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Writing Portfolio

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You can also find some further writings of mine on my old blog, BER Necessities, which focused on discussing linguistics, film studies, and social advocacy.

Mr. Mr. Mr. Boop

Consumerism, Censorship, and the Self in *Mr. Boop*

In the opening panel of the webcomic series Mr. Boop (2020), series protagonist and comic author Alec Robbins looks directly at the audience while a thought bubble above his head reads “My wife Betty Boop is really hot”. Mr. Boop is a web series that takes the form of a traditional four-panel webcomic that integrates parody, cringe, and psychological horror as narrative tools to tell the story of a man living in a fabricated reality constructed out of the media he consumes. Similar to many works of the Internet age, Mr. Boop is highly referential, both in its use of franchised characters which constitute a majority of its primary cast and in the comic’s frequent subtle allusions to many internet memes. The use of franchised characters to constitute a primary cast wholly grounds Mr. Boop as a product of consumer culture, and as a mediation on how consumerism can affect the identity-making processes of those within a highly consumer-centric society. Mr. Boop’s central story harkens back to a genre of amateur comics that gained infamy throughout the 2000s and the early 2010s known as the self-insert comic. Self-insert comics are defined by the positioning of author-as-protagonist, wherein the protagonist is a typically hyperbolized and idealized version of the comic’s author, within a wholly fictional storyline made up of copyrighted franchised characters. Self-insert comics share a narrative basis with another graphic novel genre known as comic diaries. Comic diaries constitute autobiographical comics focused on the author/protagonist’s life. Similar to self-insert comics, comic diaries can be exaggerated and hyperbolized for narrative effect, however, the difference between self-insert comics and comic diaries lies twofold. First, the self-insert comic relies on a fictionalized story while inserting a real person within the fictitious universe, whereas comic diaries may use hyperbole in their stories, but their narratives are at least grounded to some extent in reality. Second, comic diaries’ and self-insert comics’ are defined by their dissimilar audience receptions. Comic diaries are traditionally considered authentic representations of the identity of the self. Audiences read along because they can see themselves in the author, and can relate to the situations the author finds themself in. Meanwhile, self-insert comics have gained infamy online because a majority of audiences cannot relate to the author and instead read said comics to ridicule them. The fictionalized worlds of self-insert comics may be representative of the authors’ actual ideals, but the reading experience is mediated through a disconnect between the author and the audience rather than any established connection between the two forces. It is because of this disconnect that many self-insert comics are classified as cringe comedy comics, cringe comics, or most simply, cringy. Cringe, in this context, refers to an internet term for something which is regarded with contempt, or where their entire appeal comes from ridicule rather than admiration. While self-insert comics are not the only type of cringe comics out there, for the purpose of this paper discussions on cringe comedy will refer entirely to self-insert comics. Cringe comedy comics such as Andy Reyes’ 2004 comic Hey Andy, Sweetie, which focuses on an overly-sexualized fictional relationship between the author and the character Princess Peach from the Mario franchise, are typically ridiculed because their authenticity lies at odds with the audiences’ sensibilities. The relationships presented in many cringe comedy comics may be uncomfortable, but they do still represent authentic forms of

identity production constructed by consumerism and the overwhelming presence of franchises in a consumerist society. Mr. Boop, in its curated presentation of a fictionalized self-insert relationship that is mediated by the author to tell a larger story, acts as a deconstruction of the cringe comedy comic subgenre. Robbins' work is not an authentic presentation of an idealized relationship as he sees it, but rather a mediation on the identity of a self-insert author. Through a mix of industrial and textual analysis, Mr. Boop and its absurdist cringe comedy predecessors will be interrogated as products that dictate the construction of the self as an identity formed by media and as critiques of both capitalist media ownership and the copyright system which it created. These two avenues will ultimately be brought together to analyze the webcomic Mr. Boop, as well as its absurdist cringe comedy predecessors, as authentic constructions of the self against the backdrops of consumerism and censorship.

While cringe comics as discussed so far have been situated entirely on the internet, the history of cringe comics goes back much farther. Underground comic artist Robert Crumb has been creating comics since 1968 which have frequently explored transgressive presentations of his self-identity which were labeled as "impure" against the purity-laden popular comics of the time (Shannon 2012). Modern analyses of Crumb's works, such as Edward Shannon's, describe them as autobiographical, including even his fictional narratives such as Fritz the Cat, because of his protagonists' position as stand-ins for his own beliefs and comprehensions. Though his work may be revered in retrospect, the cultural contempt for his work throughout Crumb's most influential years of publication and his usage of representational self-insert protagonists put into fictionalized stories situates Crumb much closer as a historical predecessor to cringe comedy comics than to modern comic diaries. Crumb's influence may be seen in the cringe comedy scene of modern times, but his appeal came through the lens of his work as transgressive rather than cringe. The cultural lens of cringe as an appealing factor was not established until the 1990s.

The year 1989 was important in the history of cringe comedy. That year saw the premiere of a highly influential serialized cringe comedy television show, namely America's Funniest Home Videos (AFV). AFV is a variety show that includes commentary spoken over audience-submitted home videos, all played together for audience laughs. This constituted the first large-scale presentation of embarrassing private moments for public appeal, and the show was an immediate success (Fore 1993). Two main points distinguish AFV from Crumb's earlier work as a progression related to the history of cringe. Primarily, the context through which AFV was consumed was entirely different than Crumb's comics. Crumb's comics were produced and distributed by underground comic publishers. The position of the underground comic publisher as an actor against the traditional comic industry frames Crumb's comics as inherently political. The political frame, paired with the nature of his works, allotted them to be seen as transgressive rather than truly cringe. While the contempt that the general public may have had towards Crumb's work reflects that of modern cringe comedy comics, they did not constitute Crumb's target audience. Rather, his audience was made up of the fellow underground comic scene, who revered his works and saw them through as transgressive and powerful political images (Shannon 2012). Meanwhile, AFV's target audience was the large-scale American public, and the presentation of what some (namely television critics of the time) would consider low-brow and crass was displayed

to audiences as a means to commodify their contempt towards the videos and their consequences as a form of entertainment (Fore 1993). In other words, while the exact term ‘cringe’ would not come around for another decade, AFV utilized audience cringe towards the people within the videos presented on their program to keep the audiences engaged and entertained. The second point that distinguishes AFV’s importance in the history of cringe comedy is the way that it staged amateur actors, or “real people”, within its program. Crumb may not have worked directly within the popular side of the comic industry, but he was still a classically-trained artist who worked as a professional comic. Meanwhile, the videos shown in AFV are recorded and acted by ordinary people, amateurs not trained to produce the comedy people are getting from their actions but rather people living their authentic lives. As stated by Fore, “until the advent of America's Funniest Home Videos, home mode imagery was, with rare exceptions, generated for the personal use and private pleasure of its immediate participants”, meaning that AFV constituted the first main time personal amateur home video was presented to public audiences (1993). Cringe comedy as a means of displaying amateur authenticity instead of professional scripting to an audience highly reflects the amateur artists of the 2010s cringe comedy comic scene. These two factors, namely the reason audiences consume the media and the amateur as a content producer, frame AFV as an influential point in the history leading up to cringe comedy comics in the Internet age. The presentation of a self that is truly authentic also helps to denote the originator of when media is defined as cringe in both AFV and cringe comedy comics. In AFV and the cringe comedy comics of the 2010s, the definition of an act as cringe comes from the audience rather than the creator. In the creation of the initial comic or home video, the creator is focused on authentic presentation rather than the creation of cringe. The definition of the media as cringe comes as unexpected to the creator, with the cringe in many AFV home videos being created through accident, and the cringe in cringe comedy comics being created through the audiences that read them. Although, at the point of AFV cringe was still not the terminology used to describe either the genre of media produced or the audience's reason for consuming the media.

The term ‘cringe’ itself was first used to describe comedy shows of the early 2000s, such as Curb Your Enthusiasm and The Office. The evolution of television cringe comedies from the early 2000s to the 2010s may be scripted presentations, more reflective in that one regard of Crumb’s work than of AFV and cringe comedy comics, but evaluating its evolution does give a case study that parallels the timeline of cringe comedy comics and leading towards Mr. Boop. As mentioned by Robyn Bahr, early 2000s comedy shows use cringe as a character trait to act as a cultural gatekeeper, or a reflection of someone’s awkwardness to audiences “predicated on watching a socially awkward person stumble into quirky messes“ (2020). While a character or situation that is defined as cringe in a show may be relatable, their cringe is a delineator that defines a moment for the audience to laugh directly at their antics rather than with them. The cringe itself is typically connoted to audiences through consequences, and depending on “situational and intrapersonal factors, [within cringe comedy television shows,] normative violations have different consequences for the observing audiences” (Mayer et al. 2021). Contempt and distance between audience and actor denote this type of cringe similarly to the effect known as schadenfreude, as it “builds on a sense of distance between viewer and character that enables the former to take pleasure in the suffering of the latter” (Kanzler

2021). This reflects the primary audience optics for conceptualizing cringe comedy comics of the 2000s and early 2010s, wherein cringe is utilized as a tool to gatekeep between the audience and the creator. The entertainment the audience experiences is due to a contempt for the character or the author, similar to early 2000s cringe comedy television shows, highlighting the distance rather than closing it (Wöhrle 2021). As cringe comedy television evolved in the 2010s, cringe itself switched from being utilized as a tool for moment-to-moment othering into instead merging between comedy and pathos with the presentation of a cringe character that comes from a realist lens (Bahr 2020). The audience connects to the character or creator designated as cringe to create entertainment through empathy, instead of distancing themselves due to schadenfreude. The frame of a cringy situation through a realist perspective also shifts the functional purpose of cringe as it relates to Pansy Duncan's understanding of the aesthetics of awkwardness related to capitalism (2017). Cringe comedy television of the early 2000s functionally acts to gatekeep between the cringe character, or the transgressive actor, and the audience. The opposing positioning between actor and audience largely designates the awkward aesthetic of early 2000s cringe as a tool within capitalism, as the transgressive or non-normative acts presented as cringe are meant to be understood through a dominant reading which does not support them (Mayer et al. 2021). This lies at odds with cringe comedy of the 2010s, wherein the unification between cringe actor and audience allows the audience to relate to and sympathize with the actor's deviancy. The shift in the relationship between actor and audience finally denotes a shift in the relationship between audience and dominant reading, placing the audience's dominant reading against the capitalistic forces opposing the cringe actor. The shifts that cringe comedy television experienced in the early 2010s are highly similar to the narrative function of cringe within Mr. Boop. As a deconstruction of cringe comedy comics, Alec Robbins utilizes the story of his character to connect the author to an audience that is traditionally distanced from them.

