LUISS

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LGBTQ REPRESENTATION IN CINEMA AND TELEVISION

SUPERVISOR
Prof. Michele Sorice

CANDIDATE
Federica Maria Ciampa
088922

Index

Introduction

Giving a voice to the voiceless, offering a welcoming space for the unaccepted: that is perhaps the crucial function of any art expression. Cinema is unquestionably a powerful arena for directors to communicate and for viewers to feel understood. Going to the movies is in fact a very "private ritual" (Hake 2001), forasmuch as it helps people reach a space where the borders between dreams and reality are blurred, a sort of perfect limbo which they can indulge in while keeping in touch with their deepest selves and their most rooted and hidden beliefs. It allows oneself to live alternative lives, seek experiences without risks, escape the burdens of everyday life and practise fantasies intensely. This explains why watching movies or tv series is probably one of the subtlest but also most effective shortcuts to catalyse social change. Not only they become a stimulant for the creation of new perspectives or for the solidification of old ones, but they are also able to intimately reach different kinds of people all at once. It is no wonder, therefore, that positive depiction of sexual and ethnical minorities in cinema and television has been deemed as central by the components of such groups.

As humans, we are deeply affected by the images, sounds and words that surround us (Tagudina 2011). When it comes to minority groups, it is therefore particularly important that the images circulating and shaping the society we live in become the space in which they are able to be positively portrayed. Cinema and television are mirrors of society but also a filter that must push to do better, strive for inclusivity, promote the values of tolerance and acceptance as a way to help in the improvement of society. The commodified texts produced for the audience are tailored upon the public's needs and beliefs, but at the same time can push people out of their comfort zone, as a way to bring them to see the world or themselves in a different light.

Media has an infinite potential in the education of people and in their socialization with the external world. This powerful capability can however translate into dangerous consequences. It can in effect lead to the strengthening of existing stereotypes regarding a certain social group, especially if said group is part of the minority. Minority groups are by definition those groups whose members possess certain characteristics which are not shared by the majority of the population in a given society. Minority groups can be of various types: ethnic groups, gender and sexuality groups or religious groups, and they are usually victims of episodes of discrimination

or unequal treatment as their interests do not generally coincide with the ones of the greater population.

In addition to this, it is safe to assume that members of the majority do not enter in contact with members of minority groups, at least not in their normal day-to-day life. This is one of the main reasons why media representation of minority groups is crucial to reach a climate of tolerance in society. In fact, it is very common that when lacking direct experience or knowledge of a certain situation or of a certain group of people, individuals will rest their beliefs and opinions on what they hear from others or from what they see in television or cinema.

The creation of stereotypes is a tendency which is inherent to human experience: it is in other words a natural instinct. Stereotypes are a "short-cut" people use to quickly and easily understand the world and as a way to engage with it in a more efficient way. They are therefore functional and are linked to the desire of avoiding unnecessary effort (Seiter 2006). The obvious risk of this trend is that of falling into harmful generalizations that consequently contribute to misunderstandings and to the over-simplification of the struggles and experiences of certain categories of people, not to mention they can encourage and legitimize negative attitudes towards them.

This concern becomes particularly urgent when speaking of minority groups, whose representation typically rests on inaccurate portrayals, as majority groups have a stronger jurisdiction over the creation and control of cultural and media contents proposed to the wider public. As a matter of fact, as chapter one of this dissertation will analyse, there is a particular relationship between culture and power. The idea underlying such connection is that of ruling classes proposing tailored cultural subjects that actively legitimize their own interests, in order to indirectly push non-dominant groups to accept them and being accomplices of their own victimization (Lears 1985). Also, by proposing a certain ideology as the "right" one, they succeed in keeping minority groups that diverge from these values marginalized and isolated.

For the sake of simplicity, throughout this dissertation the minority group taken into analysis will be the one of LGBTQ+. Short for LGBTTQQIIA+, it stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, intergender and asexual. The term queer will also be vastly used, as both are umbrella labels for these sexual and gender minorities who do not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender.

Despite the considerable steps taken towards legal tolerance of gender and sexual orientations during the last decades, LGBTQ+ groups continue to face the common struggles of any other minority group. Still suffering from many socioeconomic and cultural injustices, they are also subject to prejudices rooted in traditionalistic and conservative thinking. Regardless of LGBTQ+ not being illegal anymore in the majority of the world's countries, there is still a long path until complete integration is truly reached. Queer people are in fact still more likely to experience intolerance, discrimination, harassment, and the threat of violence than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts (Subhrajit 2014).

Accurate and positive representations in cinema and television play a fundamental role in pushing for social change and for widespread tolerance. On the one hand, media representation of LGBTQ+ characters might support queer people during the long and burdensome process of self-discovery and self-acceptance, which is inevitable when starting to come to terms with one's identity. Movies offer them a source of inspiration and comfort in a world that condemns them. This will be the centre of the discussion presented in chapter two of this dissertation. On the other hand, as it will be pointed out in chapter three, seeing such type of characters on the screen could help non-queer people get in touch with a world they might have been previously oblivious of. It could push them to get acquainted with the existence of queer people and even reach the point of growing fond of their stories. As a result, it would ideally lead to a dismantling of prior prejudices coming from misinformation or even only just slightly upsetting deep negative convictions about them.

Lastly, while a more positive representation of LGBTQ groups has been shown to appreciably improve non-queer people's attitudes towards them, the same effect is not so easily found for what concerns political stances. In this case, in fact, it has been shown that those with a consolidated political belief are more reluctant to change their positions on the basis of a simple repeated exposure to inclusive media contents. This problem and the possible solutions to it will be analysed in the final part of this dissertation.

Chapter One

History of LGBTQ Representation: A Power Struggle

"Representations here and now have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated, but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society"

(Richard Dyer 1993)

In this day and age, people tend to believe that what they see in media represents the truth (Merks 2019). Even when aware of the fact that what depicted in tv-programmes or in movies is usually fictional and invented, the ideas, values and ways of life displayed there are subconsciously influential in the shaping of the audience's perception of the world and of themselves.

That is why the concept of media representation is profoundly linked to the one of power and hegemony. As theorist Stuart Hall observed (1981), cultural industries have the power to constantly rewrite social reality and to choose which morals will dominate in the current and future collective environment. Since the power of producing popular – and therefore influential – media content is almost exclusively in the hands of dominant social groups, it is inevitable that the images presented to the public are those which are compatible to their interests.

A consequence of these circumstances is the fact that minority groups and their experiences might not receive the portrayal they deserve, thus worsening the isolation and discrimination they face in society. Representation for them might in fact rest solely on stereotypes, their lives and values tend to be described in an inaccurate way, as they are only seen through an external and uninformed eye. This is why most LGBTQ+ representations in media seem to be negative. The misinformation coming from the media is particularly worsened by the fact that most of the time dominant groups do not come in contact with minorities, at least not in their normal life or not that they might know of. Prejudices therefore find fertile ground to settle and consolidate so that fear and discrimination towards these groups grow undisturbed.

Movies are a form of communication, and communication is one of the biggest tools of control and domination. As previously explained, the images proposed in media greatly benefit already dominating parts of society, by controlling the meanings and ideas that pass through it (Staiger 1992).

Gramsci was one of the first scholars to discuss the possible connection between the hegemonic system and cultural production. According to him, culture's main objective is the one to "provide people with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour" (Barker 2003). As a matter of fact, dominant spheres of society do not usually resort to force to establish domination. Or at least, they do not do so unless they are obliged to. What they do instead is to establish a climate of coercion and almost imperceptible manipulation through recurrent themes in culture. In this way, the groups that would not normally share the same values as the dominant ones are eventually persuaded to do so.

Culture, in other words, serves as a way to justify the dominance of a particular group and to legitimize its power. It proposes in fact values presenting them as right and virtually inevitable. Dominated categories hence develop a sort of complicity in their own victimization (Lears 1985). By now persuaded of this false consciousness, they do not resort to rebellion as they will be the first ones to believe they are in the wrong.

Hegemony, however, is unstable. This is where Gramsci opened up to the possibility of change. As a matter of fact, even if power does not shift easily, there is always the possibility to put on a challenge against it (Barker 2003). Television and cinema, along with many other forms of media, can help in this direction. While an inaccurate representation of minority groups leads to the cementation of negative stereotypes surrounding them, at the same time a positive representation can successfully bring about a better understanding of a category of people that the audience wouldn't have had the possibility of meeting otherwise.

Along with Gramsci, another important scholar analysed how the images presented in the media mirror the views of dominant groups (Merks 2019). This scholar was Cedric C. Clark. Drawing inspiration from the repeated discriminatory depictions of African-Americans in television, in 1969 he devised a theory in which he described four chronological stages of media representations for minority groups. The shift from one stage to the other is linked to the growing social recognition and importance of the group. While Clark used this model to exclusively illustrate African-American representation, it can also be transposed to the interpretation of queer images in media and relative social power struggles.

The first stage analysed by Clark is the one of *non-recognition*. This is to say, when the representatives of a certain minority group do not appear in television or cinema. This non-existence in media mirrors the condition of a category of people that is placed at the lowest level of social recognition. By not appearing in popular culture settings, it seems as if the group does not exist, therefore achieving a situation of symbolic annihilation (Gerbner 1976). The second stage – the one of *ridicule* – starts when characters from the minority finally appear in television and cinema, but only as a comical device. That is their only purpose. The comical content of their appearances is moreover based on the negative stereotypes that surround them, of racist or homophobic inspiration, depending on the group depicted. This stage serves as a way to give the idea of better recognition and visibility for minorities, but also as a way for the majority groups in the public to legitimize their feeling of superiority towards them.

Only after a greater power shift that allows minorities' demands to be more carefully met, the third stage is achieved. This phase is known as *regulation*. Still very far away from being an accurate representation of a social group, it does not at least ridicule these characters. It keeps them however segregated in socially acceptable and minimal roles, while still making them compliant to the dominant group's values. How the characters are represented therefore does not accurately represents the complexity of their lives and still perpetuates a climate of discrimination.

