking and audience reception. Largely this contrast can be linked to the involvements of figures who experienced events in the film and the goals of others involved. This case study also notes the representation of the historical cultural climate of the 1980s with a focus on the AIDS crisis. It considers closely how this is reflected in all three films, all of which focus on queer people throughout the 1970s and 1980s, two of whom die of AIDS themselves, and whether the severity of this and the fear of the queer community is expressed in a way that young viewers, not alive during the crisis, can understand. It further considers the extent to which representation of the queer community in film impacts the general public's perception of queerness. Does the polarising characterisation of the hero and the villain in queer characters create a message of desirable and undesirable queer characteristics? Furthermore, the way queerness is addressed in terms of visual confirmation in comparison to spoken confirmation and the pre-existing reputation of the figure as queer, is examined.

## Involvement

Mercury, who died from AIDS-related complications after suffering bronchial pneumonia in 1991, had no input in his own representation in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and did not release any personal memoirs or autobiographies. Similarly, Liberace, who also died of AIDS in 1987, had no input into his portrayal and in fact worked hard to keep his private life and sexuality from the public eye, and wrote autobiographies that contained lies to fortify his heterosexual image. The main access to information and insight into their lives is sourced from accounts of others who lived with and knew the stars. In contrast to this, Elton John along with husband David Furnish took the role of Executive Producer in the production of *Rocketman*. Both had significant input into the film during production with all major decisions being approved by John and Furnish during shooting. Director of *Rocketman*, Dexter Fletcher explained that he had been approached to make a film that heavily featured the ‘...warts and all, dark underside of where Elton went’ (*Total Film*, 2019) as requested by John who stated ‘...everyone knows I had quite a lot of both [sex and drugs] during the 70s and 80s, so there didn’t seem much point in making a movie that implied that after every gig, I’d quietly go back to my hotel room with only a glass of milk and the Gideon’s Bible for company.’ (*The Guardian*, 2019) Fletcher, who also took over from Brian Singer during filming, went on to explain his take on the differences in approach between *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*. ‘I fitted into what they designed that [*Bohemian Rhapsody*] to be. Then you’re dealing with a completely different subject matter because the person is no longer around. They don’t have a voice. There has to be a modicum of reverence about that. Elton is very different.’ (*Total Film*, 2019)

As many biopics focus on a subject who is no longer alive, outsourced information is an issue. Whilst it is not possible to suffer legal consequences by defaming the dead through

film, it is very easy to negatively affect a famous figure's reputation. This highlights the debate over the extent to which filmmakers can and should sugar-coat or cherry-pick elements of a person's life story and/or personality to maintain their legacy. While the primary role of a biopic is not to educate, like a documentary, audiences may accept the films' narrative as fact. The focus on real figures and real events can lead to viewers not considering changes for the sake of an entertaining narrative. Both neglecting to portray factual negative acts or traits and presenting perpetuated negative misinformation can have an impact on the figure's reputation. This change to the figure's reputation can affect areas such as the purchase/streaming of their work, tour ticket sales and merchandise sales. As stated by Carnes (1996) not only can this kind of cinema not provide a substitute for historical knowledge and research, but viewers can easily accept claims of accuracy or truth where they are exaggerated. He writes 'Viewers should neither accept such claims nor dismiss them out of hand but regard them as an invitation for further exploration.' (Carnes, 1996, p. 10) This type of representation can be influenced by the filmmaker's personal perception of events or investment in certain causes or simply striving to create a more narratively compelling film. If, for example, a filmmaker personally believes a figure guilty of a crime for which they were never proven guilty, their production will likely portray the figure as guilty. As a result of this many viewers, who do not know a lot about the figure or do no further research, will accept their guilt as fact. This can create a generation of people who view this figure as a criminal rather than a creative/activist/politician etc. No matter who it is that is making decisions as to how the figure is represented, whether they are invested in the promotion or denouncement of the figure, they cannot help but bring their own bias and morality into the decision-making process. An example of this can be seen in some of the preliminary decisions during the production of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Originally the Mercury was going to be played by actor Sacha Baron Cohen who is reported to have said he had hoped to present a

warts and all view of Mercury's lifestyle, however, he later left the production due to artistic differences between himself and Brian May and Roger Taylor, band members and Executive Producers on the film. Cohen recounts a conversation between himself and one of the band members, stating that the original script had been structured in a way that presented Mercury's death of AIDS halfway through the film, with the second half detailing 'how the band carries on from strength to strength.' (*The Howard Stern Show*, 2018) He argued '...not one person is going to see a movie where the lead character dies of AIDS and then you see how the band carries on.' (*The Howard Stern Show*, 2018) This suggests May and Taylor have a particular focus on the band and its reputation, as the remaining members of Queen who still tour under the band's original name. The audience's perception of the band, based on the film, can directly affect elements such as ticket sales, loss of publicity or sponsorship deals. The more positive and likeable they seem in the film the more popular the band and their music becomes.

The original idea for the film to continue with a second act focused on the band without Mercury suggests a more publicity-based motive, as it draws focus from the famed singer onto the current performing band. It is common, and perhaps one of the driving goals of the musical biopic, for the film to influence record sales, streaming statistics and sometimes tour revenue of the focus artist. This is especially prudent for those who still have an active career. It could be argued that as Queen is still touring and the members are still receiving royalty pay-outs, that their focus would be to cultivate a persona as a band that would not act as any kind of detriment to their income. Since the release of the film not only has the song *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975), broken records as the most streamed song from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, briefly returning to the UK charts for the third time in November of 2018, but the band announced a worldwide tour, featuring Adam Lambert as their lead singer. This focus on the publicity impact of a biopic could also have influenced John, with *Rocketman*'s May release



intersecting with the second leg of John's seven leg world tour, *Farewell Yellow Brick Road*. Following this John's new single, *(I'm Gonna) Love Me Again* that featured on the *Rocketman* soundtrack, was nominated for several awards, winning a Golden Globe for 'Best Original Song - Motion Picture'. John's 2017 release *Diamonds* reached Billboard's Top Albums, the 20th appearance of his work on this list. It is undeniable that artists and their families often profit from the release of a biopic.

May and Taylor by enforcing their own morality on the way they were presented, also impacted the characterisation of Mercury. 'There are amazing stories about Freddie Mercury,' Cohen states, 'the guy was wild. There are stories of little people walking around parties with plates of cocaine on their heads.' (*The Howard Stern Show*, 2018) Cohen stated that Taylor and May simply '...wanted to protect their legacy as a band.' (*The Howard Stern Show*, 2018). However, it could be argued that this should be unsurprising if the true focus of a musical biopic is marketing. This problematises the extent to which queer figures are downplayed and straightwashed in films where the goal is to market to the masses. Whilst it is true that certain groups or demographics may be less inclined to purchase or stream content from queer figures in response to a film representing their true queerness, this should not surpass the importance of queer historical representation for wider audiences. The issue can be related to the balance between monetary success and the morality of representing marginalised groups. It is also worth noting that whilst the band and Mercury's legacy is being protected in the way the remaining members see fit, it is also important to consider why the singer's legacy is important to the filmmakers. With its 12A rating, it is possible that *Bohemian Rhapsody* sacrifices some of its more risqué historical accuracy to present Mercury to as wider audience as possible. This could be connected to the increased revenue that a lower age rating affords. Graham King, producer of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, explained to *Logo TV* that the filmmakers wanted to 'show the generation who he was'. When asked what he

thought younger audience members would take away from the film he stated ‘I think they’re going to think of Freddie as a very heroic figure. I mean, this is a man who just didn’t care,’ he continues ‘People loved Freddie Mercury for who he was and not only, I mean his sexuality was one part, but the fact he was born in Zanzibar... and bullied for the way he looked.’ (*Logo TV, 2018*) King is clearly reflecting here the desire for young audiences to look up to Mercury as an example of someone living their truth and being proud of who they are. It could be argued that a more accurate representation of Mercury’s hedonistic lifestyle during the eighties would not only restrict young people from learning about him due to age certification but could reflect some undesirable personality traits that could negatively influence impressionable viewers.

