***But I’m A Cheerleader* (1999)**

**Film Background:** *But I'm A Cheerleader* was released in 1999. It was directed by Jamie Babbit, and it was Babbit's first feature film. The film largely received a poor critical reception from most mainstream media outlets, often because it was perceived as engaging only stereotypes. More recent critical appraisals have considered it more positively, noting its use of satire and camp to critique heteronormativity. LGBTQ media outlets such as *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle* have consistently ranked it one of the best queer films of all time. Initially, the film received an NC-17 rating; Babbit removed some content to earn it a commercially viable "R" rating. Babbit was interviewed in Kirby Dick's documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2000) and critiques the decision-making and demands of the MPAA, noting the sexism and homophobia implicit in much of their commentary.

**Plot summary:** As the film opens, 17-year old cheerleader Megan (Natasha Lyonne) is subjected to an intervention by her parents and friends, who are concerned that she may be a lesbian. She is sent to True Directions, a conversion therapy camp for teenagers, who are expected to complete a 5-step recovery program in order to rid themselves of homosexuality and reintegrate into society. The program is run by Mary (Cathy Moriarty) and Mike (RuPaul). Megan meets several other teens in the program, including Graham (Clea DuVall), who she befriends. Megan completes step 1 -- admitting that she is a lesbian. Soon after her arrival, she discovers two male members of the program, Dolph (Dante Basco) and Clayton (Kip Pardue) making out and screams, leading to Mary waking up to discover them. Dolph is expelled from the camp and Clayton is punished. One night, several members of the True Directions program sneak out to a gay bar, led by former True Directions members Lloyd (Wesley Mann) and Larry (Richard Moll). While at the bar, Megan and Graham kiss, admitting their feelings for one another. Mary finds out about the trip, and requires the True Directions members to picket Lloyd and Larry's house. One night, Graham and Megan sneak out of bed to have sex, and Mary discovers what they have done. Megan refuses to apologize for her actions and is expelled from the camp. Megan stays at True Directions, fearful of her father's rejection. Megan joins Dolph, who is staying at Lloyd and Larry's house, and the two find more acceptance. They hatch a plan to try to get Graham and Clayton back at the True Directions graduation ceremony. Dolph immediately succeeds at convincing Clayton to leave; however, when Megan confronts Graham, Graham is initially afraid to leave with her. Ultimately, Megan performs a cheer declaring her love for Graham in front of the group, and Graham relents. The four of them drive off together. In the closing credits, Megan's parents are shown attending a PFLAG meeting, suggesting their step towards acceptance of Megan's sexuality.

**Content warnings:** *But I'm A Cheerleader* contains two non-explicit sex scenes, brief underage drinking, and humor about sexuality throughout.

**Running time:** 1 hr 25 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz (day 1)
* Student-led scene analysis description and model (day 1)
* Film screening notes handout (day 1)
* Film studies vocabulary handout (day 1)
* Secondary texts:

**Notes:**

* **Note:**Because this is the first week of the course, Day 1 involves the introduction of some course systems and materials we will use throughout this course (student-led scene analysis model, film studies vocabulary, film screening notes). If you plan to rearrange the sequence of this course, you may want to move some of these introductory materials to whatever you choose to be the first week.