The one of *respect* is the last stage proposed by Clark. This is obviously the most difficult to achieve, as it can only result from a better distribution of cultural power and greater sense of inclusivity in society itself. In this phase, the characters from the minority are accurately detailed, they are realistic and not shrinking under

dominant values they have to comply with. This does not however translate to the fact that these roles are given exclusively positive or desirable traits, so that they must be free from any flaw. What this means instead is that images at this stage are based on the real-life experiences they are meant to describe, and must present the character as multifaceted and complex as any other character.

Branchik's Representation Model

As previously explained, Clark's four-stages model was not initially devised to describe LGBTQ media representations. Hence the need for Blaine Branchik – almost 40 years after the original theory – to fill in the gaps and adapt the same model to the homosexual experience. Branchik's theory mainly described the representation of *gay* men in *print* advertising, but it can also be adapted to cinema and television representations of queer people in general.

In the adaptation of Clark's first stage, the one of *recognition*, Branchik realized that in the case of homosexuality it was better conveyed through the expression *targeted recognition*. As a matter of fact, differently from what had happened with other minority groups, in the first stages of representation gay characters were not totally inexistent. Their existence and their presence were only hinted at through metaphors, so that it would be recognized by the section of the audience sensitive to LGBTQ matter, but not to the rest of it. It was therefore still a period of almost total invisibility.

The second stage, defined as *ridicule* by Clark, was instead renamed as *ridicule and scorn* by Branchik. He precised indeed that in this phase not only homosexual characters were ridiculed, they were also explicitly loathed. In other words, behind the façade of comedy, they were presented as objects of social rejection (Branchik 2007), as people that the greater part of society wanted to avoid and not to mix with.

The third stage, the one that Clark referred to as *regulation*, was rebaptized by Branchik as the *cutting-edge* stage. The main aspect of this phase was that homosexual characters were now represented, but only as one or two-dimensional characters, reduced to stereotypes rather than seen as humans. As of gay men, for example, they were relegated to specific roles such as leaders in the fashion industry or as overly-eccentric personalities. Their characterization never diverted from these pre-established roles and rarely contained any depiction of their intimate and personal life.

It is only when the final stage, that of *respect*, is reached that representation of LGBTQ characters can be regarded as correct and authentic.

History of Queer Representation in Movies and Tv-Series

Despite the birth-date of cinema being conventionally set on December 28th of 1895, it is only from the 1930s that going to movies started to be considered as an actual form of popular entertainment. Film-length was increased and synchronised sound was added, so that it was now possible to narrate stories through a movie. The period going from the 30s to the early 60s is also known as the "golden era of Hollywood" as big companies started monopolized cinematic production.

The main consequence of this cultural domination was the fact that now movies could only explicitly represent the values of these groups. Any other form of independent or counter-current cinematic production was ostracised. The regime of the *Hays Production Code* (1930) was enforced by said big companies as a way to regulate the content of movies, subjecting their release in the theatres to the compliance with these provisions. Among various other points, the Hays Code prohibited any on-screen representation of "sexual deviations", among which homosexuality.

In tune with Clark's definition of the "non-recognition" stage, by this time it was nearly impossible to watch movies containing an explicit reference to homosexuality. However, by paying closer attention it was not so rare to encounter subtexts that referred to it. While these hints were not clear enough to be picked up by the wider audience, they were more recognizable by homosexual audiences – hence why the "targeted recognition" proposed by Branchik. Among those who vastly used this type of subtext in their production there was Alfred Hitchcock, who in *Rope* (1949) or in *Strangers on a Train* (1950) displayed protagonists who were most likely gay – even if never explicitly expressed. Still, it was not a coincidence that all of these allegedly-homosexual characters only played the role of villains, as it is evident in the two Hitchcock's movies mentioned above where the protagonists are two neurotic murderers, or in *Dracula's Daughter* (Hillyer 1939) where the supposedly lesbian character is a cruel vampire.

In the years that followed the decline of the Hays Code, more queer characters started coming to the surface but only as a way to become targets to laugh at. The age of "ridicule and scorn" was reached. The use of stereotypes surrounding homosexual

behaviour were now a common joke. The *sissy* was for example a popular gag, distinguished by the presence of an overly effeminate gay man whose main role was to provide for comedy with his out-of-the-norm behaviour. While the *sissies* were never explicitly presented as homosexual – as their love or sex life was kept secret and not portrayed in the scenes – the public knew, since their whole persona was built from well-established gay stereotypes.

While it is not true that in this era all queer dynamics were ridiculed, still they could not be represented if not through the use of comedy. This happened in *Some Like It Hot* by Wilder (1959), where the protagonists are two men, Joe and Jerry, who decide to dress up as women with the intention to be hired for a musical tour for women only. In the last scene Jerry – who dressed up as Josephine for the whole movie – admits to his/her "fiancé" that he is a man. The latter seems not to care and only responds with a "nobody is perfect". While the underlying message of the movie is very progressive, the comic device used enables the heterosexual public to perceive it only as a funny fairy-tale, and no more than that.

For what concerns television, it was only now reaching the peak of its expansion. The content of popular shows and programs mirrored almost perfectly what had been proposed by Hollywood in cinema. As a matter of fact, even in television queer characters were rarely portrayed, but when they appeared they were only objects of scorn and of laughter.

The world was however changing, as shown by the new-born movements supporting "free-love" that started to arise by the end of the 60s. With the Stonewall riots of 1969, the queer population decided to come together and fight against police violence. The gay liberation movement was officially born, so that the community could now actively push for a better representation and inclusion in society. Nevertheless, in cinema and television their demands were met up to a certain extent.

This in fact marks the beginning of the "regulation" stage, or of the "cutting edge". Queer characters were no more kept hidden, still they were heavily stereotyped. Their personalities did not in any way mirror the complexity of real people lives and experiences. In particular, all the issues related to discrimination and oppression, or the values considered central by the queer community were minimized or ignored. In 1972 the show *That Certain Summer* aired. One of the characters was a gay man called Doug, who was living with his boyfriend after leaving his wife and his kid. Regardless of such explicit representation of a gay man on television, this depiction was still very

flawed. First of all, no scene showcased any tender or intimate interaction between the two men. Second of all, the show contributed to the perpetuation of heteronormativity, by reinforcing the idea that homosexuals suffer from their "condition" and even when accepted, they should be pitied (Fejes and Petrich 1993). All in all, queer people started to be more present in movies, but usually as side characters that were only helpful to the heterosexual protagonist's story. This continued until the National Gay Task Force – founded in 1973 to promote LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance – protested against such reductive portrayals. This rebellion had some effect, as more homosexual characters started to become more complex. This improvement in representation was however restricted to smaller cinematic genres such as documentaries – among which the masterpieces *Times of Harvey Milk* (Epstein 1984) or *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1991) – while in the popular media further steps had still to be taken.

A severe degradation of LGBTQ image in society followed once the HIV epidemic started spreading in the US. The illness was in fact greatly attributed to gay men and their lifestyle so that in its early stages the virus was called GRID, the Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. Homosexuality became furtherly stigmatized, presented as deviant and dangerous, and AIDS was seen by many as a "punishment" for such "degenerated" behaviour. The Moral Majority, the Coalition for Better Television and the American Family Association – which were political organizations of conservative and/or Christian forces – started to boycott all those movie producers that portrayed homosexuals in a neutral or positive light.

The situation slowly improved starting from the 1990s, when the AIDS scare had died and LGBTQ activists' voices had started to grow stronger and stronger, also helped by influential politicians in power. For instance, when Bill Clinton was elected in 1992 he explicitly supported pro-LGBT political beliefs, even if he never really kept any of the promises he made in such field. Something however was clearly starting to change, and television and cinema showed this gradual but steady transformation. Representation was in fact booming, even if the characters proposed were still not as accurate or multidimensional as needed.

It was especially in the last few years that LGBTQ media representation began to skyrocket. According to the "Where We are On TV" report by the GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters represented less than 2% of all characters on broadcast networks in the time-span of 2005-2006. Only 14 years later, in 2020, the same Report showed how regular

LGBT characters had now increased to 10.2% of all characters in broadcasts. Streaming platforms such as Netflix have almost completely substituted television as for popularity, especially among the younger population. On such platforms it is way easier to encounter shows with a high number of homosexual, non-binary or trans characters. An example is the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan 2013-2019), winner of many Emmy Awards and Golden Globes. This program is not only important for the accurate way in which it describes queer characters, but also because of its sensitivity towards the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination combine in the experiences of marginalized individuals. As a matter of fact, these characters are not only presented as lesbian or transgender, but also as people struggling with other problems deriving from their being a woman, an immigrant, a person of colour, poor, disabled, ill and so on.

As for cinema, in the last years many movies with homosexual and/or trans protagonists have won or were nominated for internationally-recognized prizes, among which *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche 2013)*, Carol* (Haynes 2015)*, Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016), *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2016)*, Call Me by your Name* (Guadagnino 2018)*, Green Book* (Farrelly 2018), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma 2019).

Despite the astonishing progresses achieved, representation of the LGBTQ population still has a long way to go. The percentage of queer characters in TV or cinema is still nowhere near the actual percentage of queer people living in the world. Not to mention, a more frequent appearance of such characters does not necessarily assure the quality of their representation.

Chapter Two

Why Representation: the LGBTQ Perspective

"Hollywood films taught straight people what to think about gay people,
and taught gay people what to think about themselves"
(The Celluloid Closet 1995)

Cultural representation is a very delicate concept. As said before, it does not only shape the way people see the world, but also how they perceive themselves. It was proven that identity, defined as "a distinctive set of attribute, beliefs, desires and principles that individuals think distinguishes them from others" (Fearon 1999) is deeply influenced by all those images and messages circulating in society. Media plays therefore a big part in identity formation, especially since its most avid consumer – the youth – also represents the category most in need of role models to imitate. As explained by Gerbner (1998), the messages infants derive from television as they are first exposed to it set the basis for the values and perspectives they will believe in as adults.

Fictional media can be considered as the primary source of information during the development of one's identity when real-life models of behaviour are missing. This holds particularly true for queer individuals who cannot go through a process of socialization that involves the imitation of standard models such as parents, friends or school, which are all valid options for cis-heterosexuals. As a matter of fact, LGBTQ individuals – differently from the members of any other minority group – are usually born in contexts where they have little to no information that might help them understanding their identity. While sexuality is usually set really early in life, with many people confessing to feeling different from the rest of people from a young age, many have to wait until adulthood to provide themselves with an explanation to these feelings. This is mainly due to the unavailability of role models in real-life, but also in fictional media. In other words, in the current lack of support from school, family or

friends for these categories, representation in media can be particularly helpful in the support of their process of self-acceptance and coming-out.