*Behind the Candelabra* is based on the book *Behind the Candelabra: My Life with Liberace* released in 1988 written by Scott Thorson, Liberace’s live-in lover for five years from the age of eighteen to twenty-three. The fifty-seven-year-old Liberace was well established in the public eye when the pair began seeing each other however he was not openly queer to the general public. After the pair broke up due to Thorson’s drug addiction and Liberace’s wish for them to explore an open relationship, Thorson publicly sued Liberace for \$113 million as part of a palimony lawsuit, ‘a substitute for alimony in cases in which the couple were not married but lived together for a long period and then terminated their relationship.’ (Farlex Legal Dictionary, 2005) A focal point of this kind of lawsuit ‘is whether there was an agreement that one partner would support the other in return for the second making a home and performing other domestic duties beyond sexual pleasures.’ (Farlex Legal Dictionary, 2005) This four-year legal dispute ended in a settlement of \$75,000 cash, along with three cars and three pet dogs worth \$20,000. Despite Thorson’s public claims that he had an ‘intimate sexual, emotional and business relationship [with Liberace]’ (Belfast Telegraph, 1982), Liberace not only denied these claims at the time but he had denounced homosexuality

all together during a 1959 lawsuit over the Daily Mirror's implications about his sexuality. He is quoted in the biography *Liberace: An American Boy* stating, 'I am against the practice [of homosexuality] because it offends convention and it offends society'. (Darden Asbury Pyron, 1959) Whilst many, if not all, biopics suffer from a level of bias, either due to subjective and potentially untruthful accounts from people involved in the figure's life or the accounts of the figure themselves, this film seems to suffer greatly from bias as the story is predominantly based on Thorson's book. Whilst the pair shared a relationship and reportedly loved each other for several years, Thorson has made it no secret that he harbours contempt towards Liberace, stating to Oprah on a *Where are They Now?* TV special, 'the reason why I sued Liberace was because he threw me on the streets and I had nothing' he begins, 'he called me a disgruntled employee. That I was a street hustler, that I was a liar. That there was never a sexual relationship. That I was nothing but a gold digger. And I was just a young kid.' (*Where are They Now?*, 2013) Therefore it could be argued that whilst some of the events detailed by Thorson can be factually proven, other elements such as personal notes of Liberace's character and personality could be distorted by the subjective view of a spurned lover. Not only is this potentially altered information in the case of Thorson's accounts, but Liberace as well. Whilst some of the content in his three autobiographies is indisputably factual, there are also elements of deceit used to create a persona. Liberace mentions his preference for women in his autobiography *The Wonderful Private World of Liberace* (1986). As described by Boze Hadleigh in his book *Hollywood Gays* 'he lost his virginity at 16 to an "older woman" named Miss Bea Haven. Such was her impact that she forever spoiled Lee for women his own age!' (Hadleigh, 1996, p.143) In light of accounts such as Thorson's book it becomes clear that Liberace's claims are not entirely truthful, Liberace shared this story to maintain a façade of being a heterosexual man who was yet to meet the right woman rather than a homosexual. This application of bias, particularly from two subjects who are both

motivated to distort the truth to a degree to help their cause, can lead to not only an inaccurate portrayal of the figure but the potentially unnecessary negative portrayal of a queer figure.

Another issue this raises is that of privacy. Liberace told Thorson: 'I don't want to be remembered as an old queen who died of AIDS' (Thorson, 1988, p. 1) Acknowledging this, are there any moral issues in the fact that the only biopic following a portion of Liberace's life focuses on his queer relationship instead of his rise to fame for his talent as an entertainer?

During the filming of *Rocketman*, Elton John was regularly consulted by different areas of production, working closely with actor Taron Egerton to ensure his portrayal felt genuine. John's involvement allowed his representation to comply with how he wished to be viewed by audiences. As an openly gay man, John's sexuality has less potential to be downplayed as not only is there nothing to achieve in hiding his widely known sexuality in the film but also as a queer man himself he may have a greater appreciation of the need for queer representation. A few months before the release of *Rocketman* an anonymous source leaked to The Daily Mail that the studio was considering cutting a nude sex scene between Elton and his lover, John Reid, fearing that it would increase the age rating to a 15. (The Daily Mail, 2019) This was likely influenced by trying to compete with the \$903.2 million worldwide box office sales achieved by the 12A certified *Bohemian Rhapsody* less than a year earlier. However, upon the release of *Rocketman*, it became clear that not only did the film retain its 15 Certification, but the sex scene remained in the film. This certification is likely predominantly linked to the drug use, violence and profanity of the film rather than the sexual content. It became clear that John never intended for the film to meet the qualifications for anything as low as a 12A, he stated that 'some studios wanted to tone down the sex and drugs so the film would get a PG-13 rating. But I just haven't led a PG-13 life.' (The Guardian, 2019) This reflects some of the purpose behind the production of this film, John wished to

reveal a 'warts and all' style of film, bringing into public knowledge the 'dark underside' of his off-stage life. Whilst you could argue that the representation of the negative sides of John's personality might damage his representation it can also help represent the character as more realistic, creating a greater sense of credibility in the characters. This also highlights the pressure filmmakers can experience to downplay or remove queer content from their production. *Behind the Candelabra* received queer-focused feedback from studios that almost led to no release at all. The film was released on HBO in 2013, and in an interview with the NY Post director Steven Soderbergh stated that they'd had trouble finding a studio that would produce and release the project. 'Nobody would make it. We went to everybody in town. They all said it was too gay.' (NY Post, 2013) He continues 'And this is after *Brokeback Mountain*,' by the way, which is not as funny as this movie. I was stunned. It made no sense to any of us.' (NY Post, 2013) This reaction to the film, that contains several queer intimate scenes, betrays Hollywood's reproach when releasing queer content. Whether it's a result of the potential loss of revenue by offending those opposing the 'gay lifestyle' or the fear of backlash from the queer community over the way queer characters are represented, many may see it as easier to simply avoid distributing queer content altogether. The statement 'too gay' implies that only a certain level of queer content is acceptable. This is further problematised as it is unlikely a film would be labelled as 'too heterosexual'.

A credit to *Rocketman* is its insistence on both verbally and visually confirming John's sexuality consistently throughout the film. John's sexuality is explicitly mentioned through dialogue three times, twice by John himself. The film is the first major studio release to contain a gay sex scene, other famous films with a gay sex scene, such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), having been released by smaller studio off-shoots and given limited releases. (Telegraph, 2019) This is important as a character's sexuality, especially in biographical cinema, should not solely be left to audience interpretation or reading of obscure

coding especially if it is attempting to portray a real queer figure. Whilst it could be argued that audiences do not need a character's sexuality to be spelt out to them, due to ingrained heteronormativity a viewer's assumption is often that a figure is heterosexual until proven otherwise. A character should not display stereotypical queer coding with a lack of verbal or narrative confirmation of their sexuality. Heterosexual audiences may not be able to read all queer coding and typification, as they are not conditioned by society to search for such signifiers in real life, as a way to identify potential partners, friends or members of a community. This can lead to the reader experiencing oppositional viewing in which 'the reader, whose social situation places them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, understands the preferred reading but does not share the text's code and rejects this reading, bringing to bear an alternative frame of reference.' (Hall, 1980) For this reason it is important that filmmakers wishing to represent indisputably queer characters must display an element of clear queer content, free from conjecture or euphemism. This means that sexuality should not only be talked about but be displayed openly on screen the same way heterosexual romances would be in a biopic portraying a heterosexual figure.

Despite John's influence with regard to the age rating and clear portrayal of queer content, there is a limitation to the star's ability to control the film and its distribution. A well-intentioned group of individuals can create something that openly represents themes, such as queerness, however once that film is released into the hands of others much of that control is lost. Much like *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Rocketman* became a victim of what Whitaker (1997) refers to as 'post censorship'. It was reported that an estimated five minutes were cut from the Russian release, all of which were scenes depicting queer content and drug use. Russian film critic Anton Dolin commented that 'all the scenes with kissing, sex and oral sex between men have been cut out... The nastiest part is that the final caption has been removed from the finale' (*The Guardian*, 2019) referring to the caption 'Years later met husband David Furnish

and was finally loved... properly' (*Rocketman*, 2019) In this editing not only does the Russian film embassy remove a depiction of gay sex but it censors the mere mention of the loving relationship John has found with Furnish, something that despite only being featured in the final captions is important in rounding out the narrative, proving that despite his mother's statement that he 'will never be loved properly' (*Rocketman*, 2019), it is possible as a queer person to find love despite the traditional heterosexist view that homosexual love is not real love. This introduces the debate as to who should be responsible for portraying LGBT content and how to treat conflicts of interest in the narrative. Firstly, it is clear that in some way Paramount is accountable for this edit as the company could have refused the edit and not distributed the film in Russia, however, this argument oversimplifies the issue. This would lead to a loss of revenue, something that would both negatively affect the box office ratings but could also deter other studios from working with queer projects over less objectionable viewing as it is less financially productive. If films with queer content refuse edits that decrease the explicit representation, then this could deprive queer audiences, who live in countries where their government does not support them, from any level of queer content at all. For example, it is still possible to have a queer reading of *Rocketman*, especially due to the common knowledge of John's sexuality, it is simply less positive and less undeniably representative of the queer community. This reflects the government's control over its content, in countries such as Russia, China, Samoa (in which *Rocketman* has been banned completely). These governments are attempting to hide what they consider to be queer propaganda from their people. However, this censorship will not stop people from being born queer and it only serves to highlight why representation is important. It is banned or edited out as governments do not want audiences to sympathise with LGBTQA+ people. They want them to continue to ostracise queer people and positive representation of queerness regularly leads to more acceptance and normalisation.