Beyond the self-insert nature of Alec Robbins' work, the author works carefully to construct an authentic presentation similar to his earlier cringe comedy predecessors. The style, rough and amateur with a focus on simple gestures and figures, harkens back to the amateur style many cringe comedy comics were known for. The sexualization of the fictional relationship between author and franchised character is very typical for self-insert cringe comedy comics, and can even be seen in the first line of Mr. Boop quoted earlier, "My wife Betty Boop is really hot". Though the work itself is critical of the hypersexual nature of earlier cringe comedy works, Robbins' directly takes time to understand his predecessors and ensure that his work does not solely criticize them for their fantasy-oriented identity creations. As Robbins said in an interview with The Verge's Scott Meslow, " I don't want the ultimate statement of Mr. Boop to be that it's bad to fall into fantasy worlds and enjoy them" (2022). Rather than wholeheartedly criticizing the genre of cringe comedy, he utilizes the absurdity of the genre as a tool for social commentary. Mr. Boop begins does begin as a traditional self-insert cringe comedy comic, however, Robbins' fragility begins to shine beneath the thin veneer of idealism as soon as strip number 7, where Robbins discloses to his wife Betty Boop "I'm afraid you're going to leave me". This begins a series of arcs for Robbins' character related to his insecurities, a recurring theme throughout the series.

The first insecurity explored in the comic is that of the protagonist Alec Robbins' sexual prowess. In a manner that seems to question the hypersexuality of cringe comedy comic predecessors, the sexual nature of Alec Robbins' character is juxtaposed with his sexual insecurity. The reality of his sexuality as the author feels like it begins bleeding through against the presentation of perfect sexuality he shows as his ideal. In an absurd twist, Robbins' fictionalized world acts to cover up his insecurities by detailing a series of sexual encounters between him, his wife Betty Boop, and a large plethora of copyrighted characters. The inclusion of multiple copyrighted characters from disparate franchises reflects the laissez-faire nature of traditional cringe comedy comics, wherein the ideal of an individual's imagination holds more value than narrative continuity. However, Robbins utilizes this trope to service an anti-capitalist statement through absurdist comedy. One main instance of this is strip 124, where Mickey Mouse is driving a car and states to himself "Walt Disney really hates it when I, Mickey Mouse, participate in orgies". Though this statement is absurd and played as an absurdist joke for laughs, it also hints at Robbins' critique of copyright by noting that copyright law designates appropriate and inappropriate use of franchised characters. The audience ownership of franchised characters, to the point where individuals present their idealized self-identification as a life sitting alongside an amalgamation of different franchises and series, lies at odds with the restriction of character use by the general public. Robbins' analysis of the irony between restricting characters under copyright and capitalism versus marketing the same characters as franchised products to be consumed and internalized stays a consistent theme throughout the comic. This ultimately culminates in a storyline where Betty Boop's father, the head of the Fleischer Studio, forces Alec to divorce Betty Boop because Alec does not have her copyright. Alec chooses to not divorce her, and as a result, the head of Fleischer Studio sues him. Because of this in-narrative lawsuit, Alec is forced to cut back on spending, and cannot afford the fourth panel on any of his strips between strips 151 and 165, instead intentionally leaving them as black squares. Here, Alec Robbins is commenting on the true ownership of copyrighted characters under a capitalistic system. Whereas the companies that market franchises present a narrative of audience ownership to the general populous, Robbins argues that trying to put that ownership into practice has financial consequences which are dangerous to the individual. As Alec Robbins' fictional marriage to Betty Boop comes to a close, the comic turns into a transmedia experience with a departure into a short video series. In the series, the actual author and in-narrative character Alec Robbins 'come clean', telling the audience that his marriage to Betty Boop was entirely fictional, and transitioning the rest of his comic into a pandemic journal. Though, the pandemic journal does not last long, as he ends up getting in a relationship, but slowly replaces her with an idealization of Betty Boop in his character's head. This final act juxtaposes reality with ideals, confronting the idealistic fictional character his character wants in his life against the real people surrounding him.

Alec Robbins' Mr. Boop contemplates what it means to have an identity within a consumerist society. He wonders what it means to be authentic, whether the fiction one sees themself in can be authentic, and how the media we consume creates the identities we see in ourselves. While Robbins' work does not validate the problematic and potentially misogynistic hypersexualization and pervasive nature of earlier cringe comedy authors, he understands the authors as legitimate identities created under the

backdrop of consumerism and capitalism. Robbins includes a mediation on the true owners of franchised characters, sparking an internal tear between the ideal self and the real self when the characters society is meant to idealize are said to be owned by all, but in actuality are owned by a small minority of individuals.

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Thinking of the Children

Generational Biases Surrounding Screen Time in the U.S.

As the U.S. transitions into a society of cell phones and global connectedness, the topic of screen time has dominated the public consciousness (Ernest et al., 2014; Gadzikowski, 2021; Lauricella, 2020). Screen time, or the amount of time which a person spends viewing or interacting with digital displays, has been a concern of parents ever since televisions became common staples of the U.S. household (Gadzikowski, 2021). As a modern appliance found in over 90% of housing units in the U.S., it makes sense that the television and its use would come under scrutiny (Nielsen Norman Group, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In the 2010s, when cell phones took over televisions as the primary screen for adolescents, screen time conversations shifted towards primarily vilifying cell phones and social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Vilifying conversations on screen time were mainly lauded by Baby Boomers, and specifically targeted the screens most used by adolescents (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006; Lauricella, 2020).

While academic research into screen time has not produced fully conclusive understandings, what has been produced primarily specifies the dangers of high levels of screen time explicitly for babies and toddlers up to age 3 (Ernest et al., 2014; Pappas, 2020). The explicit age-based delimiter for screen time dangers contradicts experts' traditional belief that screen time is dangerous to a broad population, and begins to explore the complex nature of screens and the idea that not all screen time is equal (Pappas, 2020). Research is beginning to emerge which looks at the nuances of screen time, but this conversational framing has yet to penetrate public discourses surrounding the issue, and many families fail to critically analyze their own understandings of screens (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Schoeppe et al., 2016).

Baby Boomers' failure to critically reflect their own comprehension of screens and digital environments seems incongruous when juxtaposed with the amount of time they spend on screens. An independent study done by Provisional Living (2019) found high amounts of daily digital display usage by both Baby Boomers and younger generations. Despite their high digital display use, evidence has shown a negative generational correlation between Baby Boomers and both internet literacy and digital trust (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Raymer et al., 2017). Baby Boomers' lack of internet knowledge led screen time to become an internal "unknown", which allowed for an environment of fear and rumors to be born (Carleton, 2016; Goleman, 1991).

Organizations such as the Erikson Institute's Technology in Early Childhood (TEC) Center are just starting to disseminate preconceptions surrounding screen time and rumors spread by Baby Boomers, such as the view that prolonged time on screens will "rot your brain" (Lauricella, 2020). Given how recently programs such as this were initiated, the success of social change campaigns like TEC's on biases against screen time has yet to be seen. The "rot your brain" narrative itself was largely created out of the fears of older generations towards the digital landscape, and the corroboration of said fears by mainstream media (Laidlaw, O'Mara, & Wong, 2019). These rumors reflect

the aforementioned fear of the digital unknown, as demonstrated by internet literacy rates in Baby Boomers, and supported by generational stereotypes they hold surrounding the digital display usage of Generation Z in the U.S. (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Kibanov et al., 2015; Raymer et al., 2017). When put under academic scrutiny, the "rot your brain" narrative was further found to be unsubstantiated by data, cementing it as a product of generational biases rather than empirical evidence (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). Paired with the lack of critical self-reflection towards their own use of screens, all this shapes a widespread public fear with a generational basis (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Pappas, 2020; Schoeppe et al., 2016). Based on these generational narratives, we ask the research question:

RQ: How do the generational biases of Baby Boomers towards Generation Z in the U.S affect current public conversations surrounding screen time?

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Korine's Authentic The Shocking Realities of Harmony Korine

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What does it mean to be deviant? Maybe it's as Cambridge says, something or someone that is "not usual and is generally considered to be unacceptable". But then, who defines acceptability? One of the current sociological theories of deviance, Conflict Theory, suggests that deviance is defined by those in power as a way to maintain control through laws and policy. This theory does not present deviance as an act which needs to be condemned, but rather as a normal facet of society akin to conformity and community. The films of director Harmony Korine reflect this sociological theory, presenting deviance as a type of norm. Even from his early years, Korine's work has always held a highly engrossing anti-establishment message. Within the worlds of his screenwriting debut, *Kids*, and his directorial debut, *Gummo*, Korine's rejection of normative power structures reigns.

Before discussing the film *Kids*, I feel that it is important to briefly discuss the film's director, Larry Clark. When looking at Clark's other films, such as Bully and Wassup Rockers, it becomes immediately clear that Clark has a pattern of presenting minors' bodies in an exploitative manner. Given this, as well as this article's intent, the film's script and writing will be analyzed to a much greater extent than the visual aspect. It is my opinion that the film's exploitative visual presentation of the bodies of minors is a reflection of the director, whereas the moral relativism of the characters is a much more direct reflection of Korine's screenwriting. Clark's presentation does add to the film's artistic merit in creating an air of discomfort, but given his other works, whether that discomfort is purposeful or if Clark's intentions were more exploitative is yet to be uncovered.

