***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:
  + Day 2: Video: CBS - Conversion Therapy (Homework: Watch before Day 2 Class. Content warning: contains descriptions of suicide attempts and abuse)
  + Day 2: Jeffers McDonald, Tamar. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London, Wallflower Press, 2007. (Homework: Read before Day 2 class. Excerpt included: Introduction and Appendix B)
  + Day 3: Video: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression. (Watch in class.)
  + Day 3: Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

**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 the Genre of Romantic Comedy**

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. (2 min) Re-watch today’s scene: Graham and Meghan flirt in a montage (38:40-40:21).
6. (10 min) Discussion prep. Students could do this independently or in small “study groups” to prepare for discussion.
7. Review McDonald’s essay on romantic comedy. What elements of romantic comedy that McDonald notes align with *But I’m A Cheerleader?* What components of romantic comedy does it subvert throughout the film?

*Subvert:*

* *Central plotline: McDonald defines a romantic comedy as “a film which has at its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (9) – one could argue that Megan’s confinement in conversion therapy is a more central storyline, rather than the romantic plotline, especially because she does not seem romantically interested in Graham until about 1/3 of the way through the film; however, once the romantic storyline emerges, it does drive the plot in a “light-hearted way” and resolves in a “successful conclusion”*
* *Poster/marketing: The poster and title of the film suggest that the central plotline is Megan’s personal journey and confusion over her parents’ decision to send her to True Directions, but perhaps Babbit subverts the norm of “romcom film posters…employing very consistent tropes to market their products, involving emphasizing the central couple” (9). Perhaps film marketers in 1999 did not think an audience would be receptive to a queer romantic comedy that followed all the tropes audiences were accustomed to, so they subverted the audiences’ expectations*
* *Setting: McDonald points out that “almost uniformly the contemporary romantic comedy now has an urban location” (11); Babbit may have wanted to subvert this norm in order to highlight the isolation and exile that Meghan experiences at True Directions; there is only one mention of “the city” and it seems to be a place of promise for the future: Lloyd and Larry discuss Megan potentially looking at “schools in the city,” suggesting a more hopeful future exists there. In contrast to the typical romantic comedy, in which the city aids the couple’s quest for love, in But I’m A Cheerleader the rural nature of True Directions highlights Megan and Graham’s inability to seek out freedom, independence, and romance.*

*Align:*

* *Stock characters: McDonald argues that stock characters “most often include the unsuitable partner” who “illustrates the rightness of the central romance by being plainly wrong” (11); Megan’s grotesque makeout sessions with her football-playing boyfriend highlight the “wrongness” of that initial coupling; similarly, Sinead appears to be a classic stock character who attempts to sabotage the relationship because of her interest in Graham*
* *Props: Throughout the film, there are visual references to weddings and future domesticity through the education that Graham and Meghan receive at True Directions; however the images of wedding dresses (when the girls try them on as part of Step 2), flowers (same scene), beds (such as in the sexual simulation scene) etc that McDonald mentions (11) emphasize this story’s divergence from traditional romantic comedies; these images represent imprisonment in heteronormativity rather than a blissful future*
* *Costume: McDonald discusses the trope of the “special outfit for the big date;” while the characters mostly wear uniforms, Megan’s decision to wear her cheerleading outfit to the graduation ceremony aligns with this trope, as it is one of the only times she is able to dress in a way that expresses her true identity throughout the film*
* *Embrace of the “chick flick”: McDonald argues that romantic comedies face contempot due to their “association with a female audience,” their privileging of the “perspective of the female lead character,” etc. (16) One could argue that Babbit fully embraces the chick flick, especially through the choice of a soundtrack that exclusively features pop songs with female vocalists. While McDonald argues that romantic comedies are often disparaged due to a sexist rejection of their identification as films for women, Babbit’s film centers on femininity.*
* *“Idiotic public gesture”: (118) McDonald references this as a declaration of one’s affection that also leads to embarrassment, and this trope is evident in the graduation scene when Megan performs a cheer in an effort to win Graham’s affection back. The stakes are perhaps even higher than embarrassment here, since Megan is chased away by Mary, who yells, “you will wallow in the scum of your homosexual depravity for the rest of your life!” This moment highlights Megan’s willingness to outspokenly claim her sexuality and her desire for Graham. (This scene will be a focus of tomorrow’s class.)*
* *“Wedding that goes wrong but it’s just as well”: (118) – The graduation scene is filled with the imagery of weddings, as graduates walk down the aisle to a gazebo where their families are dressed in white, and they receive objects that include a heterosexual couple as a graduation gift. This wedding-esque graduation goes very “wrong” in the sense that Graham does not graduate, but instead runs away to ride off into the sunset (painted on the back of the pickup truck) with Megan. As a runaway “bride,” Graham highlights the value of escaping the restrictive control of her parents’ heteronormativity.*