## Sexuality and the Queer Relationship

One notable difference in comparing the three representations of the famously queer musical legends, is the way in which they tackle their subject's sexuality. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Mercury doesn't once state through dialogue that he is gay. The scene in which Freddie first addresses his sexuality is set in his flat with his fiancé Mary Austin. He states, 'I think I might be bisexual'. To which Mary quickly informs him 'No Freddie, you're gay' (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, 2018). An issue with this scene, in terms of queer representation as it brings the conversation of Mercury's sexuality to an abrupt end. Despite this scene asserting Freddie's identity as a gay man the film was criticised for spending a disproportionate amount of time focusing on Freddie's relationship with previous fiancé and lifelong friend, Austin. Not only does Mary consistently appear throughout the film, each time having moved on more and more from her relationship with Freddie, something that is portrayed to hurt him, but she is the character that later 'saves' him from his relationship with Paul Prenter. She is framed in a way that had audiences not known better it could be believed that the narrative arc would end in the pair getting back together. It is important to note that the film aptly displays Mercury's camp nature, but it shies away from other elements of his queerness. To quote Lesley-Ann Jones, writer of *Mercury: An Intimate Biography of Freddie Mercury* (2012) and *Bohemian Rhapsody: The Definitive Biography of Freddie Mercury* (2018), 'All their efforts to preserve Freddie in memory as, effectively, a straight man who was in love with one woman — his soulmate Mary — but who was 'corrupted' by factions of the music industry (and wasn't really gay) are ridiculous to me' (Them., 2018). Whilst it could be argued that Mercury is shown to have two queer relationships in the film, the amount of time spent on both relationships combined is less than that spent on his heterosexual relationship with Austin.

A 2017 GLAAD study into LGB representation in television found that within the '278 regular and recurring characters on scripted broadcast, cable and streaming programming, 83



(30 percent) are counted as bisexual' (GLAAD, 2017, p.24). It is also interesting to note how this number differs in terms of gender, finding that of the 83 characters only 19 were male. Whilst this study found well over half the LGB characters to be male, this does not correlate to the distribution of bisexual men and women in this study. This can be linked to an audience's general acceptance of bisexual women over bisexual men. A 2002 study in the *Journals of Sex Research* exploring '*Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Bisexual Men and Women in the United States*' found that 'heterosexual men felt less favourable toward sexual minority males (whether bisexual or gay) than females (whether bisexual or lesbian). Regardless of the target's sexual orientation, the most negative ratings were those of heterosexual men for male sexual minorities' (*Journals of Sex Research*, 2002, p.271). 'Respondents attitudes toward bisexual men and women were more negative than for all other groups except injecting drug users.' (*Journals of Sex Research*, 2002, p.271) This could be linked to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), as commonly bisexual and lesbian women are considered to have sex appeal to straight men, with many female bisexual characters presented as 'slutty' and 'desirable'. It could also relate to a heterosexual man's ability to connect better with a bisexual or lesbian as they both find the female form attractive so can understand their sexual perspective better. Studies such as these highlight the importance of bisexual representation especially that of bisexual males, as TV and cinema are lacking in positively influential representation. In light of this it is understandable why audiences may have hoped for bisexual representation in *Bohemian Rhapsody* of a man who is considered by many to be bisexual. 'It is still fascinating to me, after all these years, that Queen's management spent decades trying to convince the world that Freddie was heterosexual while he was alive, but then conceded to his homosexuality after he had died, they would not, however, allow for his bisexuality — even though they embraced and promoted Mary [Austin] as his 'one true love!'' (Them., 2018)

Whilst the subject of Freddie Mercury's true sexuality, whether bisexual or gay, can never be fully known as Mercury never addressed it publicly, the film discounts the idea that Mercury was bisexual. It could be argued that the film treats bisexuality as a form of steppingstone, or an excuse used by queer people who don't want to admit their sexuality. Mary's instant dismissal of Freddie in this scene left some feeling disappointed that this film would not contain the bisexual representation they hoped for. It is factually known that Mercury had at least two documented loving and committed relationships with men and women, Mary Austin (1970-1976) and Jim Hutton (1985-1991), however it could also be argued that the expectation of any clear bisexual representation in this film is baseless. Despite Jones' insistence that Mercury was 'clearly bisexual' as there is not written or recorded evidence of Mercury stating that he was bisexual some might say that as positive as bisexual representation through such a beloved figure in British rock music may have been it would betray the truth. Whilst it could be argued his relationships with Austin and Hutton stand as proof enough of his sexuality, it opens the debate as to whether those who come out as gay later in life are in fact bisexual for having loved previous partners of another sex. Bisexuality, due to its spectrum and subjectivity, is a difficult thing to define for another person as most cannot help but apply their own bias to such situations. (For further reading see Wayne Bryant, 2008)

Unlike Mercury, John has made several public comments about his sexuality and has lived as openly homosexual since 1992. In an issue of Rolling Stone in 1976 John came out as bisexual, stating 'I haven't met anyone I'd like to settle down with – of either sex... there's nothing wrong with going to bed with somebody of your own sex, I think everybody's bisexual to a certain degree. I don't think it's just me.' (Rolling Stone, 1976) This information is not addressed in the 2019 film, *Rocketman*, and the word 'bisexual' is not mentioned at all. Not only does the film not make any references to John apparent bisexuality

at the time, but it spends very little time on the heterosexual relationships John had before coming out as ‘quite comfortable being gay’ (Rolling Stone, 1992). The film condenses a four-year relationship between John and sound engineer Renate Blauel, whom he married in 1984 after a four-day engagement, into a less than ten-minute segment of the hundred-and-sixty-two-minute runtime. The scene following their break up presents John in a rehab support group as he is asked by the therapist if being married made him happy to which he quickly replies ‘Not really, I’m gay’ (*Rocketman*, 2019) The film seems to address John’s straight relationships with as little attention as possible, almost as though they are addressed through necessity but rushed to allow room for other scenes considered more important by filmmakers and perhaps John himself. Costume designer, Julian Day, worked on the costume design for both *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*. He stated in an interview with Vice that ‘with the film, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we did copy some of the outfits’ (Vice, 2019) however when it came to *Rocketman* they ‘always said that we were not going to do reproductions of his stage wear, it was our film and we were going to make it our film’ (Vice, 2019). The costumes, whilst not reproductions, were heavily inspired by outfits actually worn by Elton John, therefore it can be assumed that any design choices not directly inspired from reality could be an attempt for the filmmaker to portray a message or tone of a scene. Sarah Street in her analysis of the influence of costume in regard to film theory states that ‘film costumes can exceed the demands of the plot or historical accuracy, conveying a sophisticated address which can be said to constitute a language of its own’ (Street, 2001, p.6). Therefore, a film such as *Rocketman*, with extravagant costuming as a clear influence of the filmmakers, such a language must be considered. Whilst some costumes are very similar to the outfits they are based on, such as the rhinestone Dodgers baseball outfit, others deviate from the original in a dramatic way. One example of this is the creative licence taken with the poufy white lace gown that Blauel can be seen to be wearing in her wedding photos with John, replaced in the

film with a period style red evening dress. Despite the confetti and tuxedos, the brief clip barely presents as a typical wedding scene, not following the usual conventions and visual codes of a wedding. This is made all the more significant when it is considered how much weight is placed on the visual elements of this film. This could be used to draw a link to the thought at the time that the marriage was a cover to hide John's sexuality, as though the scene is coded so the audience does not connect to their marriage as it is artificial. It flouts areas of established conventional signifiers to reflect to the audience that something is not quite right. It is possible that John, and to some extent perhaps Furnish, may have influenced how much focus was placed on the relationships that he admits to feeling guilt towards, however it could also be argued that this lack of detail and importance shown towards these heterosexual relationships is used to focus the viewer on the fact John is gay. Comparing to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Mercury could be read as much more heterosexual than he was, negating some of the queer representation that the film might hold.

One criticism that could be made about *Rocketman* is that even though it clearly portrays a queer relationship between Elton John and John Reid through both verbal confirmation and visual, we are only presented with one of John's several queer relationships and whilst his relationship with Reid may have been one of those most important in terms of influencing his career it does also portray a toxic relationship. Arguably these elements could be detrimental to the viewer's perceptions of queer relationships if that relationship is presented as one of manipulation and abuse. Whilst the film's time frame doesn't cover John meeting his now-husband David Furnish, a fact that is mentioned in a credits caption, John did have other boyfriends that influenced his life particularly during the late eighties. In his book *Love is the Cure* (2012), John writes about his ex-partner Hugh who was instrumental in his decision to go to rehab. 'Hugh told me he was going to rehab... I tried to convince myself that Hugh had betrayed ME - that he had left ME alone, that it was HIS fault, that HE was wrong' he

continues ‘I was the true culprit. Besides, I loved Hugh very much, and I missed him terribly.’ (John, 2012, pp.62-63) John then recounts a meeting after their breakup, which Hugh would only agree to if they were guided by counsellors. They agreed to share three things they dislike about each other. Hugh informed John, ‘You’re a drug addict. You’re an alcoholic. You’re a food addict. You’re bulimic. You’re a sex addict. And you’re co-dependent’ (John, 2012, p.65). John highlights this in the book as the wakeup call, he needed to go seek help and enter into a rehab facility. In the film, however, it is his interaction with Bernie Taupin that leads to John’s revelation just before a show at Madison Square Garden, leading him to dramatically walk out singing ‘*Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*’. Whilst the scene is dramatically impactful and adheres to the theme of ‘true fantasy’, it could be argued that it takes away from the potential of portraying John in a relationship with someone other than Reid. Further that the portrayal of John and Hugh’s relationship, despite their love for each other, could be viewed as a portrayal of yet another toxic relationship as the pair both suffered their drug addictions together for a portion of their relationship. A scene briefly featuring Hugh was cut from the final release however it does not make his relationship with Elton clear, acting more as a stand-in for dialogue about the AIDS crisis and Elton’s insistence that he does need rehab. The scene between Bernie and Elton seems to suggest a focus on the power of friendship, something the *Bohemian Rhapsody* also does, changing moments that involved queer partners and replacing them with the lead’s heterosexual friends.