When viewing the film *Kids* with modern sensibilities, it is easy to dismiss it due to its undoubtedly sexist, problematic, and all-around uncomfortable material. There's scenes of kids using drugs, people shouting hateful slurs, and multiple instances of nonconsentual sex between minors. Further, all of these actions are done by the film's main protagonists. With all of this, however, *Kids* does not try to actively glorify the sexist and problematic ideals that it depicts front-and-center. This is entirely due to the way in which the narrative is framed. The philosophy of *Kids* is pessimistic and nihilistic, conveying a world where there is no inherent good or evil. Whereas a film like Birth of a Nation paints its problematic ideals as a true model that the audience should strive for, *Kids* never attempts to frame itself in that same light. The film is devoid of any true moral compass. Many of the characters' actions lie antagonistic towards modern sensibilities, but within their world there is no inherent hero or villain. Instead, the film opts for a more realistic framing, which allows each of the characters to exist in a space of moral greyness. Thus, the film presents to the audience what can only be described as a set of alternate moralities.

The concept of alternate moralities is not exclusive to *Kids*. Rather, it's present in many of Korine's films, including *Gummo* and *Trash Humpers*. For this article, an alternate morality is a set of moral understandings which exist antagonistic towards the mainstream culture from which it originates. Some of these moralities may fit within the definition of deviancy, but they are not inherently deviant. Alternate moralities are not meant to be inherently sympathetic or approving, rather they are presented to the audience as a means of challenging their modern moralities. In *Kids*, the mainstream moral grounds of 1990s America would consider the actions of the film's protagonists to

be hedonistic and deviant. Yet, the presentation of these characters as an alternate morality stands to highlight the ways in which their morality overlaps with modern America's. Since their moralities lie so heavily antagonistic to mainstream society's, these moments of overlap act as a form of critique against society at-large.

The first main instance where these moralities overlap comes early in the film. The film opens with a sex scene, followed by two of the main characters, Telly and Casper, walking throughout the streets of New York City discussing what pretty much amounts to "locker room talk". The open framing of this discussion is what creates this dichotomy between the moralities of these characters and real life. In the film, as Telly and Casper talk, onlookers and listeners who manage to catch glimpses of their conversation react with disgust. The general street crowd of New York critiques the main characters' conversation and their morality by using their fleeting time on the screen to give subtle facial reactions. But, the creation of this alternate morality is not to frame these characters as pure societal outcasts. The camera movement, following these characters in a pseudo-documentary style as they merge into the street crowd of New York, helps reinforce this.

Instead, their mannerisms are reflective of the morality and demeanor seen in corporate areas and "men's club" sections of society (bars, gyms, etc). There exists a distinct separation between these two events, wherein sexism done by wealthy groups in "men's club" areas is considered socially acceptable, but the same demeanor is frowned upon when done by less wealthy individuals in the public sphere. This brings up questions of class. None of this is meant to sympathize with or idealize the blatant sexism of the scene, as Korine never idealizes his characters and always suggests moral relativism in his works. Rather, it is meant to question why this is considered okay societal behavior for people of higher class, but perverse and intrusive for people of a lower class. Through this alternate morality, Korine is using the principles of Conflict Theory to make the audience question the connection between class and the definition of deviancy.

The film then switches to a conversation between the main female characters. The conversation is still perverse and obtrusive, failing even to pass the Bechdel test, but it's also a moment of the characters talking about sex for themselves. It is powerful in that it puts the conversation of sex on the women, giving them control over the discussion of their bodies. This scene is interspersed with cuts to Casper and Telly hanging out with their friends, cutting between the two conversations in an almost call-and-response manner. This exists inverse to the "boy's club", where the same conversation is told but in a manner that's reflective of the patriarchal ideals thrown onto them by society. One group is shown giving their opinions on a manner, followed by a separate conversation of the other group giving their opinions. In this, the film creates a platform to critique the patriarchial fallacies of sex through a two-way conversation. The male group spend their sections lamenting about the problems of being with women, which is followed by women directly rebutting the aforementioned "problems". In one section, both groups are talking about fellatio. The guys' group mentions how women "love sucking dick", with resounding approval from the rest of the group. This is immediately followed by the character Jennie telling her group "I hate sucking dick". It is extremely brash, but in this one example, Korine is blatantly revealing the male preconceptions of sex and enjoyment, then contrasting them with the female perspective to highlight their

fallacies. Within these two groups there are separate moralities. Korine does this to showcase the diversity between these intersectionalized groups. While Korine is infatuated with alternate moralities, he never uses this infatuation to depict a single narrative. Single narratives are dangerous in their ability to generalize entire groups of people, and Korine is highly aware of this.

Even in the face of these alternate moralities, none of the characters are depicted as morally bankrupt. By doing this, Korine allows for a level of relatability or sympathy between the audience and the characters. In fact, even though Telly and Casper's moralities are antagonistic to most of mainstream society, there are scenes in which they are shown to be morally good. Halfway through the film, Telly and Casper are riding a train. A person with no legs begins riding a skateboard through the train, singing “I have no legs” and seeking charity. A majority of people on the train ignore the man, specifically turning away when he gets near. Casper, who earlier alluded to the fact that he only has a few cents on him, decides to reach in his pocket and give some of his change to the man. It's not much, not at all, but in this act of charity Casper gives away all that he has the physical capacity to. Though, this act of charity is contrasted by a later scene in which Casper rapes Jennie while she is asleep.

This scene comes at the end of the film, and is the only part of the film to contain little dialogue, minimal camera movement, and no soundtrack. It is harrowing to watch, and bookends the film with pure discomfort. The only form of retribution allowed to Jennie is that earlier in the film she learned that she was HIV positive, so in this scene she is transmitting it to Casper. But to even describe any part of the act as retributive in any sense is completely false, especially, but not just, because she is unconscious during its entirety.

Jennie's character is the film’s main tool of garnering sympathy in the audience. It is really easy to paint Jennie as the "exception" or the "odd-man out". Her sensibilities are more mainstream than the rest of the characters; she's more reserved and she is not as outwardly deviant. But, Korine and Clark do all they can to balance her character on a fine line, with reservation for the sake of moral relatability on one side, and relation to the film's main group on the other side. Jennie is not supposed to be an outside perspective for the audience to relate to and through whom to demonize the rest of the group. Rather, her character tries to allow the more conservative audiences to sympathize with the characters of the film, despite all of their possible preconceptions.

Harmony Korine moved on from writing *Kids* in 1995 to his directorial debut, *Gummo*, 2 years later. With this new opportunity, Korine exhibited his ability to create a visual world that reflects his experimental screenwriting style. Visually, *Gummo* is much more experimental and much less candid than *Kids*. The films have many similarities, with both containing alternate moralities, youth “out of control”, and nihilistic philosophies. Despite these similarities, with Korine as the director instead of solely the screenwriter, differences arise.

One of the big differences is best exemplified in the visual/audial presentation of sexual violence between *Kids* and *Gummo*. In *Kids*, acts of sexual violence are depicted very candidly. There’s a focus on the physicality of the act, and the disturbing nature comes

directly from its unfettered depiction. This depiction can be extremely powerful in creating a sense of discomfort in the audience, but also the frank depiction of nonconsensual and violent acts is in itself a form of exploitation. The candid portrayal is contrasted with *Gummo*, where the visual elements become more distorted and the audio becomes metallic, almost turning into harsh noise. This is a much more personal representation of sexual violence. In it, the fear and discomfort is not created through a physical look into the act itself. Instead, the discomfort comes from the stylized representation of the mentality of the survivor. Their psychological world is rendered unto the audience through a claustrophobic abstraction of the visual space, and through ear-piercing metallic audio distortions. The audience is not forced to watch the physical act, but rather to bear witness to the mental state of the survivor first-hand.

Gummo also manages to be surprisingly progressive in its politics. A majority of the film presents these alternate moralities to the audience, but these moralities are almost never tied to marginalized groups for which these stereotypes would be problematic. Instead, the film feels aware of the damage which framing these groups in stereotypical lights could do, and it opts to present specific characters as non-deviant. The first main instance of this occurs in the introduction of the character Eddie. Eddie is an award-winning tennis player, who also happens to have ADD. In his depiction there are no stereotypes, no outward irreverent tropes like those seen in Sia's Music. Instead, Eddie just simply talks about his ADD. He is given the power to frame its discussion, opting to just offhandedly mention it. His neurodiversity is never shown as a detriment, and while his depiction is short and simple, it is really effective in normalizing and humanizing his character. Likewise, there is a scene with an unnamed gay black man listening to his drunk friend's ramblings. The drunk friend upkeeps an alternate morality in his drunken ramblings, swinging through a series of odd topics in a manner that's difficult for the audience to even comprehend. But, the gay man does not join in on the conversation. Instead, he just listens to the drunk man's rants in a supporting manner. He himself is not depicted with any alternate moralities, and rather his mannerisms are less eclectic, more reflective of the mainstream. In Korine's quest for moral relativism there is no good or bad, but in these marginalized characters there exists compassion and understanding.

In all of the film's characters and their philosophies, both the alternate moralities of the main characters and the mainstream moralities of the intersectional characters, Korine is dehomogenizing the marginalized groups which the film symbolically supports. In the impoverished, the groups forgotten by society, there is diversity and divergence. Nobody is glorified, as Korine still vies for a presentation that supports moral relativism. But, he does the work of showing that humans are humans. Korine effortlessly represents the intersectionality of marginalization in a manner which does not exploit, but rather highlights and upholds marginalized individuals.

In Korine's filmography, there is no mainstream. He does not write, and he does not direct, for the sensibilities of others. Films like *Kids*, *Gummo*, *Trash Humpers*, and all of his others are uncomfortable to watch. They push past mainstream tastes, opting to present a reality that is both hyperreal and more down to earth than many of their contemporaries. They are hyperreal in the mannerisms and inflections of the characters, yet in this their struggles and their fears become more painfully relatable than seems

possible. He smoothly bounces between presentations of alternate and mainstream moralities, all in an effort to directly display the uncomfortable truths of modern society to the audience. Korine's films also manage to put marginalized people in an environment where they can present their own narratives. Not all of these narratives are positive, but they are their own, which is extremely powerful in itself. If nothing else, Korine's films have a voice. If nothing else, Korine is authentic.

