***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:**

* 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.
* Throughout the course, secondary texts are listed alongside the day they are discussed in class. For example, the CBS Video on Conversion Therapy is listed as Day 2 because it is intended to be discussed that day. Students should watch this video prior to Day 2's class.

**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 *But I’m A Cheerleader* and Genre**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection.
2. Did you enjoy watching *But I’m A Cheerleader?* Why or why not?
3. Consider the CBS Video you watched on conversion therapy. What did you learn from this video? What surprised you?
4. (7 min) Discuss.
5. (3 min) Re-watch today’s scene.
6. (4 min) Discussion prep.
7. What elements of romantic comedy align with *But I’m A Cheerleader?* What components of romantic comedy does it subvert? How do the formal elements of this scene, such as the mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound relate to Babbit’s use and subversion of the conventions of romantic comedy?
8. Consider the formal elements of the scene we just watched. How does Babbit critique the practices of the conversion therapy camp through the cinematography, editing, sound and mise-en-scene?
9. Whole class discussion. If time, have students discuss their responses in partners before moving into whole class discussion.

12. **Push ahead question:** Some films, like *Boy Erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* examine the topic of conversion therapy camp through drama, but director Jamie Babbit chose to address this topic as a comedy. Why do you think Babbit wanted to address this topic through the genre of romantic comedy? (If time, you could show the trailer for *Boy Erased* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-B71eyB_Onw>)to help students consider this question and compare/contrast what each genre may be able to convey and may not be able to convey about this topic.)

**Lesson 3: Examining But I’m A Cheerleader**