Rosenstone (2006) states in *History on Film/Film on History* that ‘the screen provides no clear window onto a vanished past; the best it can do is to provide a construction of proximate realities to what once was.’ (Rosenstone, 2006, p.160) Whilst acknowledging the inevitable artifice in any historical recreation, Rosenstone highlights the impact of what he refers to as ‘history as vision’ (Rosenstone, 2006, p.160). He suggests that history as vision is

a whole new way of experiencing history, with as much difference between history as vision and written history as that of written history and oral history. Period films, particularly biopics and historical docudrama, present the visual of a specific time and place in history. Whether that history involves inevitable inaccuracies and biases or not, audiences get to see a visual image of a world with familiarity to their own. This allows a connection to the setting and a better understanding of the situation the characters are in. In terms of queerness, historical attitudes towards queer figures are becoming ever more important to show in historical cinema as modern audiences experience a more liberal climate. Cinema audiences are becoming far more understanding and accepting of queer identities as society continues to change with the aid of the LGBTQA+ movement. By 2038 UK cinema's most influential and most profitable audience, the 14-24 demographic, will have grown up in a country in which gay marriage has been recognised by law their entire life. As homophobia becomes less prevalent and less socially acceptable in our society, so does our audience's personal understanding of it. For this reason, it is essential that a film not only reflects period-typical attitudes towards queer people and their thought processes but also does its best to help audiences understand what queer people experienced physically and emotionally in that setting. *Bohemian Rhapsody* briefly touches on this concept as Mary Austin very sadly informs Mercury that his life 'is going to be very difficult'. However, that is the only real comment that reflects the social climate of the late seventies, and any other period-typical views are treated the same way Mercury's sexuality is, with knowing looks and nods. *Rocketman*, however, as a film grounded more in emotional weight as a means of representing John's reality presents us with a more emotional scene in which John comes out to his mother over the phone.

Elton: I'm a homosexual, a poofter, a fairy, a queen... well?

Sheila: Oh, for god sakes, I know that.

Elton: You know.

Sheila: Known for years. Although I'd rather you keep something like that to yourself. I just hope you realise you're choosing a life of being alone. You'll never be loved properly.

(*Rocketman*, Fletcher, 2019)

Not only is this scene much clearer in the representation of period-typical homophobia but the dialogue has been written and delivered coldly by Bryce Dallas Howard. Unlike *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s soft focus on Mary's concerned face, as she laments how difficult his life will be, clearly concerned, Fletcher slowly zooms into a tight close up of Sheila's matter-of-factly emotionless face. The camera lingers on her face for a few seconds after she has completed the dialogue, leaving an uncomfortable pause for the gravity of her words to sink in. This is followed by a medium close up of Elton deeply hurt by his mother's words as she promptly hangs upon him. This reflects a realistic representation of society's perception of the queer lifestyle and to an extent, the actuality of said lifestyle during this time period.

Homosexuality was not as commonly accepted as it is now, the UK government decriminalising homosexual acts between two consenting men above the age of 21 in 1967, it was not easy or even possible for homosexual couples to be together. Also, there was much more importance placed on marriage in the fifties, John's childhood, all the way through to the eighties. Creating a family was a priority for many, especially women who often did not work, therefore following that logic being a homosexual would mean you are choosing to live alone, never marrying and never producing a family. This interaction is later referenced in the *Bennie and the Jets* scene. Her comments that he will 'never really be loved properly' and that he is 'choosing a life of being alone' are layered over shots of Elton's blank face as he floats

over a group of scantily clad bodies. This is quickly intercut with clips of Elton as a child wanting to become a musician, kissing his previous boyfriend, John Reid, and Elton rolling around with several men in their underwear. This scene is not only supposed to represent how overwhelming Elton's life has become but also some of his internalised homophobia that he is medicating with sex, drugs, and alcohol. Whilst not every film that presents queer characters has to devote excessive time to period typical homophobia, general ideas and attitudes towards queer people, especially in historical settings, are vital in the audience's understanding of the character and their motivations. Audiences need to be aware of the danger of being queer in different historical contexts as it dramatically influences the world-building of the film. It is one thing for audiences to know that homophobia existed in these contexts, but the extent and consequences vary between settings.

### **Sex, Drugs, and a Rock Band Narrative**

Aristotle's *Poetics* emphasises the importance of catharsis in the experience of art, noting the importance of a build-up of drama before an emotional release and that is exactly what happens in the rock band biopic. The drama builds and builds until the character's epiphany and the band's reunion. Returning to the writing of Mernit (2001) and the adaptation of his three-act structure, the rock band redemption structure of *formation*, *break-up* and *reunion* can be seen in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Freddie approaches Brian and Roger, who are already in a band, and offers to replace their lead singer who just quit. The band, with the addition of John, goes on to play small gigs until Freddie persuades the others to sell their van and use the money to record an album. They are signed by John Reid, and soon find themselves on tour in true *formation* style. They continue to create music, occasionally arguing in a way akin to siblings. However, the cracks begin to form as Paul assists Freddie in living a life of excess. Soon Freddie begins arriving late to studio sessions and later signs a solo deal. This is



the *break-up* moment as the band argues, hurtful words are said, and it seems like the end of Queen for good. Freddie continues to party with Paul, experiencing substance abuse and promiscuity. Mary pulls Freddie from the destructive lifestyle, highlighting his behaviour. The moment of *Reunion* begins as Freddie, under the supervision of their manager, Jim, apologises to Brian, Roger and John and they soon make up, deciding to perform at Live Aid. In the following scene Freddie finds out about his AIDS diagnosis and tells the band. They go on to perform at Live Aid where their powerful performance moves the public to donate record breaking amount of funds to famine relief in Ethiopia. In truth, Queen did not break up and in fact May and Taylor had both already released some solo work before Mercury's 1985 album. However, the band's reception to Freddie's solo deal and the subsequent breaking up is used to comply with a redemption narrative. This dissolution of the band makes for a more dramatic ending as Freddie frees himself from the hedonistic loneliness he was living in with Paul.

*Rocketman* begins with a young Elton discovering his love for music and pursuit of stardom. At a studio he is given an envelope of songs written by Bernie Taupin. He meets Bernie and the pair instantly connect, singing *The Streets of Laredo* together to the ire of other café goers. They form a partnership much like a band in the way they work together. As Elton is booked and tours, Bernie goes with him, revelling in their success together. In the *break-up*, the pair both fall victim to the excess of the Rockstar lifestyle, abusing substances and alcohol. Bernie decides to go home, with the implication that he intends to sober up, and asks Elton to come with him. Elton turns him down, feigning an impassive tone as he suggests there are others he would like to work with. Elton continues to get worse, struggling with bulimia, an abusive relationship and substance abuse. During a tense dinner Bernie, while ignoring Elton's attempts to blame him for everything, tries to push Elton to get help. Elton then suffers an overdose induced heart attack and comes to the realisation that Bernie was

right. He leaves moments before going on stage and rushes straight to rehab. In the reunion Bernie visits Elton in rehab, the pair share a heartfelt conversation and Bernie helps him regain his confidence on the piano by providing him with lyrics. This film follows the elements of a band biopic but with much fewer characters. Often films focusing on a band will focus slightly more on the more famous or outrageous member/s, like *Bohemian Rhapsody* with its clear focus on Freddie over the other band members. With *Rocketman*, Elton is the focus, as he is the face of the music the pair produce, however this film follows the common trope that the divided band either cannot create music on their own or the music is unsuccessful. This plays to fans, pressing the importance of the group working together to create *their* sound. This enforces the idea that these individuals were somehow destined to perform as a group and if said band is still performing then the fan simply must go see them perform together. Only *that* band can create *their* sound, go buy tickets to see them. Custen notes the importance of the role of the friend in the Hollywood biopic, stating that 'he or she is a kind of moral gyroscope, reminding the great one of the nonprofessional values like modesty, honesty, family, and, above all else, love.' (Custen, 1992, p.163) The redemption relies on this character as someone to help our hero realise the error of their ways at their worst moment. As we see in these case studies this friend can be a member of the band, like Bernie, or an uninvolved friend, like Mary. In some ways they play the role of the audience, a moral viewer invested in the outcome and betterment of the figure, who can view their downfall from an outside perspective. They step in to tell the character just what they need to hear, what the audience begs them to realise before they self-destruct completely.