Obviously, such representation can either be positive, when it validates LGBTQ experiences, fostering their self-esteem and sense of resilience. Or it can be negative, when it worsens their feeling of isolation and fear of being one-self.

Positive Portrayal

As found by Ochman (1996), the availability of positive models in the media is linked to an improvement of self-perception, but only if these models share similarities with the viewer. The more there are similarities with what seen on-screen, the greatest will be the effect on the individual's self-esteem. It is therefore plausible that LGBTQ people who have access to positive LGBTQ role models will have higher self-esteem than those who lack access to them (Gomillon and Giuliano 2011).

Because of the lack of enough characters to relate to in the media, queer people have historically tried to "appropriate" media contents in order to interpret them in a personalised way (Gross 1989). This results in the idealisation of fictional characters or media role models that share some characteristics that might be related to being queer, such as lesbians idolising strong women characters who do not conform to traditional feminine roles (Gomillon and Giuliano 2011). This natural tendency viewers have in trying to recognize themselves in what they see on screen acquires an even deeper significance for queer people – they are in fact looking for external validation when unable to find it in real life. Yet, such idealization of characters that are actually not queer poses the risk of delusion and of inevitable disappointment upon the realization that they do not share the same struggles and values as them.

For self-esteem to form it is therefore crucial that viewers are exposed to LGBTQ characters whose experiences and identities they can fully relate to. All people, especially the members of a minority group, need to develop a strong sense of self-esteem in order to flourish. As already victims of social exclusion – whether direct or indirect – it is important that they have the right tools to stand up to it and fight back. One of the most beneficial tools of television and cinema is the fact that fictional dynamics lead viewers to undergo a process of identification. Such process can take two forms, according to the type of character presented. It can be a "similarity" identification, as in a viewer who recognizes themselves in the character and is

consequently able to "live through it", therefore incorporating the fictional experiences they see on screen to their actual life. Or else, it can also be a "wishful" identification, as in a viewer that wants to imitate a character because it possesses characteristics that they do not have but want to, such as fame or money (Gomillon and Giuliano 2011). Usually, the two forms overlap so that both types of identification co-exist at the same time.

What this means on a more practical level is that fictional characters become icons capable of inspiring pride and comfort in the viewers that recognize themselves in them or that want to be like them. By representing homosexual, transgender or non-binary characters as valid, strong, resilient and capable of success, the viewers who recognize themselves in them will learn to appreciate themselves through them. TV shows or movies depicting homosexual characters who lead a normal and happy life will end up making homosexual viewers feel like their identity is more socially accepted than what they thought it would be. Seeing how people in the show or watching the show are okay with the presence of queer characters onscreen is particularly helpful when struggling with the need to hide in the "closet" and deny one's identity to the outer world. The youth is the main recipient of media messages, but such representation can be incredibly helpful also for grown-ups who have always believed that their feelings were wrong. Even at an old age, coming in contact with characters that are accepted and that live happy lives outside of marginalization and violence, can result in a general sense of greater self-acceptance and lower the need to hide themselves.

Additionally, not only exposure to such characters improves queer people's self-esteem and acceptance, but also increases their strength and resilience in front of negative experiences they might encounter in real life. Considering how intolerance against homosexual, trans or non-binary people is so greatly spread in the world, this is particularly helpful. It has been shown that queer people that can look up to queer idols in offline media such as television and cinema end up being more tenacious and perseverant than those without such access (Craig and McInroy 2015). This effect is caused both by the fact that in this way media becomes a coping mechanism used to escape the stress coming from their constant discrimination, both by the ability media has in making queer people feel part of a wider community.

For what concerns the interpretation of television and cinema as coping mechanisms, this holds true for the majority of people, LGBTQ or not. As a matter of

fact, movies and tv-programs are forms of entertainment that enable the viewer to immerse in the fantasy on-screen and to live desirable alternative lives without consequences, thus taking a break from their normal – and usually stressful – life. For queer viewers, this propensity to escape life through fiction is strengthened, as the life they run from is particularly unaccepting towards them. Through the processes of *similarity* and *wishful* identification explained above, the viewer is able to validate himself and live through the character, feeling for probably the first time a sense of belonging and inclusion. It offers therefore great consolation. Obviously, escapism is not healthy on the long-run, as it can generate a sense of alienation from real life and decrease motivation to improve and solve real problems.

Yet, positive representation also has another important effect. In fact, it prompts feelings of strength and resilience in the viewer. The exposure to perseverant queer characters allows an individual who relates to them to understand that this is a possible way of life. Strength not only derives from the imitation of strong protagonists, but also from the fact that viewers understand they are not alone. When living in a conservative household, representation helps in giving a sense of "possibility" and might act as a first contact with non-heteronormative or non-cisgender experiences, which might come as a revelation to many people (McInroy and Shelley 2017). As one participant in a study on the impact of LGBTQ role models in TV said, media sources "let me know *we* were out there" (Gomillon and Giuliano 2011). When living in an environment that does not acknowledge – or worse, condemns – these experiences, such type of content becomes central in the journey of self-discovery. This is fundamental because LGBTQ people are usually not only victim of the external world, but also of themselves, and might have to deal with mental and behavioural problems steering from this. Especially the youth frequently deals with depression, anxiety and substance abuse – not to mention suicidal attempts – because of the lack of support around them and their inability to integrate.

As for what is considered a *positive* portrayal, the concept is not easy to define. As a matter of fact, it can vary greatly according to the topic presented and to the viewer's receptiveness. When analyzing the LGBTQ context, a portrayal is usually seen as positive when it is *realistic*. In other words, when the character who represents queer viewers is portrayed as a complex person with dreams and dynamics similar to those of the viewer. The character's life and personality are not therefore exclusively centered around their sexual or gender orientation, but they are as complex and multi-

faceted as those of any other character on screen. Surely, the struggles experienced by the protagonist as a member of a minority group should not be overlooked or minimized. Yet, they should not be presented as an eternal struggle, but that life outside of that is possible.

Nevertheless, to better understand how a positive portrayal should be, it is useful to firstly analyse how it should *not* be like.

Lack of Portrayal

While the portrayal of queer story-lines stopped being expressly prohibited from the 1960s, it is still considered taboo. Representation of homosexuals – but especially of transgender and non-binary people – is nowadays very limited. This scarceness is particularly accentuated in the context of cinema, rather than in television or streaming platforms. This difference has a simple economical explanation. In fact, while tv-shows do not require a lot of money to be produced, movies need considerably more. So, while tv-shows do not need to attract a large audience to cover the costs of production, movies need to sell a huge amount of tickets as a way to profit from their sale. In order to do so, the story-line and the type of characters presented in movies are chosen based on their ability to attract the greatest number of people possible. As a consequence, cis-heterosexual protagonists and love stories are preferred, so that the majority of people can relate to it and there will be no risk of offending some people's moral convictions.

Another factor that leads to movies and tv-shows' dissimilar ability to represent inclusive story-lines on screen is the fact that tv-shows are able to extend their fictional narrative over a longer span of time. It is indeed easier to insert multiple story-lines, even if secondary, through the use of episodes and seasons, so that more inclusivity can be achieved without sacrificing the portrayal of a predominant cis-heterosexual protagonist or couple. Movies do not enjoy the same level of flexibility. As they can only develop over a limited span of time – of usually only two hours – they have to restrict the narration to the protagonist's story. Everything else that is not functional for the development of the main character's arch is kept in the background, as not to confuse the audience and take precious time away from the cardinal plot. This can turn out to be incredibly dangerous for those minority groups who important producers

have no economic interest in portraying and that will therefore always be excluded from appearing in popular films.

This absolute lack of representation results in the further consolidation of heteronormativity – defined as the belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable orientation. It cements the idea that a couple must be formed by a man and a woman, exclusively. Not to mention, the lack of representation of different orientations that are rarely discussed – such as the concepts of asexuality or transgender – increases the feeling of exclusion and isolation felt by viewers who recognize as such. Movies represent in fact a way to socialize with the outer world and discover the range of human experiences. A limited access to images that validate minority groups' experiences and feelings is harmful as it reinforces their alienation from a society so seemingly different from them.

Recently, more queer characters have started to appear on screen. Still, their characterization has on many occasions been mediocre and unsatisfactory. As for what concerns cinema in particular, it has been a very famous trend that of *queerbaiting*. The term relates to a marketing technique aimed at raising the number of spectators by proposing something appealing to minorities. In this case, directors and producers decide to hint at, but never explicitly depict, LGBTQ romance or representation. In other words, they include homosexual or transgender subtexts in some scenes of the movie or tv-show as a way to engage queer viewers while at the same time not scaring away the rest of consumers that do not identify as LGBTQ or as allies.

Queerbaiting is considered as very offensive by many members of the community, as it is perceived like a mockery used to extract money from those viewers that – hopeful for some representation – in the end are left with nothing. Using Bridges' words (2013), it is a "way to throw us a bone when we normally wouldn't have anything, to acknowledge that we're there in the audience when the powers that be would prefer to ignore us".

A great illustration of this phenomenon is found in the live-action movie *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon 2017), promoted as the first Disney movie with an openly gay character. What actually happens in the film is that the openly gay character is nothing else but a side character who for a screen time of no more than two seconds is seen dancing with another man. The scene in question is so short and secondary that it is easily missed, not-to-say of total irrelevance to the plot. In general, it is noticeable how in the cases of queer-baiting, the hints at queer dynamics have always to be reported

by the director itself, because with no explicit indication it would be almost impossible to perceive them. It comes without saying, however, that if that character or story-line had had enough screen-time or importance, there would be no need for explanation. Their presence would be evident.

Popular Tropes

When the inclusion of queer plots does happen, it is however very common that stereotypical versions of the characters are put in place. They are typically known as *tropes*. Following Lexico's definition, the term refers to a recurrent theme or motif that in this case appears each time a queer character is portrayed on television or cinema. While the recourse to tropes could have been useful at the times of the Hays' Code regime as a way to overcome censorship, it does not have a strong reason to still exist anymore.