**Lesson 1 – Course Introduction and Model Scene Analysis:**

1. (3 min) Course introduction. Teacher may want to provide a syllabus with a schedule of assignments, grade breakdowns, etc. Teacher may also want to share their interests that led them to this course. (Note: I have not included this document because I assume it will vary significantly based on school context).
2. (5 min) Student introductions: Have students introduce themselves with their names, pronouns, and a film that changed their life. (If gender pronouns are not commonly discussed, this may be a good moment to briefly explain why it’s important to ask them, rather than assume them.)
3. (7 min) Students write - Personal reflection:
   1. What goals do you have for your learning in this course (about LGBTQ identities, cinema, etc?)?
   2. What knowledge or skills are you bringing into this course that you hope to share with our class?
   3. What questions do you have about what we will learn or how we will learn it?
   4. Considering our focus on LGBTQ identities, what do you think we should set as norms and expectations for how we interact with each other?
4. (10 min) Discuss personal reflections.
5. (3 min) Teacher will introduce three handouts: film studies vocabulary handout, sample screening quiz, and film screening notes handout.
   1. The film studies vocabulary handout will be useful during class discussions, film screenings, and when preparing for your scene presentation. Teacher can emphasize that it is not expected that students know or understand every term on the list, but that they should practice using this terminology and asking these questions in their notes.
   2. The film screening notes handout is what students should use to take notes during film screenings. (You may want to collect and grade this handout. You could also offer students the opportunity to use their handout during weekly screening quizzes, if you’d like to incentivize strong note-taking.)
   3. The sample screening quiz is an example of what your screening quiz will look like at the start of each week. Students should consider whether they’d be prepared to answer these questions today, and keep in mind effective note-taking during screenings could help them prepare. (Alternatively, you could give students this quiz as a practice if you have time).
6. (5 min) Give students time to scan through the film studies vocabulary handout, and perhaps share with a partner one term that is familiar and one term that is unfamiliar. Draw students’ attention in particular to the cinematography page, since today’s model presentation will focus on that.
7. (4 min) Provide students with the student-led scene analysis handout description and model document. Explain that each week, one (or a pair) of students will present a close-reading scene analysis on day 1 of our weekly sequence, and that presentation should follow these guidelines. Today, the teacher will model this presentation to give students a sense of the formats of these presentations. Read through the description of the presentation (page 1) and take student questions on presentations. Tell students to take notes on what they notice about the presentation as they observe it.
8. (15 min) Teacher will model an effective scene analysis presentation, including screening of the intervention scene, a lecture on cinematography in this scene, and leading a brief discussion on other formal elements of the scene.
9. (5 min) Ask students to share out what they noticed about why the presentation was effective, and ask for any final questions students may have about presentations. You could also have students sign up for presentations during this time, or set a time by which students need to sign up.

**Lesson 2: Examining *Ma Vie En Rose* Alongside *Whipping Girl***

1. (5 min) Consider the three works we’ve examined so far this unit.
   * Why, according to Muñoz (and perhaps many of the filmmakers in this unit) is the “here and now” a “prison house” for LGBTQ people?
   * How do LGBTQ people use the past and the future to create “other ways of being in the world” and “ultimately new worlds?” How do “San Junipero,” *Pose,* and *Ma Vie en Rose* convey that world-making?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (4 min) Re-watch today’s clips: Elisabeth changes the music and dances at the party; Elisabeth teaches Ludo her “trick” (10:01-11:00; 15:01-18:35)
4. (15 min) Study groups. Groups will work on the following questions.
   1. What key points does Serano make? What terms does she use to make her claims?

* *Serano argues that trans women are subject to a variety of intersecting forms of oppression: transphobia, cissexism, misogyny, oppositional sexism, and traditional sexism. These terms are defined on p. 12-14.*
* *Serano argues that these intersecting forms of oppression function collectively as trans-misogyny, which is the specific form of sexism and transphobia that trans women experience most prominently. As Serano argues, “In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived thread than the existence of trans women, who despite being born male and inheriting male privilege ‘choose’ to be female instead. By embracing our own femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity” (15)*
* *Serano argues that trans-misogyny takes many forms, including hyperfeminization of depictions of trans women, hypersexualization of depictions of trans women, and objectification of trans women’s bodies (16)*
* *Serano argues that trans activism must be a “feminist movement” that “challenges the idea that femininty is inferior to masculinity” (18)*
* *She argues that femininity must be uplifted; “we must learn to empower femininity itself…we must challenge all who assume that feminine vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For when we do open ourselves up, whether by honestly communicating our thoughts and feelings or expressing our emotions, it is a daring act, one that takes more courage and inner strength than the alpha male façade of silence and stoicism” (18)*
* *Serano also argues that “we must stop pretending that there are essential differences between women and men” and that the two genders are “opposites”; (19) Serano argues that the notion that opposites exist in gender makes it “impossible for us to empower women without either ridiculing men or pulling the rug out from under ourselves” (19)*
* *Serano closes her piece by claiming that “by challenging both oppositional and traditional sexism simultaneously, we can make the world safe for those of us who are queer, those of us who are feminine, and those of us who are female, thus empowering people of all sexualities and genders” (20)*