*Behind the Candelabra*, may seem to follow the band biopic structure as well, focusing on the partnership of Scott and Lee and their *formation* (as a couple), *break up* and *reunion*. However, this redemption story focuses more on a hero narrative than the three-act structure of a band biopic. The film could be described as a biopic about Liberace; however, Liberace

is not the main character or even a protagonist in many ways. The story still follows the structure of a redemption, detailing characters polluted by fame and wealth and their ultimate redemption. Liberace is presented as corrupted by wealth and power, as he lives lavishly and regularly throws away boyfriends whenever he meets someone new, treating his partners as purchasable and easily replaced. It may be considered that in his death Liberace is redeemed, showing some care for Scott as he asks to see him before his death, however we never see the humble beginning of Liberace, like we do with Queen or Elton. He isn't seen as a younger, innocent character at any point. Therefore, he doesn't have the classic origins that show the audience the good in the character, giving them a chance to relate to them before their lifestyle becomes wholly unrelatable. The audience has to connect with the character early on so that they will continue to root for them during the *break-up* period. The character of Liberace doesn't actually go through any substantial change, and that is because Liberace doesn't change throughout the time Scott knows him, as evidenced in both the book and the film. Scott is the main character of the film, from his humble beginnings working with stunt animals and living on a farm with his foster parents. He is manipulated by Liberace's rehearsed vulnerability and wealth. Corrupted by Hollywood and Lee's influence, particularly through the plastic surgery he is coerced to undertake, he becomes addicted to drugs. Scott hits rock bottom as he is chased out of his apartment by Lee's 'people' and fights an ugly lawsuit against the performer. Scott is finally redeemed as he visits Lee on his deathbed, releasing the hostility he felt towards the man and finally deciding to remember him the way he would want to be remembered. The moment of Liberace's funeral, contrasting greatly to the small twenty-person funeral that Thorson was not even invited to attend, is focussed on Scott and his memories of the man he once loved. Scott's arc is used to align the viewer with his character however this can be an issue due to the bias of the source material, creating a

villainised narrative. The book details Thorson's version of events. As Scott is the hero of his own story, as most people are, he becomes the hero of the movie.

In each of these films the predominant queer partner (Paul, John and Lee) acts as Vogler's shapeshifter. Beginning on the side of the hero (Freddie, Elton, Scott) and crossing over to the side of the shadow as their relationship continues until the hero overcomes the shadow. In terms of the redemption biopic, the shadow may refer to the Rockstar lifestyle in general or something more specific such as abuse, illicit substances, or immorality. These characters take this role as not only does the hero need a physical embodiment of the shadow to battle but it emphasises the purity of their relationship with the ally (the band and Bernie). The ally, who may also fall victim to the same shadow as the hero will always forgive the hero and join them in their final battle, to get sober and get the band back together. In *Behind the Candelabra* Scott does not have the same kind of consistent ally as Elton or Freddie, as the film doesn't really focus on his relationship with anyone other than Lee. This may be to highlight the isolation Thorson felt or simply the ally he has to reconnect with is himself. These shapeshifters may well be based on real figures and their real actions but in working for the shadow do the characters become more villainised than is necessarily fair to the real figure? And what are the implications of this villainization when applied to queer figures?

According to Dyer (1993), we use queer visual typification, to identify a character's queerness without needing verbal confirmation of their sexuality. These commonly connected types create mental prototypes within our minds of what a queer person does, wears, and how they speak etc. Whilst these associated types are often more superficial and visual it is possible that if a certain characteristic is consistently associated with queer characters, then this can affect a viewer's mental prototype, especially those who do not have many if any, other examples to draw from. This is how queer villains and queer coding, 'He may actually

be overtly homosexual (*Braveheart*) or he may just carry out his evil with a series of effeminate gestures and phrases and show a creepy, semi-erotic fascination with the male hero.' (Cracked, 2008), can have a real impact on the perception of queer people and promote general distrust of queer people. Queer coded, camp villains, can be seen in many genres from children's films such as Scar from *The Lion King* (Minkoff and Allers, 1994) to action such as Raoul Silva from *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012). This facilitates the association of queer people with stereotypically queer characteristics and types with distrustful and antagonistic attitudes. 'The effeminate bad guy, on the other hand, plays right to the insecurities of the young, male audience those movies are aimed at, taking everything, they find disgusting about homosexuality and using it to ratchet up the horror.' (Cracked, 2008)

Paul Prenter, Mercury's manager, and lover for almost a decade, is villainised rather blatantly in this film as a predatory, controlling queer figure with a goal to break up the band and push Freddie into drug-fuelled sex parties and a reckless lifestyle. Whilst it is true that Prenter made decisions that negatively affected the band and Mercury's reputation, selling several stories to *The Sun* that included stories of past lovers dying from AIDS, he is presented as a rather seedy character with ill motives to turn Freddie to 'a life of sin' from the beginning. This is how the film seems to represent quite a lot of Mercury's gay sexual or romantic encounters, with a level of shame and lechery that whilst it could be argued that this in an attempt at world-building it entirely seems to focus Mercury's sexuality on sex rather than any romantic elements until he meets Jim. It is portrayed that Paul began destroying the star's talents by cutting him off from his friends, his public and his music. As if the 'gay lifestyle' he is experiencing with Paul is isolating him from his real family and his life suffers because of this. This argument as to the characterisation of Prenter opens a debate as to how historical queer people who did things that were morally and legally questionable are represented in biopics with a focus on narrative. It is possible that these characters, when applying narrative

to a real-life story, become the villains and their queerness is just an added character trait. So, it could be argued that, whether it should be the case, Prenter is the chosen villain of the film regardless of his sexuality and relationship with Mercury. A similar effect can be seen with figures such as Sir Alfred Douglas (Bosie) in *Wilde* (Gilbert, 1997). It could be argued that people such as Prenter and Bosie are unfavourably characterised because of their negative influence on the main historical figure's career, in contrast to a love of said figure by filmmakers and/or the general public. It could further be argued that whilst characters can be overly villainised to the point of cliché or caricature, it should be acknowledged that as real people they do make antagonistic decisions and can have solely self-serving motives. This could mean that perhaps we are ready to see historical queer 'heroes' but not villains, perhaps due to the surplus of queer coded villains we already see in cinema or perhaps due to political correctness. True film equality would suggest that antagonists are just as likely to be gay as protagonists.

Whilst Prenter may be villainised for narrative purposes and because of his negative reputation with *Queen*'s fanbase, the filmmakers must acknowledge that audiences may associate certain personality traits or actions with others. Perhaps if Prenter had even just one additional scene in which he was represented as a complex character who does not solely have negative intent and traits, he would not seem as strongly antagonistic as he does in the theatrical release. It cannot be argued that the antagonistic characterisation of Prenter is the sole reflection of the film's attitude towards gay characters. The other two named gay characters in this film who are not only positively represented they are, in many ways, glorified as the characters for young people to connect with. It could be argued that Paul, and the lifestyle he and Freddie began to lead, regarding promiscuity and drugs, is not a representation of the 'gay lifestyle' that all Freddie's straight friends are trying to save him from. It could simply represent the 'sex, drugs and rock and roll' point you see in many

redemption biopics about musical legends in which fame and money lead them astray. It could also be argued that *Bohemian Rhapsody* isn't telling its audience that the gay lifestyle is bad, it is simply influencing the audience to connect with Jim as a representation of a monogamous and safe relationship, rather than the risks of a promiscuous and hedonistic lifestyle personified in Paul. The storyline between Jim and Freddie is greatly romanticised, including disassociating Jim from the partying lifestyle altogether, further pushing the idea of this as a romanticised queer relationship. However, the way *Bohemian Rhapsody* represents these two characters and the lack of depth into their lives together and relationship leads to such easily simplified readings of antagonistic and negative queer characters.

The figure John Reid appears in both *Rocketman* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, taking on a managerial role for both acts for a period of time. The two portrayals of Reid vary greatly in terms of casting and characterisation. In *Rocketman*, Elton first meets John at a party, and this is quickly followed by a sex scene portraying Elton losing his virginity. This scene takes place in 1970, when Reid would have been twenty-one and Elton John twenty-three. Reid is played by Richard Madden, an actor and model who is known for roles such as Prince Charming in *Cinderella* (Branagh, 2015). In part, Madden's casting in the role of John Reid is linked to the reflection of Elton John's perception of him at the time. His character is sexualised and styled to emphasise his looks, with neatly coiffed 70s hair and sharp suits. Whilst the audience comes to view his character much more negatively as his relationship with Elton falls apart in 1975, he is styled to reflect Elton's attraction to him. The role of Reid in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is much smaller and features Reid between 1975 to 1978. Aiden Gillan, aged fifty, was cast to play the twenty-six-year-old. The character of John Reid in *Bohemian Rhapsody* acts more as a catalyst for the plot, signing the band and highlighting Paul's villainy as he is manipulated into his dismissal. There is no trace of John's sexuality in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, however as a minor character, there is little time devoted to his

development as a character anyway. This further enforces the film's contrast between acceptable and unacceptable queerness as it reduces the number of queer characters, focusing on Paul and Jim and their influence on Freddie in the narrative. John is presented as someone who believes in the band and is ultimately betrayed by Paul. This exemplifies how the representation of a figure can change based on the narrative structure. Unlike in *Rocketman* John Reid in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a mentor.