Some of these tropes are incredibly widespread. One of them is for instance the "gay best-friend" trope, of incredible success in late-90s and early-2000s coming of age movies or tv-shows. In these cases, the gay character shares screen-time with the heterosexual female protagonist and appears only for the sake of enabling such interactions. His presence in the movie is therefore legitimized exclusively by the fact that he is helping his friend in the development of her own narrative: he does not have a story-line for himself. His main aim is to provide the woman with advice on her love-life and on fashion choices or by providing interesting gossip. He is never scripted to have a more complex personality that goes beyond his over-the-top and flamboyant appearance. Moreover, his homosexuality is only implied by the way he dresses and talks – which closely follows the widespread stereotypes linked to gay men – but no portrayal of his actual love life is proposed. If it is, it is commonly very troubled and surely of no significance for the whole plot.

Bisexual individuals, especially women, are instead associated with the "murderous bisexual" or the "promiscuous bisexual" tropes. The former is characterized by the presence of a woman character that identifies as bisexual and plays the role of the villain in a story. These women are pictured as being driven by an unstoppable feeling of greed, jealousy and envy that pressures them to commit murderous or cruel actions. The latter trope instead sees bisexual women as promiscuous. They are narrated as unable to maintain a monogamous relationship

since their attraction towards both genders is interpreted with the need to have many sexual partners. For these reasons, it is also common that the bisexual woman will be the one to cheat on their partner more often. In addition to this, the promiscuous and unfaithful bisexual motif mixes with the "it's-just-a-phase" trope, as the woman who usually has female sexual partners eventually ends up settling in with a man. This common idea is sometimes brought up during the coming-out of some characters, when their mothers admit as a joke that during their college years they also had that "phase" in which they experimented with women. While these gags are usually inserted for comical purposes, they furtherly perpetuate the stereotype that the "problem" with lesbian or bisexual women in same-sex relationships is that they have never found the right man. Once found instead, they begin a life of happiness, going past their troubled teenager life. In other words, asserting one's heterosexual identity is associated with the overcoming of the typical rebellious phase of adolescence and finally achieving maturity. This is also known as the "lesbian until graduation" stereotype (Davis 1999).

Another very common trope is the "Bury Your Queers" trope. It has been shown that directors of movies and tv-shows prefer to "eliminate" queer characters rather than heterosexual ones. Hogan (2016) analysed more than 1.779 screenplays of TV-series made in the USA and found out how among those who starred queer characters, more than the 35% had them dead by the end of it. But then again, it does not end here. Even when queer characters are not killed, they still face a tragic fate. Either as individuals – for example they start struggling with mental disorders, drug addictions or terrible discrimination – or as couples – as they are forced to inevitable separations. It was in fact found that among the screenplays that starred queer characters or relationships, only 16% of them enjoyed a happy ending.

The last trope analysed in this paper will be the one of the "male-gazey lesbian action". In this case, same-sex interactions and relationships are included as a performance for the man watching. The characters are not actually lesbian, nor bisexual, but act as such as a way to arouse the male who hopes to jump in in the middle of the action. This becomes particularly disturbing as it shows how lesbianism intersects with sexism: women are portrayed as constantly objectified and sexualized.

All in all, it seems evident that queer characters on screen are typically reduced to their sexual or gender orientation, which is also stereotyped. They do not have a story-line that focuses on their life outside of the problems stemming from their

sexuality. Many characters are in fact seen struggling for their whole life with their identity, which is seen as something troubling and unsolvable. This is incredibly harmful for viewers, in ways that will be analysed shortly.

Consequences

The instances of absolute or relative lack of representation explained above have serious consequences on the psychology and self-esteem of viewers. A repeated exposure to discriminative content in media cements in fact feelings of internalized homophobia, heteronormativity and transphobia in the audience, paradoxically among queer people themselves. Even if what is said on TV contrasts their inner predispositions, they will end up believing that the truth is actually what portrayed in media, not in what they feel is right. As a result, they might end up denying their own identities in order to follow values they see on screen. In those cases in which the ones exposed to such cis-heteronormative contents are young people, the effect is considerably stronger, as during this age ideas and beliefs are more malleable. With the youth being the main consumer of media therefore, the problem poses an even greater danger.

Nevertheless, as explained by Nölke (2018), the strength of the influence exercised by movies and tv-shows' depiction of queerness on queer viewers deeply depends on the level of *stigma viscosity* those viewers have. What this means is that whenever an individual happened to grow up in an unaccepting and intolerant environment, they will tend to be more affected by what seen on tv. In this case they experience in fact a high level of stigma towards themselves, and might as a consequence be more in need for external validation since they never received any in real-life. Hence, they seek such comfort in media – so that when they do not find it – they will be profoundly touched by such depictions. When the representation promotes self-acceptance, they will be very positively affected. However, when what seen in TV and in theatres reinforces existing prejudices and hate, the already high level of stigma of that individual will drastically increase.

The contrary will instead happen if the individuals' stigma level starts as low. After growing up surrounded by accepting people that taught them the values of tolerance, they will be less affected by what portrayed on tv, both if the representation is of good or poor quality. As their existence and experiences have already been

accepted by their communities, they will be less sensitive to stereotypical or hateful representation.

In general, however, it is easier for an individual to be born in a household where the level of stigma is really high, rather than low – as homophobia is currently so widespread. This is why good representation is so important for the development of queer identities and personalities. It is not only the total absence of homosexual or transgender characters in media that can lead to a feeling of exclusion from society. Even inserting not flattering or one-dimensional characters results in queer audiences not feeling represented by them. By not relating to these characters – but being these characters the only ones available in media – the range of possibilities in life for queer viewers seems incredibly limited. Queer viewers could tend to try their best to run away from those stereotypes they see in media, because they feel ashamed or even scared to face the same type of life as them.

As previously mentioned, many shows portray queer characters as constantly struggling with their sexual or gender orientations. They are in fact met with hardships and discrimination during their whole life, to the point they might get assaulted or even killed for it. This perpetuates the idea that punishment is the "norm" when being so "different" (Nölke 2018). In a study conducted by Lockwood (2002), it was shown that people tend to put as much distance as possible from whom they perceive as their "worse-off-other". If they see any resemblance with another person – in this case a queer character – that is however living a situation of danger and vulnerability such as receiving hate because of their queer identity, then the viewers will be more motivated to avoid associating to what caused those negative consequences. In other words, they will avoid acting "queer" out of fear that the negative outcomes experienced by the person on the screen – that they recognize themselves into – will happen to them. This phenomenon was illustrated by a participant in Nölke's study (2018) – when talking about a scene of a movie in which a cross-dressing man was beaten up for his sexuality, he declared "I knew that I was gay and I went 'Hell no, I ain't going to put myself through that'".

Subsequently, it is essential that even if majority of environments in life are still not tolerant and accepting, that at least movies should bring about a better representation, for the self-esteem of viewers and their ability to be resilient. And hopefully, contribute to the fight against trans-homophobia among cis-heterosexual people.

Chapter Three

Why Representation: The Non-LGBTQ Perspective

"I think Will and Grace did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has done so far. People fear that which is different. Now they're beginning to understand"

(Biden 2012)

While the benefits of representation on the well-being of minority groups have been repeatedly demonstrated, not many studies have focused on why this representation is actually beneficial for the progress of society as a whole. In fact, not only is the presence of LGBTQ dynamics in media important for the queer public's self-discovery and self-acceptance, but also for non-queer audiences in gaining more knowledge over social spheres they ignored or perhaps were taught to fear and hate.

In other words, exposure to recurring images in media have deep consequences on the attitudes and beliefs of any type of public. What this means on a more practical level is that first of all, more queer-related representation in television and cinema leads cis-heterosexual groups that have never come in contact with LGBTQ groups to be informed about their existence. Also, most importantly, on condition that the portrayal proposed is accurate and non-derogatory, this "first contact" leads people to form opinions on these groups that do not arise solely from widespread stereotypes.

Stereotypes pose indeed a great obstacle in the fight of homophobia and intolerance. While they are functional tools exploited by the human mind in order to make sense of the surrounding world, they could easily become dangerous when they are never questioned and are left to cement. In particular, stereotypes influence people's attitudes towards experiences and especially towards other people. They arise following the *principle of least effort*, so that when information over the external world is limited, or maybe so vast it is impossible to consider it as a whole, people make assumptions based on what they perceive superficially (Allport 1954). Or more commonly, based on what they learned or heard from other people. In general, in fact, the way people form opinions or incorporate values is not through direct and personal

experience. The stereotypes they form, or better, the base from which they create certain stereotypes derives from teachings they were given as they were younger. Majority of stereotypes and prejudices are therefore not directly formed.

This is linked to the important phenomenon of *socialization.* Socialization, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is the process of "learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society" and it is performed under the influence of the so-called *agents of socialization.* An agent of socialization is any institution that has a strong and long-lasting effect on the establishment of the individual's values, habits and attitudes – which draw inspiration from the conventional norms put in place for that category. Among these agents the most important ones are family, school, friends and – as it will be better analysed shortly – media.

Socialization is therefore a fundamental process that any human has to go through, as it helps in the effortless understanding of the outer world before even directly experiencing it. It is also functional for survival, since it allows humans to better integrate into the society they were born in and become valuable members of it. By learning what is considered acceptable by the dominant institutions around them, they will unconsciously adapt themselves to these values and incorporate them in order to avoid isolation.

Yet, the risk of blindly believing to the values diffused through socialization without resorting to further investigation is evident. In fact, the principles presented as *right* to the individuals during their young – and most delicate – years will hardly be questioned throughout their life. Instead they will be taken as the truth, so as granted and irrefutable. No further proof will usually be searched before they are implemented and used in quotidian decision-making. It could thus happen that some people will live their entire existence believing to prejudices they derived from what their family or teachers have taught them, never realising that they are actually founded on misinformation.

This predisposition is particularly threatening in the dichotomy between majority and minority groups. In general, in fact, socialization processes frequently tend to the creation of distinctions between categories – or better yet, between what is *desirable* and what is not. The recipient of such subconscious teachings will naturally develop a mental separation between *in-groups* of "similar" and "acceptable" people and *out-groups* of people perceived as out of the socialized norm (Rowe 2010). This

is at the basis of the reason why majority and minority groups hardly tend to interact with each other or mix together.