1. How do these key points relate to the scenes we just watched, or to other scenes in this episode? Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
   * *Throughout these scenes, Berliner highlights Elisabeth’s connection to Ludo, and also the ways she too is outcast due to misogyny and ageism. When she begins to dance at the party, she is critiqued for being “as crazy as ever” and “pretending to be young.” Despite Pierre’s judgment, Elisabeth dances, and Ludo runs to her. Hanna joins them, and the trio dance together, ignoring the judgment of the men who stand at the sidelines. All three characters wear orange, suggesting their unity and their enjoyment, especially in contrast to the cool blue tones that are dominant in the second half of the film. Men’s judgment of feminine expression--especially by gender non-conforming characters like Ludo, and women who are older and therefore no longer treated as objects of sexual conquest, like Elizabeth—shapes this scene, but so too do the characters’ rejection of that judgment and celebration of their femininity. This is one rare scene in which Hanna seems to connect to Ludo’s exuberance and expression, embracing her and grinning as they dance. This scene illustrates Serano’s point about the intersections between transphobia and misogyny, as well as her claim about the importance of “empowering femininity itself” (18).*
   * *Elisabeth gives Ludo the box with a feminine figure dancing inside it, perhaps as a symbol of her strategy for feminine expression. While she seems to accept that the world does not want people like herself or Ludo to freely express themselves, she encourages Ludo to live out feminine expression through fantasy. She explains, “At some point you have to face reality. So in order to do all the things I want without seeming ridiculous, I have a trick.” She explains that she closes her eyes and “the world becomes whatever I want.” Ludo closes her eyes and imagines herself in Pam’s world, in a white lacy dress and surrounded by rich pinks and reds.*
   * *Elisabeth and Ludo’s shared joy in feminine expression through fantasy illustrates 1) the film’s critique of patriarchy, in which masculinity is prized and femininity is devalued, and 2) why the film turns towards utopian imagery to provide Ludo with a different vision of “Ma Vie En Rose.” Since the world Ludo lives in is a world of trans-misogyny, she relies on Pam’s World for a staging of utopia that values feminine power and expression.*
2. (20 min) Whole group discussion.
   * 1. What key points does Serano make? What terms does she use to make her claims?
     2. Review p. 12-14. What forms of oppression does Serano address?
     3. On p. 15, Serano defines “trans-misogyny.” How does she explain this term?
     4. According to Serano, what must activists do to combat trans-misogyny?
     5. How do these key points relate to the scenes we just watched, or to other scenes in this episode? Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
     6. How does Ludo’s relationship with Elisabeth illustrate the film’s critique of misogyny?
     7. What does Elisabeth share with Ludo about how to challenge misogyny?
     8. How does this help us understand why the film uses fantasy and utopian imagery?
     9. How does the use of color in this scene help us understand the film’s focus on trans-misogyny?
   1. **Extension question:** Did you find Serano’s critique of trans-misogyny compelling? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary. As critiques, students may note that while Serano details intersecting forms of oppression in terms of gender and sexuality, she does not take up how these forms of oppression intersect with race and class, or white feminism’s erasure of Black women’s experiences. Students may also point to transmasculine invisibility in culture (vs. transfemininity’s hypervisibility) It could be interesting to explore whether this divergence supports or challenges Serano’s claims.*

* 1. **Extension question:** What other works that we’ve seen in this course might relate to Serano’s claims?