There is an argument to be made that future progressive audiences may no longer accept over-simplified queer villains, based on current progress in understanding queer representation and especially the inconsistency in the representation of queer protagonists and antagonists. It is understandable that queer representation and queer coding, in which villains are given stereotypically queer and camp characteristics which leads the viewer to subconsciously associate said queer typification traits with distrustful and harmful figures in their everyday lives, is frowned upon for having a negative effect on the queer community. Assuredly, based on current social development, there will likely be a point in which real representation will have successfully become a cultural norm in filmmaking when there are protagonists and heroes that are complicated, queer and morally good. However, it is also important to consider that it would, in fact, be an act of positive prejudice to create an unspoken law in which all queer characters must be protagonists with no negative personality traits for fear of damaging representation. This kind of unflawed character not only reflects unrealistic representation but may lead viewers to have a negative response to the character, perhaps in annoyance toward the lack of realism, seemingly invincible nature or simply that fact that the character could come across as forced. 'Mary Sue' is a term used to describe a character who simply has no flaws and is inexplicably advanced in too many areas to be believable or relatable. For example, some have argued that the character of Bella Swan in the *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005-2008) novels is a 'Mary Sue'. She is described in the novel as



rather ordinary looking and putting little effort into her appearance however she immediately receives the attention of many suitors on her enrolment in her new school, she is naturally immune to a vampire's ability to read minds and masters controlling her bloodlust unusually quickly once turned into a vampire. This could be an example of a 'Mary Sue' as she is desired by many suitors, achieves difficult skills much faster than others and both as a human and a vampire she has almost supernatural abilities without effort. Whilst there has been debate as to the application of a 'Mary Sue' to a queer character, as some associate it with sexism due to its common application regarding female characters who display the same characteristics as male protagonists, the concept is universal in its assessment of unrelatable characters that tend to disrupt the audience's suspension of disbelief. Therefore, it is important that representation is not overcorrected, creating unflawed queer characters that an audience cannot relate to. If the audience member cannot relate to the character, they cannot create meaningful parasocial connections and empathy.

Aristotle wrote that audiences must fear for the character, creating pity and empathy but the audience cannot feel this is a character that doesn't suffer or struggle, there is no tension or fear if the character is undefeatable or superhuman without flaws. If queer critics and audiences want to accurate and equal representation, they must accept that some queer characters are going to be antagonistic and flawed. Biopics are an efficient way to study this as the main character or protagonist is based on a real figure. This figure, who being naturally flawed as all people are, may make decisions that are immoral or selfish, be unjust or cruel to other figures or communities, be motivated by material gain or fame. Using these decisions, characteristics and motivations we can compare the film's characterisation with reality and see how much the character is glorified or villainised by the filmmaker. This allows us to negate the need to consider the filmmaker's personal design of a character. It cannot be argued that a queer character with overly positive or negative traits or stereotyping is simply

the way the filmmaker and writer designed them, there is referential evidence as to that figure's personality. Therefore, it can be presumed that if a figure's representation in a film differs from the figure's reality that this is a result of filmmaker influence often related to media biases in the representation of specific groups and prejudices. Furthermore, presenting some negative traits or actions of a figure can create the perception of authenticity. The audience thinks if they're honest enough to show me this, everything else has more credibility. Lehtisalo notes that 'No longer does the verisimilar appearance alone create the affective experience, but rather the sense of 'authentic' intimacy between spectators and a public figure at a well-known public event.' (Lehtisalo, 2011, p.113) The audience wants to feel like they know the figure on a personal level, this requires seeing them at their worst.

An example of a queer figure displaying many negative traits whilst still achieving the audience's empathy is the characterisation of Elton in *Rocketman*. Despite clearly being the film's lead protagonist, Elton continues to portray several negative characteristics and can be seen to be doing and saying several morally and legally questionable things. An example of this can be seen during the scene in which Elton argues with life-long friend Bernie, accusing him of abandoning him when he needed him most and claiming that he was the one that earned their success, suggesting that Bernie has used him. In this scene Elton is at his worst, he has fought and cut ties with his mother, he is indulging in alcoholism, drug use and suffering from bulimia. He is clearly lonely but only proceeds to push away the person who has always been there for him. Elton clearly displays some very negative traits here and is cruel to a character that the audience has been conditioned to look upon fondly. However, all these negative traits and actions do not affect the audience's connection or sympathy for him because they are in the context of his redemption narrative depicted in the rehab scenes. Whilst some of the cause of his demons can be connected to his sexuality, the character is still our protagonist, and his negative traits are not associated with his queerness. Elton is

undeniably queer in both his antagonistic and protagonist moments as he is a queer character all the way through the film. Queer moments, such as queer kisses, queer communities, and verbal affirmations of queerness, feature throughout. This can be compared to the way Freddie leaves *Queen* to pursue solo work, in which he insults the other members and tells them that they would be nothing without him. In contrast to *Rocketman*, it could be argued that Freddie's antagonistic actions and traits are only really represented whilst he is involved in this queer culture with Paul. The majority of Freddie's most undeniably queer moments are wrapped up in the portion of the film in which he is cruel to his friends and pushing them away to pursue the queer lifestyle with Paul.

## **The AIDS Crisis**

As Rosenstone (2006) highlighted, history as visual is an important window to the past. And in this the stories that are covered in a film's setting should be scrutinised. Whilst not every historical moment is directly relevant to a character living in the time period, if something relates to the character the audience need to understand the social impact of that event to a degree. Some films take it upon themselves to explain and educate the audience, through elements such as voice overs. Not only does this information benefit the audience directly in terms of their understanding of the film but they become further educated on the topic.

Rosenstone notes that 'we come to understand the past in the stories we tell about it.'

(Rosenstone, 2006, p.155) Cases of AIDS have been evidenced since 1959 the disease became an epidemic in the early eighties, a time period that *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Rocketman* and *Behind the Candelabra* all spend a portion of their run time in. According to the CDC, HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus)/AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) 'weakens a person's immune system by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection' (CDC, Accessed: 16 03. 19) that can ultimately lead to death. Some of the first

people to die of AIDS during this time were gay men, therefore it was deemed by medical professionals that the disease was contracted due to the promiscuous and risky sexual behaviours of queer men, initially label the disease 'GRID' 'gay-related immunodeficiency'. In 1985 an *LA Times* poll found that a majority of Americans thought that HIV-positive people should be quarantined, and 42% thought that gay bars should be closed to prevent infection. 'AIDS killed 324,029 men and women in the USA between 1987 and 1998...' (Dr Rosenfeld, 2018) All three of these films follow queer celebrities throughout the eighties, and yet despite the fact that each had deeply personal experiences and connections to the AIDS crisis, each film portrays this to varying degrees. During the eighties, every gay man was affected by the AIDS crisis, if not contracting the disease, then experiencing their friend's or lover's suffering and untimely deaths. 'In the USA, by 1995, one gay man in nine had been diagnosed with AIDS, one in fifteen had died, and 10% of the 1,600,000 men aged 25-44 who identified as gay had died.' (Dr Rosenfeld, 2018) Friends, past lovers, acquaintances would simply disappear, sometimes people did not find out about deaths until much later as families would try and hide the cause of their death and often have no connection to the deceased's 'queer family'. It was an era of loss, fear and heightened homophobia. 'Returning to 'the world' after a partner's death was often a return to a world in which many if not most of these survivors' gay male friends had 'disappeared'. (Dr Rosenfeld, 2018) It could be argued that a film that is not directly about the AIDS crisis but is set during this time period should not be expected to go into detail about the epidemic as the film is about a specific figure or event. However, due to the scale and impact of the epidemic it must be acknowledged. Each of these films fails to fully represent the true fear and hysteria that surrounded the AIDS crisis and the terror and loss that many people experienced.

Freddie Mercury is arguably one of the most famous people to have suffered from AIDS, diagnosed in April 1987 the singer died of bronchial pneumonia due to AIDS complications

in 1991 a day after publicly announcing his illness. Between 1986 and 1991, after reported sightings of Mercury getting tested at a clinic and his visibly failing health, tabloids debated the singer's HIV status despite his repeated denial of suffering the disease. Due to this, audiences may have expected to see some portrayal of the suffering during this time. An often-criticised trope in queer cinema is the narrative structure in which queer characters or couples die at the end, most often as a result of murder, suicide or AIDS. This idea is explored by reporter James Rawson who writes 'Since *Philadelphia* there have been, by my count, 257 Academy Award-nominated portrayals of heterosexual characters, and 23 of gay, bisexual or transsexual characters. Of the heterosexual characters, 16.5% (59) die. Of the LGBT characters, 56.5% (13) die.' (*The Guardian*, 2013) Not only do these characters often suffer death at the hands of the filmmaker, 'Of the 10 LGBT characters who live, only four get happy endings. That's four characters in 19 years.' (*The Guardian*, 2013) Whilst the Redemption Story biopic can often portray the figure's redemption in death, they can also portray a portion of the figure's life in which they experience most growth. An example of this can be seen in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, in which the film ends on the highlight of the band's career, *Live Aid*. We see Freddie at his best, performing well-loved hits to an adoring stadium of fans and cinemagoers, playing an instrumental role in raising millions for charity, ending the film on a positive high. This frames Mercury as a performer in the end rather than a victim, creating a role model for viewers and perhaps with the aim to inspire younger audience members with the idea that they can live their lives as openly queer and achieve success rather than ending on a perpetuated theme of queer punishment. It is possible the filmmakers wanted Mercury to be remembered for the traits that made him so beloved by fans rather than the disease that killed him. It could be argued that the intention to end the film with the over ten-minute long shot for shot remake of *Live Aid* may have had more to do with entertainment than queer representation. Mercury's diagnosis, in 1987, was moved in

the film's narrative to a short while before *Live Aid* (1985), it is unknown if this decision was made entirely so that the narrative would flow to a grand finale or if it was to avoid portraying the character's death on screen.