As already mentioned, television and cinema are important agents of socialization as well. And particularly powerful ones too. In fact, they have a double potential. Like any other agent of socialization, media might represent a first contact with the world – and its rules – for the viewer. A person watching a movie or an episode from a tv-show subconsciously learns what is normal and not, what brings the character to succeed or to fail, which are the values better accepted in society – only by observing made-up roles play fake scenarios on-screen. The same happens considering the context of minority and majority groups, where cinema and television become important intermediaries between them. Even if as for now media portrayal for minority groups is still limited – and if not, still not sufficient – its presence contributes to affirm their existence, at least from the perspective of the majority. In fact, by seeing members of these categories on screen, they find it easier to acknowledge them, get to know their values, and consequently create "stereotypes" that are now however helpful short-cuts based on accurate information rather than superficial observation or by hearsay.

Media's most advantageous ability does not however only rely on this. In fact, it is very interesting to observe how cinema and television have the incredible tendency of making the public – queer or non-queer – empathize with the characters, regardless of their sexual of gender orientation. Movies and tv-series are particularly decisive because they are able to emotionally reach the audience and to connect with them at a deeper level, so that they are less influenced by prior convictions and more susceptible to follow their automatic emotional response (Hanckel 2016).

In other words, the fictional stories represented on screen are so immersive that they touch viewers' intimate emotions, so as to create a reaction that does not consider previous – probably stereotypical – beliefs. This is why it is such a valuable tool in the shifting of ideas and education of people, that eventually brings about a more widespread change of attitudes in society. Many theories have been devised to explain how such phenomenon is possible. Throughout the rest of the chapter, however, the discussion will rest only on the *Parasocial Contact Hypothesis* (Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes 2005), as one of the most valuable ones in explaining the beneficial function of media in the overcoming of conflict between majorities and minorities.

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis is particularly interesting as it connects two precedent theories as a way to explain a more complex and modern phenomenon. The two theories it draws inspiration from are the *Intergroup Contact Hypothesis* proposed by Allport (1954) and the *Parasocial Interaction Theory* by Horton and Wohl (1956), so to connect Allport's precedent findings to media, such as television and cinema.

The main hypothesis postulated by Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes rested on the idea that by being exposed to characters representing minority groups in media, majority groups' members would as a consequence develop a more positive attitude towards that minority as a whole. In other words, a contact with these characters – even with such contact being mediated by fiction – will lead to a decrease of stereotypes and prejudices surrounding the category these characters represent.

The reason why this would most likely happen is explained by the two theories put at the base of this hypothesis. First of all, there is the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis (1954), devised by Allport in order to explain how it is possible to solve conflicts between competing groups – for instance, between opposite majority and minority groups. Allport eventually realised that what contributes to the increasing of distances between these groups – and therefore to the worsening of their relationship – is the fact that direct interactions between them are so rare in daily life. This makes it harder for the members of both groups to eradicate established and usually socialized stereotypes they have towards one another. In fact, once settled and incorporated, convictions towards a certain category are not easily dismantled unless there is some contradicting evidence against it. However, the more there will be prejudices against a certain minority group, the least will majority group members try to have interactions with them. Yet, the more they do not have interactions with them, the more their prejudices will consolidate. Instead, with a greater amount of contact between them prejudices will diminish as a consequence.

People tend naturally to associate more positive characteristics to their *in-group* while associating negative characteristics to their *out-group* (Smith 2009), and this is particularly evident for the majorities – as the established norms enforced in society work in their favour. Still, having positive interactions with members of a minority works as a way to realize this apparent difference between them is only superficial. And even if the other groups actually have contrasting values, this does

not mean that these will be automatically negative. This happens because by having interactions with one another, people develop an emotional connection, they experience more empathy and the distinction between in-group and out-group is not so clear anymore. The more comfortable a person becomes with another one, the more they will realize how they are essentially the same. They will therefore learn not to fear them, so that it will be easier to understand their different perspectives.

Therefore, adapting Allport's model to homophobia and transphobia, it was shown that individuals who have had real-life interactions with homosexual or transgender people are more likely to be more accepting towards the LGBTQ community as a whole. In other words, as humans tend to generalize experiences, a positive contact with a member of a minority group will end up fostering more positive attitudes towards the whole group the individual belongs to (Herek 1988). Negative dispositions therefore diminish as through personal interaction, the whole image and belief constructed upon a whole category is questioned all over again.

The change of attitude caused by such contact is caused by the fact that positive experiences upon interaction cause a *dissonance* with what previously believed. Having well-established pre-conceptions and stereotypes towards minorities, the member of a majority group will expect a negative experience when coming across its members. However, when met with a positive experience, the dissonance will be so strong that the expectation towards that type of people will change (Schiappa 2005). Yet, what is the role of media in this?

In order to answer to this question, Schiappa et al. drew from another important theory devised by Horton and Wohl in 1956. Known as the Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), this theory tries to explain how the audience relates and interacts with mass media performers or fictional characters in television and cinema. In particular, it illustrates why audiences become so attached and so engaged with the stories and characters proposed in television or cinema – even when they've never met them or when they know they are fake. In fact, it has been shown, especially during the last few years in which the access to tv-shows and movies has expanded, that audiences form real ties and relationships with their favourite characters or tv-persona, to the point that they become emotionally connected to them as if they were friends or people they knew in real life. Real emotional and affectionate, even if one-sided, ties are formed. They are known as *parasocial relationships*.

What is most striking about this phenomenon is the fact that the audience is well aware that these characters are not real, or at least – in the case of celebrities – they are most likely not like they appear. And that obviously it is impossible to have a real interaction with them, and surely not an intimate relationship. Still, watching fictional content will give the audience the impression of "knowing" the person on the screen.

Even while consciously knowing that these interactions are not real and ties formed with the character are artificial, subconsciously the human psyche tends to consider these para-social relationships as valid as any other relationship (Barnes 2015). The cognitive bias linked to such paradox is the one of *Alief.* Alief is defined as a gut-level and automatic – physical or emotional – feeling that says the opposite of what the mind beliefs in. It is a way to instinctively react to experiences (Santos 2015). This explains why people become so emotionally attached to fictional characters. In fact, why do viewers feel like crying when their favourite characters in a movie dies, knowing that it is all fake? It is because while they "believe" the scenes are not real, they "alieve" they are.

This also leads to the fact that when being exposed to a likeable character, audiences will establish with them similar relationships to the ones they have with real-life friends. Even if logically they will not consider them as "friends" on the same level as the others, subconsciously they will act as these relationships are just as valid. As a consequence, the benefits they would achieve from real-life friends will be achieved from para-social friends. In many surveys studying this phenomenon, respondents replied by saying that occasionally they felt like "my favourite TV personality is like an old friend" (Schiappa 2005).

In fact, media has been demonstrated to be an almost perfectly equivalent alternative to a real experience of contact. In other words, it was shown that through media interaction, people feel like having met that kind of people in real life as well. The human mind, in fact, does not make a distinction between people known through real-life interactions or artificial ones.

By connecting this theory to Allport's one, the Para-Social Contact Interaction Theory is formed. So, keeping in consideration that the interaction with members of minorities reduces prejudices towards them, and the fact that the contact audiences have with characters on screen have the same emotional value of real-life interactions, the hypothesis devised by Schiappa (2005) is that exposure to queer characters in

television and cinema will lower prejudices in cis-heterosexual public, and improve their attitude towards the whole LGBTQ community.

This method is therefore particularly effective because it does not require majority members to exit their comfort zone. In fact, artificial interactions have the advantage that they increase the possibility of having such type of experiences. It would be in fact incredibly difficult to have the same amount and quality of contact with minority group members in daily life – both because of the prejudices surrounding them, but also because of the limited occasions in which such contact would be possible. Representation – if positive and accurate, and not relying on derogatory stereotypes – is therefore a very important tool in the fight for homophobia and transphobia.

As it happens in any other study on social and psychological behaviour, it is impossible to generalize these findings to any situation. As a matter of fact, there are countless of other variables that could influence the results. An example is the fact that men are found to be considerably more intolerant to LGBTQ issues rather than women, especially regarding male homosexuality. The reason for such widespread attitude is the fact that men receive heavy social pressures throughout their lives to conform to *toxic masculinity* values – such as being pressed to act and appear as virile and strong at all times, and show no emotions or weaknesses. This is why the feminine values often connected to male homosexuality are demonized and rejected. In other words, men tend to reject homosexuality at all costs, wishing to appear as more masculine (Herek 1986, 1988). Cis-heterosexual women will instead be more open to such matters, even if probably they will end up sexualizing female homosexuality because of society's pressure to perform in order to please their male counterparts, as it was briefly illustrated in chapter two of this dissertation.

Apart from gender differences, another variable that strongly affects the fight against intolerance is related to people's political beliefs and convictions. Political opinions and policy preferences can in fact be incredibly hard to change. All these theories listed above explained how LGBTQ-content in media can help in improving non-queer public's attitudes towards queers in society. But they do not specifically illustrate whether these theories can also be effective in directing the viewer towards more progressive political beliefs. In this next section, instead, it will be analysed if – along with more positive social attitudes towards this category – exposure to movies

and shows that contain queer-content is also effective in pushing towards the inclusion and support of pro-LGBTQ policies.

Effects On Non-LGBTQ's Policy Preferences

Entertainment media offers great potential in the influence of audiences' political opinions. Media's already powerful ability of persuasion is strengthened by the fact that upon being exposed to content which is made for entertainment, viewers "lower their political guards" (Adkins and Castle 2013). Expressly, as they are not expecting to receive political propaganda from what they are watching just for leisure, they will not be as quick to create resistance towards the political values that might go in contrast with their personal ones.

Such ability of political persuasion held by entertainment media was more practically illustrated in a study conducted by Mulligan and Habel (2011), in which they analysed the effects of watching movies with pro-abortion content on randomly-selected participants with diverse political opinions. It was shown how the *fictional framing* of the movie – that promoted pro-choice behaviour in the context of abortion – contributed to a slight change of opinions after watching the movie towards a more pro-choice stance. So, even if such movie was not presented nor regarded as political, its effects were.