1. How do the formal elements of the scene we just watched, such as the mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound relate to Babbit’s use and subversion of the conventions of romantic comedy?

* *Love montage: (118) McDonald lists “love montage” as a commonly used romantic comedy trope (118). This scene is an example of a “love montage,” since an upbeat, romantic song plays and indicates the passage of time in a series of shots. Graham first expresses interest in Megan by touching her arm, and the pair flirt their way through Mary’s exercises. While this trope aligns with the norm of romantic comedies, it also subverts it because most of the actions the girls take as they flirt are unseen and overlooked because of heteronormativity; ironically, the flirtations of touching hands while they watch dishes together and looking deep into each other’s eyes as Graham gives Megan a pedicure seems to go unnoticed by Mary, whose heteronormative gaze does not identify these moments as part of a love montage. Like many love montages, this sequence helps us understand how and why Graham and Megan grow closer without dialogue; the audience is expected to understand that time is passing and both protagonists are starting to care more for each other by observing their body language, shared laughter, whispers, etc.*
* *Sound: The diegetic sound of Mary didactically explaining “lovemaking” between “Dan and Sue”--a ideal of a heterosexual couple she is teaching about—contrasts with the non-diegetic sound of the song “Trailer Song” by Sissy Bar. The diegetic sound of Mary’s voice is oppressive and dry, but it fades out and is replaced with the song, which represents Graham and Megan’s growing attraction to one another amidst the oppression of True Directions. Like many romantic comedies, this film uses romantic pop music to echo the feelings of a romantic couple.*

1. 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?

* *Costume: This scene, like many others, highlights that the camp conflates sexuality and gender identity; this is evident in the shot of Graham painting Megan’s nails while Megan wears a corset top. While her clothing is sexualized, Mary would not perceive this moment as sexualized because her behavior is aligned to feminine gender expression, and this is therefore perceived as a moment that is bringing her closer to heterosexuality.*
* *Color: Strong color contrasts throughout this scene highlight the absurdity of the camp. One brightly lit shot features several students in green dresses with a pink and green floor below them—a hideous combination of colors (the same contrast is shown a few shots later). In contrast to the students in this scene, Mary wears a plastic, see-through bright pink blazer, which reflects light. The students’ dresses are deeper colors that do not reflect light. As the one dressed in pink, and the first one to model crossing her legs in a feminine manner, she is the paragon of femininity in this scene, but the femininity she presents is plasticized and inauthentic.*
* *Editing: There is a shot of the students crossing their legs highlights Megan and Hilary correctly doing the task followed by Jan incorrectly crossing their legs. There is a cut to the next part of the sequence before Sinead and Graham attempt crossing their legs in order to emphasize Jan’s failure to adhere to Mary’s expectations. Since the audience knows that Megan and Hilary are not “cured” of their homosexuality, and that Jan is, in fact, interested in men, this shot satirizes Mary’s expectations are not rooted in any genuine correlation to sexuality. The humor of the sequence lies in the superficiality of Mary’s exercises that are intended to educate the students.*
* *Lighting: In a shot of Graham and Megan practicing with their “gender role” cards, the two protagonists are shown laughing and talking in low key lighting, which emphasizes the romantic nature of this moment as shot-reverse shots suggest their banter and intimacy. Because this is a romantic moment between the protagonists despite the fact that they are working on their assigned task, Babbit highlights the futility—and perhaps counterproductivity—of Mary’s approach to promoting heterosexuality.*