How Codes Can Kill The Cinematic Myth of Transfeminine Terror

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A spectre is haunting the cinematic world - the spectre of transfeminine fear. Though, unlike the notorious spectre from which this quote is derived, this one leaves nothing but danger, moral panic, and death in its wake. This spectre, this coded fear of transgender and transfeminine individuals through antagonistic film characters, has existed in cinema since Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and continues to spread dangerous false trans narratives to the filmgoing masses to this day. Now, on the 60th anniversary of this cinematic trope's inception, let us take a moment to reflect on the history, evolution, and dangers it presents to trans lives and contemporary American society.

Before even taking a cursory glance at this trope, it is important to set up a definition of the word transfeminine and explain why we must critically analyze tropes such as this in the first place. When used in the context of this article, transfeminine refers to a person who was assigned male at birth, but whose gender identity aligns more with the feminine gender identity. Transfeminine individuals and characters can be transgender, nonbinary, or androgynous. While some of the characters that will be discussed are transgender, others are not, and to use the wrong terminology here would be grossly disrespectful to both the characters and the transgender community.

It must also be said that this is not a criticism of anyone's affinity for the films of this trope, and this article is not meant to police what movies you can and cannot enjoy. The intended purpose is for us to better understand the implications these narratives have on living individuals and communities, and if those implications are understood then it is okay to still enjoy these films as entertainment. Personally, I still enjoy *Sleepaway Camp* and all the other films mentioned in this article, even though they spread problematic messages about transgender people. Instead, I hope this shines a light on how many pieces of media our society adores can also spread dangerous messages about marginalized groups, and helps you develop a lens from which to view such stereotypes and false personal narratives and to be aware of other similar harmful and dangerous tropes.

Alfred Hitchcock was the one of the first directors to toy with the concept of crossdressing antagonists in his 1930 film *Murder!*. That film, while adhering to some principles of the titular trope, is not considered to be its origin because the film misses out on one key principle. That being, in *Murder!* there is not an inextricable connection

made between the character's gender identity and their homicidal tendencies. This entanglement was not made in cinema for another 30 years, and since then it has become one of the most well-defining aspects of the trope. The entanglement principle is one of the main reasons why the trope is considered problematic, as it spreads the narrative that there does exist this connection between homicidal actions and transgenderism. This connection was first made with the movie *Psycho* in 1960, making that film the true origin of the antagonistic transfeminine serial killer character trope. In *Psycho*, when Norman Bates kills somebody, he enters a mental state where he sees himself as the character "Mother." Thus, the trigger that causes him to see himself as another person in the wrong body is the exact same trigger that causes him to commit acts of murder. The contemporary narrative within society is that transgender people are "born in the wrong body," that there exists a disconnect between the mind and body of transgender individuals that can be treated with sex reassignment surgery, medication, and/or therapy (but it should be noted that there is a debate going on over whether this framing of the discussion is problematic). This has been one of the main narratives surrounding trans individuals for decades, and it existed as a narrative when *Psycho* came out. Whether purposeful or not, with *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock created a cinematic trope which perpetuates the false narrative that there does in-fact exist a mental connection between a state of transitioning and an urge to kill.

While characters like Norman Bates are not necessarily transgender, it must be assessed how even nonbinary and androgynous characters which adhere to this trope are damaging to the transgender community. In the modern sociopolitical context of the United States, the socially conservative narrative surrounding transgender individuals usually takes the form of the "man in a dress" argument. Within this argument, social and religious conservatives state that male-to-female transgender people are not "real women," but rather are men utilizing the modern liberal-leaning social landscape for darker ulterior motives. The argument is so widespread because it concisely delegitimizes both the struggle and the existence of transgender women while adhering to the modern moral panic surrounding gender and identity. This sentiment is so ubiquitous that even former 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Mike Bloomburg was recorded spouting it, though according to many researchers, such as Amy Snierson of the Maine Human Rights Commission, this argument holds "no factual basis." If the conversation was currently concerning transgender equality rather than mere existence of transgender people as real, it would be possible to look back at these characters and recontextualize them to find positive meanings. But, as long as American social conservatives push the narrative that transgender people do not exist, that is impossible.

Looking back to the rest of the 1960s and 70s, most films that utilized this trope continued to exhibit the "man in a dress" narrative. It was not until 1983 when we first saw a drastic evolution in the transfeminine serial killer trope with the film *Sleepaway Camp*. The film differs from many of its predecessors in that its eponymous antagonist, Angela Baker, is an actual transgender character. While she was not the first transgender character in film, or even the first transgender antagonist, she was one of the first and most influential trans woman serial killer characters up until that point. In the beginning of the movie, two children, Angela and Peter, are on a boat with their dad when the boat capsizes. Nearby, a reckless speedboat is bolting along the lake, and the boater runs over the dad and one of the children, killing them both instantly. It is

believed that Angela is the survivor, and that Peter and the dad both died that day. The film became (in)famous for its surprise twist ending, in which the audience learns for the first time in the entire movie that Angela is in-fact transgender. In a flashback, it is shown that Angela actually died, and Peter's aunt, who took him in after his sister and father died, decided to raise Peter as Angela. With this, a sub-trope within the transfeminine serial killer film genre was born. This is the sub-trope of parents forcing their kids to grow up as the opposite gender, and while it is an evolution in the genre, it is not necessarily a positive one. For some background, while social acceptance of transgender people is still an uphill battle, in the 1980s a marginal trend was starting where parents were having conversations with their children about gender, and with an open conversation more young people (mostly in their late teenage years and 20s) were beginning to transition. This caused a moral panic within conservative spheres, and a narrative was born wherein it was believed that not only were some parents allowing their children to transition, but that some parents were actively encouraging and even enforcing it. The encouragement for young people to question the gender binary has since been re-evaluated as a positive parenting model, but the idea that there were parents forcing their kids to transition was a conservative myth perpetuated to silence trans voices. By illustrating this narrative in a gruesomely violent film, director Robert Hiltzik created a platform for conservative parents to "prove" their fears of transgender people and sink further into the moral panic.

From *Sleepaway Camp* to the early 2010s, there were not many evolutions in the trope. The one exception being the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, which used this trope, but the main protagonist of the film did not fault the antagonist for being transgender. By doing that, the film tried to unravel this cinematic entanglement between transgenderism and homicidal tendencies, but completely destroyed any progress it would have made with the character Buffalo Bill's notorious "would you f--- me" scene. In this scene, Buffalo Bill parades himself around a mirror and asks "would you f--- me? I'd f--- me." While the action itself is not inherently terrifying, the character is shown as homicidal and this scene switches between focusing on Buffalo Bill and their victim who is stuck in a nearby pit. And with those intercuts, Buffalo Bill's self-parading around a mirror is meant to create a terrifying dichotomy. As mentioned earlier, this trope still continues to exist to this day, and modern transfeminine serial killer films are still perpetuating these false narratives and inciting moral panic. Pedro Almodóvar's 2011 film *The Skin I Live In* presents confusing politics while still adhering to all the old principles of the trope. The main difference of the film is that the transgender character is not directly antagonistic, and their sex reassignment surgery is forced on them by a derranged doctor. The movie seems to be trying to make a statement about gender detransitioning, which while that does happen, is yet another point perpetuated by conservatives solely to silence trans voices. The James Wan film *Insidious: Chapter 2*, which came out in 2013, does nothing to try and recontextualize the trope either. Rather, it adheres to all the problematic ideals presented thus far, and even includes the seminal sub-trope of the "parental forced transgender upbringing" with the character of the Bride in Black. Rather than discussing these movies themselves, I am bringing them up to discuss the real-world implications which they have. Even though a reported 0.5% - 0.7% of the United States population is transgender, a 2018 FBI report found that 2.4% of all hate crimes in the country were motivated by gender-identity bias, and that

number is constantly rising. While these films are not the direct cause of those hate crimes, by continually perpetuating these dangerous false narratives, these movies are helping to incite moral panic, which is the direct cause of those hate crimes, and thus these films are implicitly dangerous.

That brings us to today, and brings up the question where do we go from here. Looking forward, we should be asking "is there a way to do a transfeminine serial killer character 'right'?" I am not sure, but in the film *Hereditary* gives me hope. In *Hereditary*, the character Peter gets possessed by the ghost of his dead sister Charli in a cult's attempt to bring the demon king Paimon into this world. The introduction of Paimon adds a level of complexity not seen before and gives its gender politics an air of ambiguity. I honestly think this ambiguity is an amazing change of pace from the other transfeminine antagonist films so far, and could possibly lead to a positive evolution within the trope. As the years go on, gender is being seen less and less as a binary, and by leaving out the traditional binary-driven narrative for a less strict definition of gender with Paimon, the film feels like it is challenging that social convention. Though all this makes me think, given the problematic history and current societal battle transgender people are facing, would this evolution in the narrative be enough? Also, should we even be striving to make the trope more inclusive, or should it be left in the dust as a whole? Not all films that come in the future may adhere to this evolution, if it does even catch on at all. Because of this, I think it is time that Hollywood abandons the antagonistic transfeminine serial killer trope. It has done irreversible damage for years, and if more films keep adhering to it, it will just continue to do more damage.

Even though we have only gone over six specific examples of the transfeminine serial killer antagonist trope, these are not the only examples of this trope in film, not by far. This is not an individualistic problem happening because of a few select directors, but rather it's a systematic plague corrupting Hollywood and the cinema world as a whole. Hollywood has had a problem with diversity for decades, and it could even be argued that its initial inception as the central hub for the motion-picture industry is rooted in supremacist ideals and homogeneity. While I am not here to make that argument, what we choose to film does steer our pop culture dialogue, and these stories do in-fact have real-world consequences. The transfeminine serial killer is only one of many common problematic tropes in cinema today, and other tropes, such as the white savior narrative, queer tragedy porn story, and the manic pixie dream girl, continue to provide falsified and dangerous narratives. If Hollywood and the cinematic world do not begin to look inwards at the problems they have with diversity and representation, tropes like these will continue to strive and actual lives will be lost as a result.