In this film, there is a scene in which, after several mid shots of Freddie looking pensive as he prepares to leave the house, he visits a hospital to receive results of AIDS testing. He is informed in a distant-sounding voice that he has AIDS. The doctor asks him if he understands as he looks down in defeat. This is followed by a long shot of Freddie walking down a hallway towards the exit, a thin young man covered in lesions calls out softly to him in Freddie's famous concert call-and-response. This is the only other character, except for the faceless doctor, that Freddie interacts with during his diagnosis. The wide-open space of the corridor and lack of named characters creates a sensation of isolation, as though Freddie is conducting this diagnosis not only in secret but alone. Mercury had actually been dating Jim Hutton for at least two years at the point of his diagnosis and the pair were living together. Whilst it could be argued that Mercury did, in fact, receive his test results without Hutton, as Hutton was away visiting family, the lack of any scene in which the pair acknowledged or discussed this diagnosis could be seen to do a disservice to their relationship. Again, this could be rooted in the interest of rearranging events for the sake of narrative, however it is important to consider if the shot for shot concert remake is more important to the story than a scene portraying the relationship they had and how they dealt with his sickness together. Jim's character is underdeveloped in comparison to the man Mercury referred to as his 'husband', to the point the pair wore rings. In Hutton's book, *Mercury and Me* (1994), he details a conversation between himself and Mercury, when the singer first informed him, he was HIV positive. Mercury stated, 'If you want to leave me and move out of [their home] Garden Lodge I won't stop you; I'll understand.' To which Hutton replies 'But I love you... I'm not going to walk out on you- now or ever.' (Hutton, 1994, p.82) In a way the film's

decided structure and purposeful inaccuracies in many ways robbed the audience of an onscreen representation of a long-term loving queer relationship. Despite the representation of Jim as the good man that Freddie needed, it also does Hutton, who cared for Mercury until his death and continued to live with HIV himself until 2010, a disservice in not taking the opportunity to represent his direct influence in key moments of Mercury's life.

*The Elton John AIDS Foundation*, founded in the US in 1992 and the UK in 1993, is a non-profit charity that has raised over \$400 million to support HIV programmes in fifty-five countries and still continues to raise funds to help the prevention and cure of HIV and AIDS. John established this foundation in response to the deaths of friends, especially singer Freddie Mercury and haemophilic teenager Ryan White, who contracted the disease due to an infected blood transfusion. In his book, *Love is the Cure* (2012) John explains his experience during the AIDS crisis. 'So many have been taken from me by this disease- sixty, seventy, eighty, I honestly don't know how many. I'd rather not count. But I never want to forget them.' (John, 2012, p.29) A brief scene was filmed that featured Elton viewing a news story about Ryan White, however, it was cut from the final release. It is somewhat surprising to find that the only mention of AIDS in the final release can be found in the closing credits. Whilst John does state in his book that the death of his friends, although it saddened him deeply, did not immediately trigger him to battle his addictions or help in the fight for governments to spend more on AIDS victims, he does source the deaths of Ryan White and Freddie Mercury as an eye-opener. 'I had friends dying left and right of AIDS. I would go to funerals. I would cry. I would mourn, sometimes for weeks on end. None of this changed my behaviour. In fact, it just got worse. I was doing more drugs to block out the horror of it all.' (John, 2012, p.56-57) He states that the impact of Ryan White in his life first led him to consider that he may need help. As John refers to this moment as one of emotional significance, it is possible that it should have been represented in the film to some degree.

There is no reference in this film to the many funerals that John attended to the shrine in his home devoted to the friends he lost to AIDS or the loss of Mercury. It could be argued that the lack of reference is in keeping with the representation of Elton's dissociation and confusion as he reaches the point in which he is constantly high and drunk. However, it could also be argued that a film that shows so much emotional vulnerability could, in fact, have done the tragedy of the time a lot of justice. It could help to portray how miserable and lost John had become, risking his life constantly and suffering emotionally. 'I was sleeping around without protection, I was drastically increasing the chances I would contract the very same disease that was killing the people closest to me. It's no small miracle that I never contracted HIV myself.' (John, 2012, p.57)

In *Behind the Candelabra*, unlike *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*, the introduction of the AIDS crisis, whilst brief, flows well within the narrative and allows an accurate level of weight for its influence on the subject. A scene in which Lee calls Scott to check that he is in good health is treated with understanding and the overtone of fear in Michael Douglas' delivery highlights how frightening and deadly the AIDS crisis really was. Liberace was diagnosed with HIV in August 1985, dying of pneumonia as a result of AIDS in February 1987. This diagnosis was kept secret by doctors, managers and family members, as not only did Liberace not wish for the public to know he was sick, he was still vehemently denying being a homosexual. Whilst it is possible to contract HIV in ways other than unprotected gay sex, at the time most would assume that AIDS sufferers were homosexual due to his reputation as a gay disease. We are further presented with a shot of Lee sick in bed, telling Scott not to touch him just in case. This reflects the genuine fear that the disease could be contracted by touch, an idea that continued to be perpetuated by the masses despite the CDC informing the public that it is only transmitted through contact of certain bodily fluids. The scene helps to



highlight how stigmatised HIV and AIDS was not only by the general public but within the queer community.

## **Queer Emotional Reality**

Biopics always present an augmented version of reality as it is always to some extent fictionalised. Commonly within the film's cultural verisimilitude, 'the norms, mores and common sense of the social world outside the fiction' (Gledhill, 1997, p.360), an attempt is made to reflect a world close to reality. As many of the plot points, characters and places are real there is often keen attention to the cultural verisimilitude of the biographical film.

Situations, conversations, and motivations seem to mirror reality as they are based on our own reality. This can be seen in *Bohemian Rhapsody's* almost shot for shot remake of the live recording of *Queen's* set at *Live Aid* (1985). This creates a strong sense of reality in the film as scenes are recreated directly from reality. However, this form of recorded reality does not represent influential filmmaking and negates any filmmaker influence or auteur style.

Sometimes, however, a film can flout its cultural verisimilitude whilst adhering to the generic verisimilitude, that 'allows for considerable play with fantasy inside the bounds of generic credibility (e.g. singing about your problems; the power of garlic in gothic horror movies)' (Gledhill, 1997, p.360). This can often be seen in musicals, whilst someone singing out of the blue in real life would be odd, it is fitting in the expected generic verisimilitude of such a genre. (See Neale, 2000 and Hall, 1997) *Rocketman* is a musical biopic, it plays with distorted reality to create what is described by Fletcher as 'a true fantasy' (*Total Film*, 2019). He continues to explain, 'when the script came it was screaming out to be a fantasy. It was screaming out to not just be a biopic' (*Total Film*, 2019). 'Generic conventions can undermine the plausibility of a film built on cultural verisimilitude, but if the references to the real person and the real life can be recognised, a film can still be considered a biopic.'

(Lehtisalo, 2011, p.102) Actions such as dance sequences, flight and singing to progress narrative are used to create a form of emotional reality within the film, but still centre the viewers focus on Elton John and his story. The purpose of such scenes is to portray reality, like *Bohemian Rhapsody*; however, the film fully acknowledges the bias in said reality as it represents John's emotional and subjective reality at the time. The film relies on the audience's emotional reading of scenes that were created to reflect how moments felt rather than merely dramatisations of events. A good example of this is stated by John in a *Guardian* article 'there's a moment in *Rocketman* when I'm playing piano on stage in *The Troubadour* club in LA, and everything in the room starts levitating, including me, and honestly, that's what it felt like.' (*The Guardian*, 2019). Whilst it is not unheard of in cinema to influence the audience's emotions with the use of augmented reality it is unusual to see it used to this extent in a biopic. This may be linked to John's involvement in the production as he can inform the filmmakers of his emotional reality. It would be much harder and perhaps somewhat inaccurate if a filmmaker was to attempt this form of emotional reality with a figure that is no longer living or has not provided particularly honest accounts of their thoughts and feelings. However, this does not mean that audience emotions cannot be influenced by sympathetic imagery and understanding of characters, just perhaps not to the fantastical extent of *Rocketman*.

According to Münsterberg, 'our imitation of the emotions which we see expressed brings vividness and affective tone into our grasping of the play's action. We sympathise with the sufferer, and that means that the pain which he expresses becomes our own pain.'