Adapting the discourse to the LGBTQ context, it has already been shown how media representation can be incredibly effective in improving positive attitudes towards the queer population. However, this is not enough. In order for a real change to arise in society, it is important that such improvements are also expanded to politics – so that pro-LGBTQ policies that protect this category's rights can be enforced and a more equal and tolerant society can be achieved. The role played by media – no matter how still very important – is limited. In an interesting and extremely recent study by Baldwin (2021), the correlation between watching a tv-show or a movie with explicit queer content and the shift in non-queer audiences' political opinions regarding LGBTQ matters has been analysed. Baldwin's hypothesis was that upon being exposed to pro-LGBTQ content in entertainment media, viewers' political opinions will automatically adopt a supportive stance in the context of LGBTQ rights, regardless of the participant's initial political beliefs. The effects, however, are not so strong as initially imagined, as political opinions are not so easy to modify. While media is

incredibly successful in improving daily social relationships, it is not as effective in altering ideas that are by-now firmly settled.

Still, this does not mean that queer representation in media is not useful in achieving progress, even in a political context. In the same study conducted by Baldwin (2021), in fact, it appears evident that those participants who had been exposed to movies with a high-LGBTQ content – meaning a movie or a show where queer characters are central to the plot, as for example being the protagonists – had stronger effects on those participants' following political positions. Movies with a low level of LGBTQ content – in other words, those shows that include queer characters but only as secondary roles who are not significant for the main storyline – had instead no effect on the public's political convictions. As small as such persuasion effect might be, it is noticeable that the inclusion of queer characters who are accurately represented – and not only relegated to secondary roles – is still useful in the shaping of political opinions.

Yet, while the problem of shifting already well-established ideas is relevant for the adult population, the same cannot be applied to the youth. Young people are in fact still in a flexible time of their life – as they are still in the process of forming their own opinions, they are hungry for gathering as much information as possible in order to make their own idea of the world surrounding them. Entertainment media – being one of the most easily-accessible form of leisure – is vastly used by younger users. This leads to the idea that its contents will have an incredibly stronger effect than on their adult counterparts. It is therefore fundamental to bring about a more accurate and realistic portrayal of the queer community in entertainment, as a way to allow the more flexible youth to form opinions based on a real understanding of these categories' experiences. A more tolerant and accepting stance towards queerness in movies and tv-shows will as a consequence facilitate the institution of pro-LGBTQ policies in the future. Considering the growing amount of media content with queer characters in it, it is very plausible that consent for pro-queer policies and tolerance towards queer individuals will only increase.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that entertainment media is a tool that strongly affects viewers' perceptions of others and of themselves. Media represents for many a "window" to actual life, as it reveals what to expect from it. It portrays in how social relationships are maintained and formed, which values are considered as appropriate in specific social settings, and which actions carried out by protagonists lead to success or to failure. In a certain sense, television and cinema are fundamental *agents of socialization,* as they promote the predominant principles of the society in which their content is produced. Said values are however not always the only ones that exist in a given society – there are many others that belong to minority groups and that are simply not accepted and consequently not represented. This is the reason why, in chapter one of this dissertation, the link between cultural production and socio-political hegemony was examined. Taking into consideration Gramsci's theories, it was explained how cultural production is the prerogative of the powerful groups in society, who will as a consequence try to promote those values that are only beneficial to their own interests. Thus, all those other categories that do not recognize themselves in the principles held by the stronger majority are subjected to a life of exclusion and discrimination – and very often, of self-loathing. It is in fact very common that those who see themselves excluded from representation end up being "accomplices" to their own victimization by incorporating the beliefs promoted in media, even if they do not resonate with them or might even work against their favour (Lears 1985).

In the subsequent chapters, the reason why representation in movies and tv-shows is deemed as so useful in the protection and improvement of minority groups' life was analyzed. In particular, the discourse focused on the LGBTQ community and on how the presence of accurately-portrayed queer characters on the screen is central if the aim is to improve the community's position in society.

To begin, the second chapter demonstrated how positive depictions of LGBTQ individuals has a strong influence in validating viewers' experiences and in foster their

self-esteem and sense of resilience. If these characters offer an empowering example to the audience, they become actual role-models. This become incredibly important for queer viewers. In fact, it is very plausible that majority of them has never had the possibility of looking up to mentors who would help them to understand their feelings or to create their own identity. The same does not usually happen to their cis/heterosexual counterparts, who can easily find such figures in standard agents of socialization such as friends, family or school.

It goes without saying, also, that if representation is negative – as in the cases where characters are portrayed in a derogatory way – queer viewers are even greatly affected by such images. Their feelings of isolation and of fear of asserting one's identity will worsen. Still, even if not explicitly negative or derogatory, representation must be accurate in order to bring about real positive consequences. This is why the strategy of queer-baiting or the tendency to relegate queer characters to "popular tropes" has been condemned at the end of the second chapter. While still better than a total absence of representation or a totally negative one, this is still not enough for bringing about a positive change.

Additionally, as highlighted in chapter three of this dissertation, positive queer representation in television and cinema is not only helpful for queer audiences' improved self-perception, but also in bringing about a more tolerant and accepting society. Exposure to queer characters in media increases in fact non-queer public's tolerance towards the LGBTQ community as a whole. The theory at the basis of this phenomenon is the *Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,* devised by Schiappa et al. in 2005. Simply put, the theory explains how individuals who have interactions with one queer person will as a result manifest more positive attitudes towards that person's social group in general, even if these interactions were carried out through media exclusively. It was in effect found that engaging with fictional characters on screen has the same emotional impact as engaging with friends or acquaintances in real-life. In other words, even by just watching and empathizing with queer characters on screen, non-queer audiences will tend to develop more positive attitudes towards real-life members of that category as well.

To be precise, however, it is important to highlight how this dissertation only takes into consideration USA population and cultural production in the construction of its conclusions. The studies and observations analysed in previous chapters have been

carried out in fact on American citizens exclusively. While this choice is legitimized by the fact that the US is the strongest cultural influence in the context of modern globalisation (Van Elteren 2003) – meaning that American cultural production is in fact spread all over the Western world – the studies proposed might lead to different results if adapted to the experiences of different countries. Additionally, if queer characters and stories are increasing in USA series and movies, the same cannot be said by many other countries in the world. Not considering the openly trans-homophobic countries in which the LGBTQ community is still legally persecuted, representation is incredibly limited even in those countries where gender and sexual orientations are not criminalized anymore.

Italy is an example of such phenomenon. Despite being one of the most avid consumers of American entertainment media, movies and tv-shows produced in Italy rarely depict queer characters, and if they do, it is very common that they are characterized in an extremely stereotypical or even derogatory way. In other words, it is impossible to say that Italian production has achieved the same level of inclusiveness as the USA. Some things however, especially thanks to globalization and pressures coming from more progressive foreign countries, are starting to change.

This change is mostly perceived in those tv-series or movies that are directed to younger audiences, as their stories mainly follow typical "teen-drama" dynamics. In such products, protagonists are usually teenage characters that have to deal with the delicate period of adolescence as a way to grow into developing their identities. While it is usually easier to insert queer characters in such type of content, it is not so common that these characters hold a central position for the plot. Currently the only exception is the Italian tv-series *Skam Italia* (Bessegato 2018-ongoing) which in its second season stars two homosexual protagonists who openly live their love-story. Such series is particularly important in assessing Italy's progresses in inclusive media representations, on the steps of the more experienced United States. It is true that *Skam Italia* is nothing else but an Italian re-adaptation of a pre-existing Norwegian series – where the homosexual characters were already present.

Yet, considering the amount of success of the series enjoyed among the Italian public and considering the fact that it is the first Italian tv-series with two explicitly gay protagonists, it still represents a message of great hope for future improvements.

Bibliography

Adkins, T., Castle, J. (2013). Moving Pictures? Experimental Evidence of Cinematic Influence on Political Attitudes. *Social Sciences Quarterly*. 95(3): 1230-1244

Allport, G. W. (1954) The Contact Hypothesis. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge: Perseus Books.

Amory, D., Massey, S. (2020). *LGBTQ+ Studies: An Open Textbook.* Beta Edition, Spring 2020. Retrieved at: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-lgbtq-studies/

Baldwin, G. (2021). The Effect of LGBT Film Exposure on Policy Preference. *Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies:* 38 (6)

Barker, C. (2004). *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies.* London: Sage Publications

Barker, C. (2003). *Cultural studies, Theory and Practice.* Second Edition. Oxford: Aiden Press Limited.

Blue is the Warmest Color (2013), Film. Kechiche, A. [DVD] France

Bridges, R. (2013) *How Do We Solve A Problem Like 'Queerbaiting'?.* AutoStraddle. Retrieved 20 August 2021.

Brooks, D.E., & Hébert, L.P. (2006). Chapter 16: Gender, race, and media representation. Dow, B. J., & Wood, J. T. (2006*). The SAGE handbook of gender and communication.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Butler, L. Koopman, C., Zimbardo, P. (1995) The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film "JFK": Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioural Intentions. *Political Psychology.* 16 (2), 237-257

Call Me by your Name (2018), Film. Guadagnino, L. [DVD] Italy

Campbell, J., Carilli, T., (2013) *LGBTQ Perspectives.* Plymouth: Lexington Books

Carlucci, A. (2013). *Gramsci and Languages: Unification, Diversity, Hegemony.* Netherlands: Brill.

Carol (2015). Film. Haynes, T. [DVD]. UK, USA

Cook, C. (2018). A Content Analysis of LGBT Representation on Broadcast and Streaming Television. *Honors Theses.*

Davis, A. (1999). Confessions of a College Lesbian. In *Seattle Weekly.*

Dracula's Daughter (1936). Film. Hillyer, L. [DVD] USA

Dyer, R. (1993). *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. Second Edition (2002). London: Routledge.

Fejes, F. & Petrich, K. (1993) Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbians, Gays and the Media, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*: 10(4), 395-422

Gendler, T. (2008). Alief and Belief. *The Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10) 634-63. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620132.