Soviet Queer Theory On Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

Andrei Tarkovsky is one of the most critically acclaimed directors of all time. Throughout the years, academics have pondered over his works and produced thousands, if not tens of thousands, of pages analyzing and dissecting the minute details of every single scene that the eponymous director has ever made. In this cacophony of academic musings, a few certain themes are more prevalent than others. Analyses on hauntology and ruinism, Tarkovsky's relation with the Soviet Union, spirituality in his

films, and the concept of cinematic time overwhelmingly flood the landscape of Tarkovsky-related literature.

Missing from this seemingly infinite library of scholarly studies is one topic related to Tarkovsky's filmography which academics seemingly have ignored for decades. This subject is the queer analysis of Andrei Tarkovsky's films. This type of analysis is important because it would reclaim the works of a heteronormative director for modern queer sensibilities. By examining Tarkovsky's Stalker (1979) and the director's personal relation to thew queer world of 1970s Soviet Russia, it will be questioned whether there does lie merit for queer interperetation of his work. The power of analysis lies in the audience, not the director, and Stalker possess a powerful queer narrative. The film focuses on stories of marital questioning and alienation, two themes which highly resonated with the largely discreet queer community of the time. Queer analyses of Tarkovsky's work should be much more present than they currently are, as a further expansion of this topic would lead to both a more complete understanding of the director's works as a whole and an influx of educational resources for teaching and expanding upon the subject of queer theory.

Before even taking a superficial look into Tarkovsky's films and their queer subtext, it is important to set up points of context on the sociopolitical environment of Russia in the 1970s, Tarkovsky's personal sexuality, and the basic plot of Stalker. In the 1970s and early 80s, the Soviet Union was under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov. According to Richard Mole in the Slavic Review, Brezhnev and Andropov facilitated a particularly volatile relationship with the homosexual community within the country. While other countries under Soviet rule, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, all had decriminalized homosexuality by 1968, the USSR itself rejected the opportunity to follow suite. The USSR's vehement demonification of the LGBTQ+ community was "state-sanctioned homophobia that shaped the opinions of generations of citizens throughout the Soviet era and beyond," leading to a deeply rooted cultural loathing of the community which still exists in the country to this day (Mole). Hate crimes against both openly and perceived LGBTQ+ individuals were (and to an extent still are) commonplace, forcing most queer people of the time to keep their sexuality to the private home sphere and act upon it with utmost discretion. It was common practice for queer people to enter a straight marriage for protection, and in some cases even the spouse would be left unaware of the individual's non-heterosexuality. Because of this, the queer history of Russia under the USSR is tattered at best, and any figures sexuality in this time period is open to be interpreted through context and actions rather than any strict "coming out".

Andrei Tarkovsky himself was married to Larisa Kizilova for the last 16 years of his life, and together they had a son named Andrei Jr. Throughout his lifetime no questions on his sexuality were ever brought up, though questions on anyone's sexuality in general under the USSR were few and far-between. His sexuality was not brought into question until after his death, first being brought to the forefront with Johnson and Petrie's 1994 book The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue. Johnson and Petrie interpret the mysterious "deep, dark fear" Tarkovsky mentioned as a hint towards his bisexuality (248). They illustrate how his presentation of wife characters as mother figures in his films reflects his true feelings on heterosexual matrimony and hint towards him being

bisexual. The authors then go on to mention how "Tarkovsky's adult male heroes tend to become increasingly asexual or even possess 'feminine' characteristics", two traits highly associated with homosexuality (249). Given the country's antagonistic attitude towards the homosexual community, queercoding character by using traits such as these was much more commonplace than presenting actual queer characters. Even acclaimed director Sergei Parajanov, who also knew Tarkovsky, relied on queercoded characters instead of strictly-stated queer characters for fear of percecution if he presented them otherwise. While Johnson and Petrie's book has been a divisive work in the world of Tarkovsky-related media, and their focus on "outing" Tarkovsky through his films does lay antagonistic towards his own statements that his films are void of any symbols, they do present valid factual evidence for interpreting Tarkovsky's works through a queer lens.

Now, this is not to say that believing Tarkovsky was bisexual is paramount to analyzing his films through a queer lens, nor is this meant to "out" Tarkovsky as Johnson and Petrie tried so hard to do, but entertaining this theory gives precedence towards further queer interperetation of his works. Contrarily, if Tarkovsky was straight it is still extremely important to analyze his films through a queer lens. It should also be noted that no matter Tarkovsky's sexuality, he was highly aware of the ever-elusive queer culture of the USSR and he actively sought out to associate himself with the community. The field of queer studies does not want to highlight the work of homophobic directors, so this association adds even further precedence towards analyzing his films through a queer lens. This association can be proven twice-over through an examination of his relationship with director Serei Parajanov and the novels of brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

Andrei Tarkovsky was close friends with fellow acclaimed director Sergei Parajanov, and he was even known to send colorful collages to Tarkovsky as gifts. Their friendship began in the 1970s, when Parajanov was arrested on suspicion of being bisexual and sentenced to 5 years in prison. Tarkovsky penned a letter on the subject, stating "[Sergei is] guilty of his solitude. We are guilty of not thinking of him daily and of failing to discover the significance of a master" (Knapp). In this quote, Tarkovsky seems to hint at an understanding or familiarity with the solitary nature of discretion Parajanov was forced to endure for his bisexuality. Parajanov's 1988 film Ashik Kerib is also dedicated to Tarkovsky. This dedication seems to "suggest that the bride's father in the film represents the repressive apparatus of the Soviet state, which [...] forced Tarkovsky into exile", a nod of solidarity sent from one director to another (Steffen 232). Could this back-and-forth hint at a further level of companionship between the two directors than what was publicly known? No matter what type of relationship these 2 directors had, these examples convey how close they were as friends. Thus, it is not absurd to ascertain that the both of them discussed Parajanov's sexuality in relation to the climate of the USSR. So it can be assumed that Tarkovsky had an understanding of queer politics within the country. All in all, this is to say that no matter his sexuality, it is both appropriate and important to reclaim his works for modern queer sensibilities.

Tarkovsky was an avid reader, and he had read multiple of brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's novels by the time he decided to begin work on Stalker. The brothers' had a tendency to focus on science fiction environments with a recurring theme focusing on

social progress and utopianism. The brother authors also tended to include and hint at the related themes of androgyny, demasculinity, and general queer subtext in their novels. In their novel The Dead Mountaineer's Hotel, the brothers present a comedy about two aliens, of which both are analyzed in modern academia as queercoded characters. The aliens are also physical reflections of the alienation experienced by queer people within the USSR, as they were forced to feel like outsiders (or they were demonized and killed) within their own communities if they were ever outed. In discussing the book and film adaptation, Näripea states "Evidently, it was important for both the Strugatsky brothers and Kromanov to maintain an element of queerness, even if it was eliminated from the explicit content of the story" (160). Näripea sees the queercoded nature of the story as so obviously hinted at that she postulates that the queer aspect was a key intentional element for the brothers. If such an assertion is to be believed, this adds yet further evidence to the claim that Tarkovsky intentionally created a queer narrative with his adaptation of Roadside Picnic into the film Stalker. No matter how different from the original work his adaptation is, the sole action of adapting a Strugatsky novel is an act of solidarity towards the gay community, and a detailed analysis of key points in Stalker will demonstrate how the film perfectly lends itself towards queer interperetation.

Stalker is a science fiction arthouse film by Andrei Tarkovsky from 1979. In the film, a character known as the Stalker (Alexander Kaidanovsky) helps two others (the writer, played by Anatoly Solonitsyn, and the professor, played by Nikolai Grinko) through a violent and uninhabited wasteland known as the Zone. The Zone is a dangerous and ever-changing area which is mostly uninhabited. It acts as a reflection of the totality of life, an unknown antagonistic force which is more reflective of one's internal mindset than any logical worldly truth. The Writer and Professor are travelling through the Zone in search of a place known as the Room, a miraculous space that fulfills anyone's deepest subconscious desire upon entrance. The Stalker can help others travel throughout the Zone, but they cannot enter the Room. Throughout the journey, the men discuss philosophy, postulating on human morality, consumerism, and isolationism. Their contrasting personalities reach an apex when the group manages to make it to the Room. Without entering, the Professor announces that he has a bomb and plans to blow up the Room. The Stalker gets into an altercation with him, and the Writer eventually joins in. This whole time, the Room lies witness to their altercation, an unspeakable and unmoving onlooker lying content in its ability to have caused such a spectacle. The Room and the Zone cannot move or think in the traditional sense, but on this journey the group fell into multiple deadly traps, yet the Zone did not end their lives. It's almost as if the Zone itself wished for the group to continue on their journey together, completely aware of what would happen once they reached the Room. Decomposed from their fight, the group decides to not enter the Room and leaves the Zone. The Stalker returns home, where his wife consoles him in a mother-like fashion and then monologues about the woes and joys of their relationship.

The world of Stalker is apocalyptic, destroyed, and rotting. The environment feels isolating and oppressive, and every single aspect of the film, from the soundtrack to the color of a scene, reflects an alienating dread. Apart from the time in the Zone, the film is presented entirely in sepia, with no color available for the audience to see but shades of brown. There is no comfort in this color palette, and it is meant to create a tone of

apprehension and aversion in the audience. Through this sepia-laced initial rundown of the apartment the Stalker lives in with his family, no words are exchanged. That is, until the Stalker's wife wakes up and speaks to him. "Where are you going? You gave me your word, I believed you. You won't think about yourself, but what about us? Think about your daughter." Immediately, the queer subcontext of the argument is clear. Though we later learn that she's talking about the Stalker returning to the Zone, these lines reflect matrimonious distrust, a feeling of underlying fear many gay people in the USSR were very, very well aware of. These lines, these exact phrases, have become commonplace in films about a married person opening and understanding their sexuality. They are lines that would feel equally at home in Grace & Frankie or Making Love as they do here.