(Münsterberg, 1916). This is how films with emotionally driven scenes influence audience connections to characters and scenarios. The feeling of the character, if portrayed well, causes the audience to feel sympathy in which audiences connect with and take on the emotional thought and feelings of the character. This is why scenes such as the *Troubadour* scene in

*Rocketman* are compelling as they use simple and highly visual methods of representing emotion to the audience, making it easy for them to take in and accept the intended emotion. This form of emotional reality in connection with the clear queer representation in this film allows insight for the audience into what it was like to be queer and famous in that time and also how John struggled with his sexuality. The driving goal in *Rocketman* is for the audience to feel as though they understand John, with insights into his mind and his heart. Whether their perception is entirely truthful is debatable due to John's ability to distort his own story. However, the broader goal is for audiences to leave liking and caring about John. For this, an emotionally honest and sympathetic method is used creating this emotional reality. John explains that 'some studios wanted us to lose the fantasy element and make a more straightforward biopic, but that was missing the point' (*The Guardian*, 2019). There is a scene in which Elton is clubbing, feeling abandoned by long-time friend Bernie, attempting suicide and constant substance abuse, he is surrounded by men and women all in various states of extravagant dress. They dance around him, plying him with his addictions until he stands, removing his shirt. The scene makes a tonal shift at this moment, losing any of the little light-heartedness that it originally had, featuring dancers and hit song *Bennie and the Jets* (1973). Bodies slide and writhe carpeting the dancefloor as he falls back and crowd surfs, hands running over him as he stares blankly up at the camera. This shot is crosscut and overlaid with snippets from scenes and audio clips, such as shots from his childhood, his first gay kiss, the dialogue of his mother telling him he will never be loved properly and that he is choosing a life of being alone being gay. This scene is used to reflect an inner turmoil and shame that Elton feels surrounding his sexuality and what he has become. The innocence of his childhood dream of performing on the piano to an adoring orchestra is contrasted with the close-up of his ringed fingers as they jab angrily at a piano. His mother's insistence that he will never be loved is followed by shots of those he cares about, such as Bernie and his

grandmother, but is quickly followed by a shot of him rolling around with several faceless men. This scene shows his inability to find his place and his inner conflict. It suggests that he does not want the life he is leading and suggests a level of loneliness that he is trying to self-medicate.

Similarly, in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, a scene depicts Freddie as he is led through a club by Paul, he looks around in shock as men geared up in leather harnesses, cowboy hats and gimp suits float past him in slow motion. The final club shot of this scene we see a close up of Freddie, framed by an overlay of Brian May and Roger Taylor playing their instruments on either side, as he looks up, seeming to be deciding whether to enter the back room of the club. Freddie barely interacts with his surroundings. The characters in this scene can barely be seen smiling or laughing. Everyone is stony-faced and sweaty in the dim red light. This could lead audiences to form a reading that Freddie is somehow not solely complicit in their actions, as though he is entering this place not knowing what he is getting himself into in his innocence. Not only does this scene misrepresent Mercury, with his love of parties and queer clubs, but it perpetuates a stereotype that queer clubs were and are an inherently sexual setting. While select men-only venues exist, solely representing these venues disregards a large part of the queer clubbing culture that involves queer women, queer friendship groups and other non-sexual interaction. In contrast, the club in *Rocketman* shows a much greater diversity of queer people. Masculine queer men stand with feminine queer men and women of colour all in the same shot. This reflects a much more accurate representation of the queer community both then and now. It is important to represent all areas and types in the queer community, not only to break social stereotypes of what a queer person looks like but also to allow queer youth to see someone like them represented. The word 'gay' should conjure not only the image of a muscly, leather-clad white man as it erases every other queer person who does not fit that prototype. An issue can arise when only one type of venue or community is

represented. Whilst elements of this typification can be found in areas of queer culture, the combination of certain traits perpetuates this mental prototype and their place in the seedy underground gay sex club. This can enforce an idea that queer sexuality is all about sex. In only presenting queer space as a sexual setting, it can erase the element community in queer spaces. We don't see Freddie enjoying drinks with his queer friends in the club, we don't see queer women or gender non-conforming queer people. This lack of representation is one issue but the association of this queer space with his downfall could lead to more negative association between queer space and immorality.

AIDS created a very difficult environment for queer people at the time, as not only were homophobic attitudes still prevalent in the eighties but the general public had begun to fear and blame them for the spreading of AIDS. This only forced queer culture further underground, creating protected communities from the hatred of the public. The importance of queer spaces, such as clubs and bars, is potentially misunderstood by the filmmakers in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. These bars were not only places to drink and party, but they were also often the only way that queer people could interact with other queer people. The film seemingly vilifies queer clubbing culture, reducing it to a seedy, dangerous, and hypersexualised space solely for queer men. Whilst it could be argued that the film may simply be denouncing clubbing culture in general if this is the case then this betrays the filmmaker's ignorance as to the importance of these clubs to queer club culture during the 1980s. If the film is, as King indicated in his interview with *Logo*, intended to inspire youth to see Mercury as an icon and a shining example of how someone can own their queerness and continue to be extraordinary, then it is in some ways understandable as to why they would choose to dilute the side of his life that was full of clubs, drink and drugs. However, it is possible to portray some of Mercury's clubbing lifestyle without glamorising certain elements. In the film, the introduction of Jim Hutton, Mercury's partner from 1985-1991,

takes place in Mercury's home in the aftermath of a party. Freddie gropes Jim, a member of staff, the two then continue to have a heartfelt conversation and do not see each other again until the end of the film as Freddie arrives at Jim's house and invites him to go to Live Aid. This narrative is almost entirely fictional and seems to have been written to better reflect what the filmmakers desire to polarise Freddie's lifestyle with Jim and Paul. One is clean and takes place after the party but never during. This is held in stark contrast to the relationship with Paul that seems to focus on deceit, clubbing and substance abuse. Mercury and Hutton met several times in different nightclubs before they began dating, Hutton working as a hairdresser and was not employed as waiting staff by Mercury. The pair continued to go out to queer bars and clubs together throughout their relationship. This distinction between the lives of Jim and Paul can create two archetypes, that could influence a young queer viewer's perception of the 'moral gay' and the 'immoral gay', which is both polarising and unrealistic.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, having established the history of queerness in the UK and societal perceptions of queer people throughout the last century, the influence of cultural expectations can be seen in the representation of queer people in media. Queer people have been used as the butt of the joke, as the promiscuous villain and as characters whose queerness is only visible when it is relevant to the plot. Audiences read queerness through stereotypes however these stereotypes can become negative if they rely only on immoral or unsociable character types, perpetuating the association between these types and queer people. Positive queer representation is necessary to create queer visibility to normalise queerness. Queer characters need not be exaggeratedly good, overachieving in all areas such as intelligence, beauty and humour. Queer characters simply need to display a mix of characteristics that reflect them as a whole person, with less contrast between queer characters and heterosexual characters this helps to normalise queerness. It is evidenced through psychology that positive queer representation can positively impact viewers in a very similar way to a real relationship. Similarly, negative queer characters can have a negative impact.

This thesis has proposed a method of categorisation that simplified the study of biopics based on their messages and narrative structure; Life Story, Crusade Story and Redemption Story. It establishes that although biopics are artifice, what is presented to audiences can have a significant impact on the audience's perception and consequently their personal reality. The way in which figures are presented can impact their reputation and lead to a loss of revenue for those still benefiting from their legacy. A popular biopic can successfully increase streaming, content (such as books, music and film) and tour ticket revenues. However, sometimes in an attempt to create a popular biopic, filmmakers alter the figure's character or narrative to create a more widely accepted character. This can lead to straightwashing or a

lack of clear queer content, and a lack of visibility. This presentation of less challenging viewing allows for success with regard to revenue from a wider audience however it sacrifices the queer visibility that many viewers desire and deserve. Furthermore, determining what queer content is acceptable or presenting the figure positively enforces the filmmaker's personal morality on queer culture. Creating implications that a queer venue's sole purpose is promiscuity and unsafe sexual encounters, for example, without portraying any of the social importance of queer spaces during the time period of the film.

The legality and ethical impact of authorship are considered, as the ownership of a figure's story can fall into the hands of those with a primary focus on entertainment rather than the preservation of a figure's legacy or reputation. It considers whether it is the filmmaker's role to concern themselves with the social impact of their representations of real figures. How much truth should filmmakers adhere to if at the detriment of a successful entertaining film? Also, to what extent should the fiction-based area of the entertainment industry be expected to adhere to historical truth? A question that arose during this thesis is the extent to which audiences accept the historical information presented to them through a fictionalised medium. Does the biopic genre lead to a viewer's expectation that everything within the film is based on fact without considering the narrative, character and visual changes required to create an entertaining narrative? Does a film's association with the biopic genre or its basis on a 'true story' allow it a form of accepted credibility that it does not deserve? Furthermore, do audiences further research the portrayed events or figures after viewing or is the film their primary, if not sole, source of information on the portrayed topic? To better understand this would potentially require a study to collect primary quantitative and qualitative data on audience perception and behaviour. The results of this study would highlight the importance of the impact that altering history in cinema can have on public knowledge.



Queer representation has improved greatly over the past century however there is still a way to go before queer characters begin to be treated the same as heterosexual characters by both filmmakers and audiences. However, if studios continue to devote time and marketing to wide release productions of queer biopics with unmistakable queer visibility areas of society, such as queer youth, benefit, especially when the subject's sexuality is treated with respect.

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