Gerbner, G.(1998) Cultivation Analysis: An Overview, Mass Communication and Society, 1:3-4,175-194, DOI: 10.1080/15205436.1998.9677855

Gillig, T., Murphy, S. (2016). Fostering Support for LGBTQ Youth? The Effects of a Gay Adolescent Media Portrayal on Young Viewers. *International Journal of Communication*: 10, 3828-3850

GLAAD (2021), Where We Are on TV Report: 2005-2006 Season. Retrieved from https://www.glaad.org/publications/tvreport05 [access: 3 August 2021]

GLAAD (2021), Where We Are on TV Report: 2019-2020 Season. Retrieved from https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv20 [access: 3 August 2021]

Glaveanu, V. (2009). What differences make a difference?: a discussion of hegemony, resistance and representation. *Papers on social representations:* 18(2), 1-2.22

Gomillion, S., Giuliano, T. (2011) The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity, *Journal of Homosexuality*: 58(3), 330-354

Gonta, G., Shannon, H., Fagin, C., Fong, J. (2017). Changing Media and Changing Minds: Media Exposure and Viewer Attitudes Toward Homosexuality. *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research:* 5 (5)

Gramsci, A. 1891-1937. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci.* New York: International Publishers.

Green Book (2018). Film. Farrelly, P. [DVD] USA

Hall, S. (1981) *Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular". Essential Essays,* Volume 1, edited by David Morley, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 347-361

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications.

Hall, S., Whannel, P. (1964) *The Popular Arts.* Edition (2018). Durham: Duke University Press

Hanckel, B. (2016) Representations of LGBT youth: A review of Queer Youth and Media Cultures, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 13:4, pp. 410-413

Herek, G., Glunt, E. (1993). Interpersonal Contact and Heterosexuals' Attitudes towards Gay Men: Results from a National Survey. *The Journal of Sex Research.* 30 (3), 239-244

Hogan, H. (2016) *Autostraddle's Utimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV.* Retrieved from: https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/

Horton, D., Wohl R. (1956) Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. *Psychiatry* 19.3

Kenneth, M., Habel, P. (2011). An Experimental Test of the Effects of Fictional Framing on Attitudes. *Social Science Quarterly* 92(1): 79-99

Lears, J. (1985). The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities. *The American Historical Review:* 90 (3), 567-593

Lockwood, P. (2002) Could it Happen to You? Predicting the Impact of Downward Comparisons on the Self. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82(3):343-58

Manago, A. M. (2015) Media and the Development of Identity. *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioural Sciences.*

McInroy, L. B & Craig, S. L. (2017) Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20:1, 32-46

McInroy, L.B & Craig S.L (2015) Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*: 12, 254-275

Merks, L. (2019). Yas, Queen! Zhuzh It, Henny! The Representation of Homosexuality in Bravo's Original Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and Netflix's Reboot Queer Eye. *Master Thesis North American Studies: Radbound University Nijmegen*

Moonlight (2016). Film. Jenkins, B. [DVD] USA

Nölke, A.I. (2018) Making Diversity Conform? An Intersectional, Longitudinal Analysis of LGBT-Specific Mainstream Media Advertisements. *Journal of Homosexuality*.

Nölke, A.I. (2018). The Viscosity of Stigma: Media Experiences, Intersectionality, and the Life-Course of LGBTQ+ Consumers. *Business and Management thesis and dissertation collection.* Retrieved at: http://hdl.handle.net/1842/31438

Orange Is the New Black (2013-2019). Tv-Series. Kohan, K. [Netflix] USA

Padva, G. (2007) Media and Popular Culture Representations of LGBT Bullying, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 19:3-4, 105-118

Paris is Burning (1991). Documentary. Livingston, J. [DVD] USA

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019). Film. Sciamma, C. [DVD]. France

Prot, S., Anderson, C. A., Gentile, D. A., Warburton, W., Saleem, M., Groves, C. L. and Brown, S. C. (2014). Media as Agents of Socialization. In Grusec, J. and Hastings, P. (Eds). *Handbook of Socialization. Second Edition: Theory and Research.* (276-300) New York: The Guildford Press.

Riggle, E. (1996). The Impact of "Media Contact" on Attitudes Toward Gay Men. *Journal of Homosexuality.*

Riggle, E., Rostosky, S. (2012). *A POSITIVE VIEW OF LGBTQ: Embracing Identity and Cultivating Well-Being.* Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Rowe, A. (2010). Media's Portrayal of Homosexuality as a Reflection of Cultural Acceptance. *Undergraduate Research Awards.* 8

Sánchez-Soriano, J. J. & García-Jiménez, L. (2020). The media construction of LGBT+ characters in Hollywood movies. The use of pinkwashing and queerbaiting. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (77), 95-116.

Schiappa, D., Gregg P. & Hewes, D (2005) The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, *Communication Monographs,* 72:1, 92-115, DOI: 10.1080/0363775052000342544

Schiappa, E., Gregg, P., Hewes, D. (2006) Can One TV Show Make a Difference? Will and Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. *Journal of Homosexuality*

Seiter, E. (1986). Stereotypes and the Media: A Re-Evaluation. *Journal of Communication.* 36(2), 14–26, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb01420.x

Some Like it Hot (1959). Film. Wilder, B. [DVD] USA

Staiger, J. (1992). Film, reception and cultural studies, *The Centennial Review.* 36 (1), 89-104. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23739835

Subhrajit, C. (2014) Problems Faced by LGBT People in the Mainstream Society. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies.* 317-331.

Tagudina, I. (2011) *Media Representations of the LGBT Community and Stereotypes' Homophobic Reinforcement.* Manila University.

TEDxTalks (2015) Imaginary Friends and real-world consequences: parasocial Relationships (Jennifer Barnes at TEDxOU). YouTube. Retrieved at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=22yoaiLYb7M

That Certain Summer (1972). Tv-Series. Levinson, R. Link, W. [Internet Archive] USA

The Celluloid Closet (1995). Film. Epstein R., Friedman J. [DVD] France, UK, USA.

The Danish Girl (2016). Film. Hooper, T. [DVD] USA

Thomson, K. (2021). An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Television and Film. *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections:* 5 (7)

Times of Harvey Milk. (1984) Film. Epstein, R. [DVD] USA

Van Elteren, M. (2003) U.S. Cultural Imperialism Today: Only a Chimera? *SAIS Review*: 23 (2): 169-88.

Visch, V. Molenaar, D., Tan, E. (2010). The Emotional and Cognitive Effect of Immersion in Film Viewing. *Cognition and Emotion.* 24(8), 1439-1445

Waggoner, E. B (2018) Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics, Journal of Homosexuality, 65:13,1877-1891

Wikipedia Contributors, *Cultural Hegemony,* Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_hegemony, date retrieved: 28 July 2021

Wikipedia Contributors, *National LGBTQ Task Force*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_LGBTQ_Task_Force, date retreved:18 August 2021

Wikipedia Contributors, *Stereotipi LGBT*, Wikipedia, L'Enciclopedia Libera, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotipi_LGBT, date retrieved: 20 August 2021

Wikipedia Contributors, *Skam Italia,* Wikipedia, L'Enciclopedia Libera, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skam_Italia

Wireless Philosophy (2015) Critical Thinking – Cognitive Biases (Laurie Santos). Youtube. Retrieved At: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCBALVumrUQ

Yellin, J. (2012). *Biden says he is 'absolutely comfortable' with same-sex marriage*. Retrieved at: CNN, Web.

Riassunto

Con l'avvento della fotografia e conseguentemente del cinema e della televisione, la società umana ha attraversato un effettivo processo rivoluzionario, concernente i propri tessuti sociali, il suo sviluppo estetico collettivo e una totale riforma della lente tramite cui essa aveva fino a quel momento osservato e percepito sé stessa. A partire dalla fine dell'Ottocento le *immagini* hanno iniziato a circondare l'essere umano in ogni sua azione. Cartelloni, pubblicità e locandine popolarono le città, mentre pellicole di immagini in movimento – i *film* – finirono per dominare invece quelle ore di tempo libero che fino a pochi anni prima venivano riempite dedicandosi alla lettura di un libro. E pian piano con l'affermarsi del cinema si affermò la televisione, che permise la fruizione di questi prodotti anche in un contesto domestico, con l'ausilio di un semplice click su un telecomando. Le immagini sono quindi diventate sempre più accessibili e così lo è diventato anche il sottile potere di condizionamento che queste attuano nei confronti di chi vi assiste.

La visione di un film o, come più frequente in epoca moderna, di un episodio di una serie tv ha una considerevole influenza sulla vita e sulle azioni umane. Suggestiona infatti in modo inconscio la percezione dello spettatore nei confronti del mondo. Le scene viste sullo schermo, sebbene di solito frutto di totale invenzione, si ispirano alla vita umana e cercano di rappresentarla, a volte fedelmente, a volte in modo tale da arricchirla. Lo spettatore si rispecchia quindi nelle scene che vede, si immerge in questo universo alternativo per un tempo limitato e ne assorbe gli insegnamenti, le idee e le esperienze come se vi stesse vivendo realmente. Gli sarà naturale quindi provare empatia per alcuni personaggi, detestarne altri, o forse restarne affascinato. Alcuni fra questi personaggi diventeranno per lo spettatore dei veri e propri modelli di riferimento a cui si ispireranno nella scelta dei propri valori.

L'immagine della società riflessa nelle dinamiche televisive o cinematografiche rappresenta per chi guarda la verità autentica, e viene accolta quindi con grande serietà dagli spettatori, soprattutto quando rappresenta situazioni mai vissute durante la propria vita. In questi casi, essi tenderanno infatti a formare opinioni personali basandosi unicamente sulla realtà proposta sullo schermo, piuttosto che sulle percezioni ricevute durante esperienze in prima persona – in quanto in alcuni contesti mai avvenute. Per tale motivo ci si riferisce ai media – tra cui televisione e cinema –

come dei veri e propri agenti di *socializzazione*. Come qualsiasi altra istituzione volta alla socializzazione degli individui – famiglia, scuola e amicizie – anche i media svolgono tale funzione.