After the Stalker leaves, the audience lies witness as the Stalker's wife falls to the ground, writing in agony and despair for around 40 uninterrupted seconds. This is undoubtedly the most overacted scene in the entire film, but it does not read as any less truthful or forced. No, her sorrow masterfully mixes real distraught and comedic camp to create a scene which manages to be both emotional and ironically comical at the same time. On one hand, she is brought to emotional distress, and without any other way to express her emotions to the world she falls to the ground and dramatically twists and turns in a motion akin to interpretive dance. Though on the other hand, her actions are so distorted and highlighted for so long that an air of comicality begins to manifest through the scene. Her movements become almost like a caricature, leaving reality to a plane of exaggerated despair beyond normal human reaction. This 40 second performance is an instance of Tarkovsky toying with the gay audience. Back in the 1970s, the idea of "camp" was one of the biggest manners for gay people to call attention without directly ousting themselves as gay. According to Susan Sontag's Notes on "Camp", it is an aesthetic obsessed with "the unnatural[,] artifice and exaggeration", which this scene is full of. Tarkovsky does display her despair, her anguish at the identity crisis and feeling of betrayal caused by questioning her partner's sexuality. But, at the same time he creates an environment for the audience to laugh at her. The Stalker is the one consistently tormented by alienation and isolation, yet she feels the need to fall in a hyperbolized despair because of him.

The next scene in which the film's queer subtext becomes clear takes place when the group of the Stalker, the Writer, and the Professor begin their journey through the Zone. Immediately upon entering the Zone, the color palette switches from completely sepia to a natural, if not muted, palette. This jarring color switch tells the audience that the Zone does not exist within the same space as the outside world. This message is further conveyed with the Stalker's monologue which follows. The Writer acts disrespectfully towards the Zone, and the Stalker throws a metal pipe at him as a warning. After both parties calm down, the Stalker, in a soft-spoken voice, states "Here, the straight path isn't the shortest. The more indirect, the less risk there is." On the most literal level, the mention of a "straight path" could be seen as a direct hint towards sexuality. Outside of the Zone, in the material world, choosing that which is straight and acceptable is the key to social stability. Inside of the Zone, in this area mirroring both life and the inner mind, "straightness" is not the typical answer. Deviations from straight, odd or queer turns, make more sense than straight movements. Outside of that literal level, Stalker's line could be interpreted less as a callout towards the others of his own sexuality, and more of a warning metaphorically reflective of the ropes gay people had to jump through to

hide their identity. If the Zone is life, then for Stalker to navigate through the Zone as a gay man, that which is easy and intuitive for straight people contains risk, and to mitigate said risk every action becomes 10 actions. When the fear of being ousted is constant and the punishment is incarceration or possibly death, paranoia about one's sexuality becoming publicly known is omnipresent through all of one's life. Navigating through life shifts from being a pursuit of heteronormative goals and instead turns towards a constant anxious assessment of possible traps.

This interpretation of the "straightness" mentioned in the scene as literal is further emphasized by how the Writer and Professor react to what the Stalker says. Initially, they are completely mystified at the idea of following any path but the direct straight path to the Room. The Writer even goes as far as to try and press forward despite the Stalker's warnings. In the Writer's arrogance, there seems to lie the masculine ideal of brute force. As taught to many young heterosexual men, as long as they are headstrong and force their way through life, the world belongs to them. There is no need to dodge any physical or metaphorical traps if one is heterosexual and has nothing to hide for fear of persecution. So, to be presented with this idea, that these traps do exist and that they exist beyond human comprehension and ability to overcome, lays at odds with the heteronormative ideals the Writer was told to him throughout his whole life. In other words, he has always known what it is like to be a straight man, and to see the world through the queer lens the Stalker is imploring him to feels both alien and utterly idiotic to him.

A bit later, Stalker presents his view of what he thinks the Zone is and what it wants, describing who it lets through as "not the good or the bad, but the unhappy." In pointing out that he believes it does not ascertain between good or evil, he is separating the Zone from any form of human morality. Instead, it exists beyond our societally-defined moral boundaries and appeals to more primitive emotion. This speech also acts two-fold to further establish the Zone as an interior queer space. "But even the most unhappy will perish if they don't know how to behave here." With this, the Stalker is reflecting the thoughts and sentiments of gay people in the USSR at the time. Unhappiness, a result of marriage to mitigate questions on one's sexuality, is not enough to blend in with the rest of society. The queer community had to understand how to limit all possible mannerisms as to not hint towards homosexuality. The government at the time was not just arresting people on homosexuality, but also on suspicions of homosexuality, so complete and utter discretion was required for members of the community to live safe lives. If a queer person took any wrong move, any step onto a trap, they would be faced with immediate imprisonment, or even worse, death.

The group continues on their way, and the Stalker begins to monologue about hardness and softness. The repetitive mentioning of the hard and the soft acts as a direct metaphor for the phallus. Tarkovsky, through the character of the Stalker, seems to see the hard, the idea of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity, as an antagonistic force. With the line "when he dies, he is strong and hard", Tarkovsky is denying the power of traditional masculinity. Such masculine traits only lead to hate and death, as "hardness and strength are death's companions," so one should look towards softness, or androgyny over traditional masculinity for life. In this, the flexibility, the softness, the effeminate, and the queer are all the true embodiments of life. While the Stalker is

giving this monologue, he is also slowly and carefully avoiding traps that lie just out of frame. He hugs a wall in desperation as he slides across it at a snail's pace, almost like a physical manifestation of the careful and soft, whereas hardness and strength in this situation would have only led to setting off a trap. This type of movement directly contradicts that of the Writer in the prior scene as he tried to utilize brute force tactics in the Zone. If that brute force is reflective of heteronormative ideals, this meticulous dance is truly reflective of the effeminite and the queer.

A bit of time passes, and the group all goes to sleep. The film color shifts to sepia and in his dream, the Stalker floats above a pool of water inside of the Zone. He glances over miscellaneous objects of human creation while an inner monologue talks of the apocalypse. This dream sequence expresses to the audience that the Stalker feels home in the Zone, an area most other people find weird, odd, maybe even… queer? He is accustomed to treading this deadly area, both physically and emotionally, to such a point that he begins to garner admiration towards it. Instead of dreaming about his home, his dreams focus on the Zone and he flies above the water, reflecting on all the old regalia brough to the area. This familiarity is further reflected in the shift from color to sepia film. As mentioned earlier, all of Stalker before the group entered the Zone was in sepia, a reflection of how the area outside of the Zone was familiar to all of them. When they entered the Zone, the audience was given the Writer and Professor's view as the world flooded with color. The area is unfamiliar to them, which Tarkovsky displays by completely shifting the color palette of the film for the audience. With the dream sequence, the audience is being told that the Stalker does ultimately hold a high level of familiarity with the Zone, and the colors the audience sees the Zone through are not the same colors through which the Stalker does. Thus, the Stalker lies in content in this world of uncertainty and unhappiness. His desires do not focus on his wife back home, but rather on idealized ruminations about the Zone.

The dream sequence is also equally important in how it is paced. The camera slowly drags across the water as the Stalker monologues, inching further and further along at crawling speed. Stalker as a whole is a very slow film, but the pacing is further emphasized in this sequence. In this internal space inside of the Stalker's mind, time barely moves. His anxieties and fears cause time drag on minute by minute, second by second. According to Karl Schoonover, "slowness […] forms a demarcation of queer temporality. Rather than disrupting time through asynchrony and disjuncture, it distends and delays it, creating new modes of subjectivity and provoking sites of risky spectatorial idleness." The fields of Queer and Critical Theory have found that queer and marginalized individuals can experience time differently than nonmarginalized groups. This is thought to be caused by the constant apprehension and paranoia over a marginalized individual's social status and safety caused by it. The internal mind of the Stalker can then be analyzed as a reflection of queer temporality, an idling world plauged by fear of persecution.

The next morning, the group continues on their journey. They carry on making odd turns until they finally make it to the Room. Upon approaching the Room, the Writer decides that he no longer desires to enter, telling the Stalker "can't you see how shameful this is? To humiliate yourself? To snivel and to pray?" In Soviet society, and many modern Western societies, shame and humiliation are seen as weak and

effeminate traits. To be humble and purposefully humiliate oneself, outside of a comical context, is seen as showing frailty, opposite of the hardness required for masculinity. To get one's wish granted by the Room, then, is to decry one's masculine heteronormative upbringing and accept androgyny. Unable to do this, the Writer does not enter the room. His fear of abandoning these values outweighs any subconscious desire he has, and he is left to sit and wait.

As stated earlier, at this point the Professor announces that he has a bomb and the group gets into an altercation. The Stalker tries to attack the Professor, the Writer pulls the Stalker off of the Professor, and the Stalker begins to break down. The Writer questions him on why he never entered the Room, and he claims that it is because as a Stalker he cannot. He uses the character of Porcunipine, a prior Stalker who's subconscious wish was fulfilled and who then committed suicide as a result, as an example of why Stalkers may not enter the room. The logic in connecting Porcunipine's death to his position as a Stalker is shaky at best, and the Writer asks "Why didn't he come back again, but this time not for money, but for his brother? To repent." The Stalker is out of frame when he hears this from the Writer, but when he is next seen his physical mannerisms seem to reflect more of a muted despondency than a full detestment of the Writer's statement. It is almost as if the Stalker knew this, and knew that at any given point he could physically enter the Room, but that he consciously decided not to. In this action, it can be assumed that the Stalker has a conscious understanding of his unconscious desires, and full-heartedly knows that he does not want them to be fulfilled. This unconscious desire could be many things, but in analyzing his character as queer, it would make sense to see this subconscious wish as the wish to come out.