*Students may bring up Pose, such as when Blanca comments on how Damon puts her down because he’s able to diminish her due to her identity as a transwoman. Students may also refer back to Disclosure or Boy Meets Girl.*

**Lesson 3: Examining *Ma Vie En Rose* Alongside Michael Schiavi’s**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one of the following questions to answer:
   1. Did you enjoy watching *Ma Vie en Rose?* Why or why not?
   2. This film was made in 1997. Do you think a gender nonconforming child like Ludo would be treated similarly today in your family, school or community? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (5 min) Re-watch today’s clip – final scene (1:20:19-1:25:55) (Note: This clip includes Ludo’s mother hitting her; you may want to warn students or cut the beginning).
4. (15 min) Study groups. (You may want to preface this discussion with a critique of Schiavi’s description of Ludo as a “girl-identified pre-pubescent male” and his use, without comment, of he/him pronouns.)
   1. What is Schiavi arguing in his article?

* *Non-narrativity: Ludo resists normative narrative structures that demands her “compulsory integration within recognizable narrative passages of heterosexual love and family” (2).* 
  + *Schiavi asks how Ludo can survive her circumstance, given her age and limited power: “How then, do Berliner and Vander Stappen manage to hang their entire film on a comparatively mute protagonist who seems thwarted at every narrative turn?” (12)*
* *Strategies of resistance:* 
  + *Spectatorship: Schiavi argues that Ludo’s "foregrounded spectatorship,” her “committed watching and remobilization of ‘feminine’ performance” (2) is one way the narrative resists forward momentum towards heterosexual adulthood (or straight time).*
  + *Non-speech acts: Ludo often makes claims to her identity through movement or presentation; some of these claims are rejected before they can even be named: Ludo “quickly sees the impossibility of sharing [her] hobby when an authority figure dismisses Ludo’s identification with Pam before [she] can speak it” (6)*
  + *Color: The film’s aesthetics are Ludo’s aesthetics - “It is Ludo’s worldview that informs the film’s narrative and aesthetic structures” (13)…”Despite the community’s exclusion of Ludo, its aesthetics belong to a little boy who reminds adults of the subversiveness skipping just beyond their alarm systems’ jurisdiction” (13).*
  + *Fantasy sequences:**“Ludo and Jerome’s belief in [her] fantasies keeps Ludo alive and prevents his story from shutting down altogether. If Ludo accepted [her] parents insistence on gender-prescribed behavior and clothes, if [she] allowed [her] therapist to convince [her she] is male, if [she] believed Albert and Lisette’s conviction that [she] is evil, then his narrative could not continue” (17).*
* *Atypical plot structure: “The sadistic antagonist is less a masculine subject than a masculinist discourse that exists precisely to annihilate non-masculine boys” but “Ludo is too young and too passive to engage in full-scale ‘battle’” (3). While Ludo’s subjectivity is consistently threatened by parents, classmates, teachers, etc., she does not fully respond to these threats, but rather observes and adjusts her disposition; Schiavi argues that this is “non-masculine narrativity” that defies typical plot structures, which highlights the challenge of a feminine and young subject staking a claim for their subjectivity in film.*
* *Closing scene: Schiavi argues that the “deliberately hazy—indeed, archly unresolved—end” (2) of the film highlights its resistance to narrative resolution*
  + *Schiavi points to the fact that the closing scene is abrupt and perhaps unsatisfactory (18).*
  + *“At whatever cost of narrative credibility, Ludo must reintegrate within the Fabre milieu in order to secure the kind of US attention that wins Golden Globes...still,…the question remains: just how do Hanna, Pierre and a crowd of anonymous children suddenly accept the figure who has grated so violently against spectatorship throughout the film?” (18)*
  + *“The answer seems to lie in Pam—or, more specifically, in Ludo’s consumption, redeployment and dissemination of her image” (19).*
  1. Consider Schiavi’s analysis of Ludo’s characterization. Do you agree or disagree with Schiavi’s claims?
* *Answers may vary. Students might critique Schiavi’s analysis that “Ludo seems preternaturally precocious in [her] ability to squelch the pain [she] must feel” (13). One could argue that Ludo’s suicide attempt suggests that there is much about her experience that we cannot see or understand because of the narrative confines and challenges of sharing the experience of a young gender nonconforming child so young. What is clear is that those in Ludo’s life (and perhaps the film itself) are not attentive to her pain, and it remains mostly invisible.*
  1. Consider the final scene of the film. How do you read this scene? What does Berliner do to convey its message? Do you agree with Schiavi’s analysis? Why or why not?
* *Narrative uncertainty: This scene appears to be initially attempting to resolve itself into the “heterosexual plot,” (2) as Chris and Ludo’s mothers joke that “my daughter really likes your son. I hope things work out,” highlighting how heteronormativity structures even childhood play. Pink and blue candles on Chris’s birthday cake seem to underscore the expectation of binary gender and heteronormativity.*
* *Hanna’s breakdown: However, a happy ending through the “heterosexual plot” becomes untenable when Chris returns in Ludo’s costume. While Chris’s mother laughs and turns to Hanna, expecting a returned laugh, Hanna’s face falls, and sharp synthesizer sounds convey her rage. As she chases Ludo, a shaky camera and follows Ludo as if she is running from a monster in a horror movie. As they run through the neighborhood, pops of red color are interspersed with the cool blues. The sound effects highlight Ludo’s dress being ripped. As she hits Ludo, piano notes emphasize the somber melodrama unfolding. In the space of a minute, the film shifts from comedy to horror to tragic drama.*
* *Resolution:**Ludo frees herself from Hanna, and with three minutes left in the film, one wonders how this grim conclusion could be resolved. Hanna checks the icebox, reminding the audience that the stakes of her abuse. With suicide ruled out as a closing note, the film then seems to shift to Ludo’s aesthetics and narrativity as Ludo successfully and Hanna unsuccessfully attempt to enter “Pam’s World” on a billboard, as Ludo seeks a utopian escape from the unlivable circumstances her family has created. After Ludo runs off with Pam into Pam’s world, and Hanna fails to enter this queer temporality space, Hanna awakens on a couch surrounded by friends and family, in a moment that is reminiscent of The Wizard of Oz. Her black and white checkered shirt precisely matches the pattern on the throw pillow she rests her head on, perhaps suggesting the “black-and-white” nature of her worldview and the limitations of her mindset. A brief conversation between Pierre, Ludo, and Hanna seems to suggest that because of this experience, Ludo is now free to dress as she wants and will always be “their child.” Red and pink colors return the landscape outside their house as Pam flies through the sky above.*
* *Students may find this resolution shockingly rushed and unbelievable.* *They may take issue with a seemingly happy resolution that comes so closely after Hanna’s abuse of Ludo, or they may note that the somber score at the end of the film suggests more ambivalence than the dialogue, and Pam’s appearance, lets on. Perhaps the final image of Ludo looking up to the sky where Pam flies above suggests that, although Ludo’s circumstances will continue to be challenging, her reliance on the utopian space of Pam’s world will continue to be an important survival strategy.*

1. Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Schiavi arguing in his article?
2. Review p 2, where Schiavi outlines some of his claims. What does he bring up in this section?

ii.How does Ludo’s story resist narrative structures?

iii.What strategies does Schiavi argue Ludo uses to communicate her experience and identity throughout the film?

* 1. Consider Schiavi’s analysis of Ludo’s characterization. Do you agree or disagree with Schiavi’s claims?

1. Consider the line on p. 13: “Ludo seems preternaturally precocious in [her] ability to squelch the pain [she] must feel” (13). Would you argue that Ludo is “precocious” in her resistance to her family and peers’ transphobia, or is there another way to read this film? What might Schiavi be missing by focusing on Ludo’s strength throughout this violence?
   1. Consider the final scene of the film. How do you read this scene? What does Berliner do to convey its message? Do you agree with Schiavi’s analysis? Why or why not?
2. Consider the moments before Hanna’s breakdown. What do you notice about Hanna and Chris’s mothers’ interaction? How does this convey their expectation for how they’d like this narrative to end?
3. What formal elements convey meaning through Hanna’s breakdown? After this moment, how do you expect the narrative to end?
4. Why do you think the film returns to Pam’s World right after this moment? What does this moment convey?
5. How did you read the final conversation between Hanna, Pierre and Ludo and the final shot of the film?