L'obiettivo principale di tale processo di socializzazione è quello di mostrare allo spettatore quali sono le norme sociali e le regole prestabilite nella collettività in cui si accinge a vivere, e che servirà infine far proprie in modo da potervi vivere serenamente, essendo accettati ed avendo successo. Queste norme e di conseguenza questi valori seguono però i principi prossimi alle classi dominanti della società, ovvero della maggioranza, finendo quindi per escludere quelli delle minoranze. Per definizione infatti, i gruppi minoritari sono quei gruppi i cui membri possiedono determinate caratteristiche che non sono condivise dalla maggioranza della popolazione in una data società. Per tale motivo, il concetto di *rappresentazione mediatica* è stato storicamente collegato a quello di dominazione ed egemonia. Come riscontrato da Stuart Hall (1981), le industrie culturali hanno il potere di riscrivere costantemente la realtà sociale e di scegliere quale morale dominerà nell'ambiente collettivo attuale e futuro. Poiché il potere nella produzione di contenuti mediatici popolari – e quindi maggiormente influenti – è quasi esclusivamente nelle mani dei gruppi sociali appartenenti alla maggioranza, è inevitabile che le immagini presentate al pubblico siano esclusivamente quelle compatibili con i loro interessi.

Una conseguenza di tale fenomeno è il fatto che i gruppi minoritari e le loro esperienze potrebbero non ricevere la rappresentazione che meritano, aggravando la loro situazione di discriminazione ed isolamento sociale. Le immagini che circolano in società ritraenti i membri di tali gruppi – ammesso che esistano e che circolino – poggiano infatti su stereotipi o informazioni fortemente imprecise. Considerato il valore fortemente educativo e socializzante di tali media, è evidente che permettendo che questo accada si incorre nel rischio di consolidare tali stereotipi negli spettatori e allontanare ulteriormente la possibilità di una futura inclusione sociale.

Il gruppo minoritario preso in esame nel corso di questa tesi è quello della comunità LGBTQ o *queer*, che comprende quindi tutti quegli individui che si riconoscono in orientamenti sessuali o di genere diversi da quello eterosessuale o *cisgender*. Per la comunità queer, un'accurata e positiva rappresentazione mediatica nei canali di intrattenimento quali televisione e cinema è fondamentale per due motivi. Da un lato essa permette a chi non si riconosce come LGBTQ – ovvero, la maggioranza "cis-etero" – di entrare a contatto con i membri di tale gruppo e quindi di formare

opinioni che non derivano da stereotipi riduttivi e degradanti, contribuendo perciò ad un clima sociale di maggiore rispetto e democraticità. In secondo luogo, tale rappresentazione consente anche un miglioramento per le persone queer nella gestione della loro vita privata e del rapporto con sé stessi. Come precedentemente menzionato, i media svolgono un ruolo centrale nella formazione dell'identità di un individuo, soprattutto quando tale individuo non ha potuto ispirarsi a degli adeguati *modelli di comportamento* durante l'infanzia, come spesso accade per le persone queer rispetto che per le loro controparti cis-eterosessuali.

L'inclusione di personaggi LGBTQ "positivi" in televisione o nel cinema promuove quindi lo sviluppo degli spettatori che prendono tali personaggi come punti di riferimento, e che quindi avranno gli strumenti per incrementare il proprio senso di autostima e percezione di sé. Ciò significa che i personaggi di fantasia visti sullo schermo diventano delle icone capaci di ispirare orgoglio e conforto negli spettatori che riconoscono in loro alcune delle proprie caratteristiche fondamentali e ne ammirano quelle che forse ancora non possiedono. Rappresentando personaggi omosessuali, transgender o non binari come forti, validi, resilienti e in grado di avere successo, gli spettatori che si riconoscono in loro di conseguenza impareranno tramite loro ad apprezzarsi.

È tuttavia molto raro che i personaggi LGBTQ proposti nei prodotti di intrattenimento siano ritratti in modo adeguato, in quelle poche occasioni in cui non sono del tutto esclusi dalla narrazione. Quando essi compaiono, la loro presenza è di norma fortemente soggetta a stereotipi o relegata a ruoli di secondo piano. Negli ultimi anni si è notevolmente diffuso il fenomeno di *queerbaiting*, che consiste nell'inserire dinamiche queer all'interno di film e serie televisive ma solo in modo implicito, così da attirare il pubblico queer – che ha un disperato bisogno di vedersi rappresentato – senza però perdere il sostegno degli spettatori non-LGBTQ. Altre volte invece i personaggi queer vengono inseriti, ma svolgono ruoli fortemente stereotipati che si fondano su dei motivi ricorrenti (in inglese, *tropes*) e che impediscono quindi una caratterizzazione più significativa dal punto di vista psicologico. Alcuni di questi *tropes* sono incredibilmente diffusi. Ne è un esempio quello del "migliore-amico-gay", di incredibile diffusione nei film o le serie della fine degli anni '90 e dei primi anni 2000. In questo caso, la presenza del personaggio gay è legittimata dal suo ruolo di "aiutante" dell'amica eterosessuale, ovvero la protagonista della trama principale. Il tempo sullo schermo dedicato al personaggio gay è ristretto a quello condiviso con tale

protagonista – non ha quindi una propria caratterizzazione o una propria *story-line*. Questo tipo di rappresentazione non è solo fortemente dannosa per il pubblico queer esposto a tali immagini, ma anche sull'esperienza collettiva nella sua totalità. Queste immagini stereotipiche contribuiscono infati a diffondere ulteriormente l'ignoranza e l'odio nei confronti di questi gruppi da parte di chi non ne fa parte e ricava le sue percezioni da esse.

Indubbiamente, la creazione di stereotipi è una tendenza inerente all'esperienza umana: è un istinto naturale risalente al desiderio di trovare una "scorciatoia" per comprendere più rapidamente il mondo esterno. Gli stereotipi sono quindi tendenzialmente funzionali, se non fosse per il rischio di cadere in dannose generalizzazioni e semplificazioni. L'ipotesi che permea l'ultimo capitolo di questa tesi è invece quella che tali dannose conseguenze possono essere contrastate tramite un aumento di personaggi queer nei media di intrattenimento, così da eradicare credenze e convinzioni intolleranti.

Secondo *l'Ipotesi del Contatto Parasociale* sviluppata da Schiappa, Gregg e Hewes (2005), una volta esposti a personaggi televisivi e cinematografici che rappresentano gruppi di minoranza, gli spettatori facenti parte della maggioranza tenderanno di conseguenza allo sviluppo di un atteggiamento più positivo nei confronti di quella minoranza nel suo insieme. In altre parole, un contatto con questi personaggi – anche se fortemente mediato dalla finzione del format – porterà a una diminuzione degli stereotipi e dei pregiudizi che circondano la categoria che questi personaggi vogliono rappresentare.

L'ipotesi menzionata raccoglie al suo interno due importanti teorie sviluppate nella seconda metà del ventesimo secolo. La prima, conosciuta come *Ipotesi del Contatto*, fu postulata da Allport nel 1954 e spiega come favorendo interazioni dirette e personali fra membri di gruppi sociali in competizione sia possibile risolverne i conflitti. Quanto osservato da Allport spiega che coloro che abbiano avuto nel corso della propria vita delle interazioni con membri di una minoranza – per esempio, con persone LGBTQ – tenderanno automaticamente ad avere un atteggiamento più positivo nei confronti dell'intera comunità.

La seconda teoria da cui Schiappa e al. ricavarono ispirazione è invece quella dell'*Interazione Parasociale* sviluppata da Horton intorno al 1956. Questa dimostra invece che il "contatto" tramite media è un'alternativa quasi perfettamente equivalente

ad una reale esperienza di contatto. In altre parole, la mente umana sembra non fare distinzione tra persone conosciute attraverso interazioni reali o artificiali.

Questo spiega quindi anche come uno spettatore sia capace di affezionarsi alle storie dei personaggi proposte in televisione o al cinema, seppur sapendo che esse non sono altro se non frutto di totale invenzione. È stato infatti dimostrato che il pubblico instaura legami e relazioni reali con il proprio personaggio preferito, al punto da diventarvi emotivamente connesso come se esso fosse un conoscente o amico di lunga data nella vita reale. Si formano quindi dei veri legami affettivi e affettuosi, anche se unilaterali – più precisamente, le cosiddette *relazioni parasociali*.

Come chiarito da Allport, così come le persone aventi avuto un certo tipo di interazione con persone queer nella vita quotidiana manifesteranno un atteggiamento più positivo verso i membri dell'intera categoria, anche le persone che hanno avuto tale interazione solo con personaggi rappresentanti tali gruppi, svilupperanno infine – e nella stessa misura – atteggiamenti più positivi verso quella categoria intera anche nella vita reale.

Tale metodo si rivela inoltre particolarmente efficace in quanto non richiede che i membri della maggioranza siano costretti ad uscire dalla loro "zona di comfort" per poter portare a termine interazioni con membri di gruppi che sentono socialmente, moralmente o politicamente lontani. L'interazione artificiale aumenta quindi la possibilità di avere questo tipo di contatto, il quale sarebbe invece incredibilmente difficile ottenere con la stessa frequenza e intensità nel corso della vita quotidiana, sia a causa di possibili pregiudizi che per l'effettiva rarità delle occasioni che la renderebbero possibile. La rappresentazione mediatica diventa quindi uno strumento centrale nella lotta contro omofobia e transfobia nella società odierna.

Le nuove generazioni sono particolarmente sensibili nei confronti di tale tipo di rappresentazione – trovandosi in una fase di crescita e di formazione individuale molto delicata sono facilmente influenzabili da questi messaggi. Quanto visto in televisione o al cinema di conseguenza diventerà la base sulla quale costruire idee e future osservazioni. Una rappresentazione più positiva nei confronti della comunità queer nei film e negli show televisivi facilita pertanto l'istituzione di attitudini e conseguentemente politiche pro-LGBTQ che possono a loro volta incrementare il livello di inclusione di questi gruppi minoritari nella società.

Nonostante la maggior parte della società è ancora lontana dal livello di tolleranza necessario a permettere delle minoranze queer di sentirsi libere e a proprio

agio, è auspicabile che almeno i film e le serie che circolano in società possano diffondere immagini più positive, così da contribuire al miglioramento dell'autostima degli spettatori, la loro resilienza e solidità anche di fronte alle difficoltà. E non meno importante, contribuire alla lotta contro la trans-omofobia tra le persone non-queer, così da facilitare ancor di più il processo di evoluzione dell'intera società.