Whether or not the Stalker's subconscious wish would have been to come out or something else entirely, that fear of the Room is entirely relatable to queer audiences. The overall yearning for many gay people in the USSR was to be able to free themselves from the overencompassing weight of staying closeted and acting in discretion. As conveyed earlier in the Stalker's initial description of the Zone, both the Zone and the Room exist outside of human morality, and act neither with benevolent or malevolent intent. If the Room acts upon an individual's deepest subconscious desires, then the Room itself would be dangerous for a queer person in the USSR to enter. It would not act as a benevolent force allowing them to be freed of their fears, but rather would act as an immediate forceful outing of the individual, leading to their persecution. It was proven with the character of Porcupine that the Room's wish fulfillment does not take into consideration any conscious apprehensions of the consequences of having one's subconscious desires fulfilled. Thus, even if a queer person consciously understood the dangers of coming out, the Room would grant their subconscious desire to be free from the idiomatic "closet" they were trapped in, even if it led to their death.

In the end, the Professor does not blow up the Room and neither the Professor or the Writer enters it. The Stalker leads them out of the Zone, and then returns home to his family. He cries to his wife about the entire ordeal, and she leads him to bed. She consoles him, like a mother to a son, stroking his head and prompting him to "calm yourself". The Stalker begins to calm down, the Wife gets up to smoke a cigarette, and she begins to monologue. Her monologue contains multiple references to their

relationship, but ultimately it reads more as her further trying to console him than anything. She states “If we didn’t have sorrow and pain in our lives, it wouldn’t be better”, like a mother reminding their child that it is okay to feel pain and sadness. Even the manner in which the Wife does reminisce on their relationship feels more akin to the unrequited love of familial relationships, rather than the relational love of a matrimonious relationship, mentioning the happiness he brought her now that they are a family rather than ever mentioning the term love. The creation of a bond more akin to a mother-son relationship reflects the type of relationship many closeted gay men in the USSR had with their wives out of necessity. It concerns itself with using the matrimonial relationship as a safety net, rather than as a personal ideal as is found in heterosexual relationships, and that can create both strain and a minimization of relational love. After the Stalker’s Wife consoles him, there is a final scene of the Daughter, and the film ends.

In 1978, with the film Stalker, Andrei Tarkovsky directed a narrative film for a closeted queer audience in the USSR. The director himself may have not realized this, but Stalker lends itself to heavy queer analysis. The films made by Andrei Tarkovsky are seen as traditionally heteronormative, and so to analyze his films through a queer lens is to reclaim a heteronormative director’s work for modern queer sensibilites. The titular character of the Stalker shares many of the feelings of alienation and isolation with queer individuals of the time. He is constantly under fear and anxiety, and as seen in his dream sequence, his internal world reflects a speed of the passage of time more akin to queer temporality as it is known by Queer Theory, and his relationship with his Wife reads more as a mother-son relationship than a matrimonious one. The Stalker may or may not be a canonically queer character, but his actions and feelings throughout the film reflect queer ideals, and Stalker does possess room for interpretation as a powerful queer narrative.

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I Spit on Your Grave Ahead of Its Time or Far Behind?

I Spit on Your Grave, or *Day of the Woman*, is a 1978 Rape and Revenge Exploitation film by Meir Zarchi. It's campy, cheesy, uncomfortable, disturbing, and was initially seen as socially regressive. As the years went on, the initial audience for the movie was lost to time, and now conversations about where the film lies on the scale of social progression are taking place. Many people have argued whether the film is progressive or regressive, but I believe that all depends on the culture of the audience watching it.

The story follows a woman named Jennifer Hills, who moves to the country for the Summer to work on a novel. Not long into her stay, she is assaulted and raped by a group of four men; Johnny, Matthew, Stanley, and Andy. Barely managing to survive, she then enacts revenge on the 4 rapists, going as far as to kill each of them.

At the time of its release, it was first seen as a hugely regressive movie. Coming out in the middle of the Second-Wave Feminist movement, the film was critiqued for glorifying and exploiting the terrible crime of rape. While it did not explicitly perpetuate a narrative supporting rape, it was argued that its exploitative nature made light of rape for means of cheap entertainment and was damaging to the conversation surrounding rape and women's rights at the time. Rape & Revenge was no new subgenre in exploitation films at the time, and just like all other films in the genre, it utilized cheap exploitation tropes for heavy gore and action.

In the 1970s, Grindhouse theaters existed all throughout the USA. These theaters explicitly showed cheaply made gore-filled films for so-called "gore hounds", or people that enjoyed the cheaply made schlock and action of gore exploitation films over any other aspect of the film. *I Spit on Your Grave* was made for this exact audience. It was shown in grindhouse theaters, and as such the audience that went to see it were focused on the revenge portion; the gore and violence towards these perpetrators was all for the cheap thrills of the audience. While some people may have watched it to try and find a message surrounding rape and feminism, most of the audience just saw it for the gore. Feminists of the time saw it as a dangerous piece of media because of the audience it was marketed towards. It was seen to make light of a horrible crime, and because the "gore hound" audience was not deeply analyzing the social message of the film, it was problematic. The larger meaning behind the film was irrelevant because the target audience had little interest in the social meaning. Because of this, it was banned in multiple countries and only had a limited release in many others.

As the years went on, society moved on to the Third-Wave, and eventually Fourth-Wave Feminist movements. With these new ideologies the film began to be seen in a new light. Nowadays, in the age of Fourth-Wave Feminism, many old movies are being looked at from different angles to see if they are still problematic, or if their meanings have shifted. Many problems feminists had surrounding *I Spit on Your Grave* related to its

target audience, rather than the film itself. In the 1980s and 90s, many grindhouse theaters closed down, and the "gore hound" group of film-goers died off with them. As such, since the original audience for the film no longer exists, the film can be analyzed from a new feminist perspective, and we are all asking the same question "Is *I Spit on Your Grave* a feminist film?" While still acknowledging that the film was problematic in the 1970s and 80s, we can question if nowadays it can be analyzed from a new perspective to show a feminist meaning. The main consensus on this question is yes, it is a feminist film. While the film is exploitative in nature, many elements throughout it are meant to instill discomfort in the viewer in a way that made it different than other Rape & Revenge films of the time. When watching the film, I noted 4 main elements that made this film feel different from other Rape & Revenge films of the time, and allow it to be seen as a feminist film in modern days.

First off, the film contains no non-diegetic sound. For those that don't know, diegetic sound is sound that exists within the world of the film. Non-diegetic sound, then, is sound that does not exist within the world of the film (if you're still confused, Josh Hanson has a great video explaining it you can watch here). Throughout all the film, everything that the audience hears is happening in the scene itself. There is no extraneous music or exaggerated sound effects telling the user how to feel. This helps ground the film, and stops it from being too over-the-top and dissociated from its serious subject matter. In the rape scenes (yes, there are multiple), though uncomfortable to watch, by only utilizing sounds within the scene the audience is reminded of the intensity and gravity of the situation. Jennifer's plight and struggle is let out for users to hear. There is no music to hold the hands of the viewer and remind them that this is not real, all we hear are her cries. After the first rape scene, when Jennifer manages to escape her perpetrators (or so we are led to believe), a harmonica is heard. Initially, the viewer thinks this is the first instance of non-diegetic sound in the film, an ironic tune to juxtapose against the horrific act that just went down. Soon, though, we see that this is not the case, and instead this point of (what used to be) relief for the audience becomes a part of the second rape scene. This instills even further discomfort in the audience, as we are left feeling both disgusted and disturbed by the act, and both betrayed and distrustful of both the film and the perpetrators. The audience was given a sense of relief for a second, the existence of non-diegetic music to shift the film in a more lighthearted direction, but that is immediately taken away when we realize that's not actually the case. In doing this, the user becomes extremely empathetic of Jennifer, and this acts as a great way of showing the horrors of rape to the viewer. Nothing is shrouded in fantasy, and there is no hand-holding to mitigate the terror of the acts being committed.

Second, the film shows the message to women that society's laws are not made for them, and they must put revenge in their own hand. Seeing as how, according to RAINN, in our modern society only 5 of every 1000 rapists see jail time, this is an amazing message to teach people. If society's laws will not protect women, they should take to protecting themselves. The rapists in the film are given no sympathy and they are all murdered for raping Jennifer. Though we do get some insight into the lives of some of the rapists (as I'll talk more about later) none of them are shown to be worthy of sympathy. Regardless of whatever excuses they make regarding the act or whatever their lives may be like, they all raped a woman and are treated equally as disgusting individuals.

The third thing that makes this film feel different is Johnny's monologue as he pleads for his life to Jennifer.

> "Hey, first thing, you come into the gas station and you expose your damn sexy legs to me, walking back and forth real slow, making sure I see 'em good. And then Matthew delivers the food to your door. Come on, he sees half your tits peeking out at him. Tits with no bra. And then, you're lying in the canoe in your bikini, just waiting like bait."
> Johnny Stillman, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)

In this monologue, Johnny is stating pretty much "she was asking for it". I found this to be immensely powerful because this is an argument used in modern times to argue why someone was raped. In making one of the rapists in the film say this, the film is completely invalidating this as an argument for why someone could be raped. By making a rapist say this line, instead of a lawmaker or politician as we see it so often nowadays, the audience is shown how it is not a valid defense for why someone is raped, but instead a pitiful excuse made by a rapist.

Finally, throughout the revenge portion of the film Jennifer reuses tropes of sexuality for her own benefit. She does have sex with some of the perpetrators again before killing them, but instead of being put in a position of weakness, she shows how she can reconstitute this idea of sex to be empowering for herself. She puts herself in the position of power during sex, and utilizes it for her own gain instead of being controlled by others. This is amazing because it teaches women that sex can be powerful and empowering.

The film is not perfect, though. On top of the campy and at times terrible acting taking away from the message of the film, it also adheres to one of the worst tropes of rape and revenge films. This trope is separating the rapists from the viewers to make them out to be more demonic. In this film, the rapists are all country rednecks, not people most viewers could see themselves interacting with any time soon. In doing this, the film creates a distinction between the male audience and the rapists in the film. This is problematic because it is seen to create a certain fantasy in the heads of male viewers, that of "oh, this is a work of fantasy, not a crime that happens near me or by those I know". It separates the perpetrators from any urban crimes, and hinders the film's warning in more urban environments. Within rape and revenge flicks, the perpetrators are rarely seen as this "boy next door" type of character. They are almost always characters that are as unreliable as possible to the viewers. By doing this, the viewer can break this problem away from themselves. Rape is not shown as an urgent problem that needs to be addressed in urban populations, but rather as a freak act committed by rare perpetrators out in the rural countryside.

While adhering to this trope, *I Spit on Your Grave* at least manages to make the audience see these characters as realistic. Around halfway through the film, we are introduced to Johnny's family. I think that this is one of the most powerful and progressive things the film manages to do. No longer is Johnny seen as just this terrible rapist that exists within the film, but the viewer sees a family-man who also raped someone. In doing this, the viewer is able to understand the problematic way our society

deals with rape more deeply. They are able to see Johnny not just as a demon from a fantasy film, but as a man. Just as with all other elements of the film, this greatly helps ground the film and hone in on its message. The act of rape is no longer seen as a fantasy act that can only be done by terrible unrealistic perpetrators nobody would ever encounter, but instead is shown to be a disturbing crime that can be committed by a real person. Showing Johnny's family does not make us more empathetic towards him, but instead makes us emphasize more with Jennifer, as her situation is made to be even more real.

It's important to understand that not all films are extremely socially progressive or regressive, and some can exist in a gray-zone that can be argued both ways. Sometimes, it's a matter of perspective, of audience, or even of our own society. These analyses are not meant to enforce you to see a movie in a single light, but rather to highlight a possibility presented by the film. With *I Spit on Your Grave*, the message was highly dependent on the audience. In its initial form, the message was extremely socially regressive because the film was targeted towards the "gore hound" audience. This audience had a high tendency to watch films for shock value, and so any nuanced conversations about sexual assault films tried to convey were lost on the audience. With the introduction of the 4th wave feminist movement and a change of the film's audience, said conversations were had and the film's message switched to become socially progressive.

The Medicalization of Moral Panics

Every now and then, things come into our society that challenge the status quo. Things like the existence of gay people and cellphones can be seen as antagonistic to the social order, and moral panic ensues. Moral panics cannot occur in a bubble, though, and in the modern age people look to facts and science before resorting to panic. This must stop the spread of moral panic, right? Wrong. In fact, society looks towards the medical and scientific findings as a proven science, when they can be wrong. Scientific studies and data are touted without full understanding of correlations, and data can be misused to support and legitimize an unfounded moral panic. Nowadays, society is even more prone to this. As medicalization spreads and more and more aspects of the human condition begin to be treated as medical conditions, even morality and individual lifestyles are treated like medically dangerous situations. Utilizing this guise of medical professionalism, groups can spread fear and ignorance about certain groups, and moral panic ensues. We've seen this many times, evenway back in the 1980s with the HIV and AIDs epidemic being seen as a "gay issue", and the medical field blaming the gay "lifestyle" on the cause of the epidemic just as much as the actual virus itself. We even saw this medicalized fear create moral panic before then, with the discovery of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the 1970s. With medicalization, ignorance and racism are able to spread under the veil of being "medical fact". Data can be used to spread lies, which are used to isolate populations and create moral panics surrounding their freedoms, or even their existence itself.

As a gay man, I've experienced moral panic surrounding my freedoms and ability to live freely under the guise of "concern". Though people feel that the moral panic

surrounding HIV died in the early 2000s, they would be completely wrong. The only difference between then and now is how the story is being told. In the 1980s, gay men were attacked for their "lifestyle". As HIV spread throughout the community, the straight community utilized the medical field to attack and demonize the gay community. Statistics were made that focused on how the epidemic could be curved through "lifestyle changes", instead of trying to address the virus itself. As well, misinformation was spread about how the virus was spread, and the medical field did little to curtail these lies. Straight people went around thinking you could get HIV from sharing contact or proximity with a gay person, and used this to spread hate and fear of the community as a whole. America's shift towards individual responsibility when it comes to medical conditions allowed this hate and phobia to spread. People wondered why gay people could not just abstain from sex, as if blaming the individuals helped the situation.

Nowadays, while we have started to shift away from the blatant homophobia that used to be so prevalent in society, this fear is still deeply ingrained within the community. There still is a focus on individual responsibility in regards to medical care, blaming the individual on their lifestyle choices. Upon coming out, I (and a majority of other gay men I know), were immediately given the talk on HIV and prevention. I, like everyone else, was put on PrEP, a pill that is meant to stop someone from getting HIV. This brings up an interesting question, though. Even though they claim it comes out of the kindness of their heart, why is it that when someone is first seen as gay, they are put on PrEP? Even without knowledge of their sexual habits, why is it always assumed that a gay man is sexually active? What shifted in coming out that brought someone from this throne of socially acceptable abstinence to a position where they need to take PrEP? While on the issue, it must also be questioned why PrEP is only given to and marketed towards gay men. Though gay men are more at-risk for HIV, the straight community is still highly at-risk. When someone in the straight community states that they are sexually active, there is a script that occurs. In that script, they are questioned whether they use condoms or are on the pill, depending on their gender. Never in that script are they questioned if they are on PrEP. That question is maintained for the script for gay man who states they are sexually active. In this difference, we can see a socially regarded, though rarely questioned, difference in how people see gay people. Though it may not be inherently negative in the minds of the asker, people still see a distinctive difference between the sex and sexual habits of a straight person and a gay person.

This can be problematic not only in creating this separation between gay and straight people within society, but also in creating stigmas within the gay community. Because there is such a heavy focus on PrEP and prevention, there is a lot of discrimination against people that do not take it. I have personally seen (and truthfully, have been a part of) verbally harassing individuals that are not on PrEP. Whether or not someone is on it can be the difference between being accepted or neglected in the community, regardless if someone actually has HIV or not. Prevention has become so ingrained in our minds that it is seen by some as an essential part of the script surrounding sex, and going against that norm is itself seen as an act of deviance worthy of beratement and violence. Even then, people with HIV experience further discrimination within the community.

Though there are pills to prevent exposure to other sexual partners, namely PEP, HIV positive individuals are usually seen as deviants within the community. In the community, the script regarding having sex with another gay man always contains one question. “Are you clean?”. In this wording, individuals are creating a means of discrimination. They are putting themselves in the category of “clean”, and categorizing all HIV positive individuals as the only other option in the binary of cleanliness… “dirty”. This wording is problematic in multiple ways. First off, it creates a dangerous social hierarchy within the gay community. Just as straight white men have created a social hierarchy within larger society that discriminates against any non-straight people, non-white people, or non-men, this status of “clean or dirty” creates a similar hierarchy. The hierarchy created by this is ripe with discrimination, as the “clean” individuals see themselves as superior, and try to maintain their superiority by reinforcing the status of HIV positive people as disempowered. Second, it puts a level of responsibility on the individual for their HIV status. In our society, we see the status of “dirty” as failing to adhere to cleanliness. It is a failure to clean oneself, and as such it creates this narrative in a person’s head that someone’s positive HIV status is a reflection of their inability to either practice safe sex or maintain “clean” sex practices. The situation surrounding how they got their current HIV status is completely ignored, and this generalized narrative is immediately created to put the responsibility for where they are on them. Finally, by placing such importance on this question in the social script regarding sex, HIV status becomes an individual identifier, or marker, on someone. Nowadays, within the gay community, someone’s HIV status is not just a medical diagnosis, but it is a full part of their identity. There is not “I’m HIV positive, but I’ve been undetectable for years”. Instead, that is just seen as “I’m not clean”. As reflected by Jeffery Victor’s works, reaction to someone’s HIV status constitutes a moral panic, for it “defin[es] some social category of people as being traitors to, or deviants from, the overarching moral values of a society”. Not practicing safe sex becomes a form of deviance, and those that go against the norm are seen as fighting the moral values, or as a scapegoat for us to blame in regards to our own internalized fears. This medicalized fear of HIV has become so prevalent that it created a social hierarchy within the gay community. Even though there are pills and treatments to prevent HIV from progressing or spreading to others, the medical field did so much to create panic surrounding HIV that this is all ignored. This medicalization of the gay “lifestyle”, putting individual responsibility and a medical focus on someone’s sexuality, led to widespread fear and damage. There still is a moral panic in the gay community, a moral panic surrounding HIV status. It may be so well-ingrained that we do see it as a norm instead of a moral panic, but it does exist.

Just as we see HIV used as a form of social control of gay people by straight people and HIV positive people by HIV negative people, we see Fetal Alcohol Syndrome being used as a form of social control of women and mothers. In the 1970s, FAS was “discovered” as a birth defect caused by mothers drinking while pregnant. This led to a widespread panic against moms drinking. The statistics and medical field claimed this was a dangerous problem, so was it not the responsibility of the caring father to swat that glass of red wine out of his wife’s hands? The only medical conclusion was to limit the drinking of mothers, or even possible mothers. This was used as a form of social control to establish dominance over what actions mothers could do while pregnant. Responsibility was thrusted on them to not drink, and the right to monitor prospective

mothers as to whether they were adhering to this was given to everyone else within society. As stated by Lisa Wade, “FAS, in fact, is partly the result of individual behavior, partly the result of social inequality, and partly genetic, but our entire eradication strategy focuses on individual behavior”. Our society puts full responsibility on the mother, even though other factors are at play. All these points of medicalization are used to create a moral panic. Moral panics exist to establish and maintain social control. Whether it’s gay people with HIV, women with FAS, or any other discriminated group, these moral panics will come around to force people into a corner. Under the guise of safety and caring for individuals, control will be established over these individuals, and they will be lowered in the social hierarchy to maintain dominance.

Works Cited

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