1. (25 min) Whole class discussion. If time, have students discuss their responses in partners before moving into whole class discussion.
2. Review McDonald’s essay on romantic comedy. What elements of romantic comedy that McDonald notes align with *But I’m A Cheerleader?* What components of romantic comedy does it subvert throughout the film?
   1. **Additional questions, if needed:** Review p. 11 and the appendix on p. 118. What tropes of romantic comedy does McDonald address? Are these tropes that are present in *But I’m A Cheerleader,* or are any of these tropes challenged?
3. How do the formal elements of the scene we just watched, such as the mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound relate to Babbit’s use and subversion of the conventions of romantic comedy?
   1. McDonald lists “love montage” as one of the tropes of romantic comedy. How does this scene fit that description?
   2. How does this love montage function to help audiences read this as a romantic comedy?
   3. How does it subvert the conventions of a traditional romantic comedy, given the setting and the activities that Graham and Megan are taking part in?
4. 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?
   1. Consider the lighting in the scene in which Graham and Megan discuss their gender role cards. How would you describe it?
   2. How does this lighting relate to genre conventions of romantic comedy?
   3. Why would Babbit light the scene this way?
   4. Consider the color and costumes in this sequence. How do those colors and costumes relate to femininity? How does Mary present femininity or encourage the students to express their femininity?
   5. What might Babbit be critiquing about that presentation?
   6. How does the editing underscore this critique, in the shot of the students crossing their legs?
5. **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.)

*The comedic structure of this film enables Babbit to humorously satirize conversion therapy’s (and society in general’s) belief that requiring adherence to normative gender expression produces heterosexual subjects. Through sequences like this one, Babbit shows that, despite Mary’s “lessons,” Megan’s femininity doesn’t make her less queer, and Jan’s masculinity doesn’t make them less heterosexual. The romantic comedy plotline enables Babbit to bring joy, desire and intimacy into a story about an oppressive institution of heteronormativity; this centers positive queer experiences rather than centering the destructive nature of conversion therapy. By critiquing True Directions’ approach while showcasing the love story that develops there, Babbit emphasizes queer relationality and subjectivity rather than trauma.*

**Lesson 3: *But I’m A Cheerleader* and *The Queer Art of Failure***

1.(2 min) Watch the two videos on gender identity/sexual orientation, and heteronormativity.

2. (3 min) Reflect independently.

A. What concepts were important in this video?

* *The first video distinguishes between gender identity and sexual orientation; highlights that these are on a spectrum, rather than being binary*
* *The second video defines heteronormativity, which will be an essential term throughout this course. You might add that while the word homophobia emphasizes personal feelings (fear), the word heteronormativity focuses our attention on the systems and institutions that oppress LGBTQ people, which is a more useful way to think about discrimination and oppression.*

1. Why are these concepts important when considering *But I’m A Cheerleader,* and LGBTQ studies more broadly*?*

* *True Directions conflates these concepts and believes that students who have a normative gender expression are learning how to become heterosexual. The film highlights that there are a wide variety of gender expressions, and that one’s gender expression is not an indicator of their sexuality. While Dolph and Megan have somewhat normative gender expressions, they both are kicked out of the program because of their inability to become heterosexual. On the other hand, Jan may be non-binary or trans, but is perceived as queer because of True Directions’ conflation of these concepts.*
* *True Directions operates on the assumption that, as the video explains, “heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality.” While But I’m a Cheerleader showcases an extreme example of heteronormativity, it might be worthwhile to discuss more subtle examples of heteronormativity in culture.*

3. (10 min) Discuss.

4. (6 min) Watch today’s scene: graduation (1:13:12-1:19:45).

5.(15 min) Study groups.

A. What key points does Halberstam make in the excerpts you read from *The Queer Art of Failure?* Choose significant quotes and explain them.

* *The value of failure: Halberstam questions the value of success, “dismantling the logics of success and failure under which we currently live” (2) As Halberstam explains, success “depends upon ‘trying and trying again.’ In fact, if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards” (3). Halberstam explains that one major reward of failure is that it “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (3)*
* *Resistance to hegemonic systems: “Queer studies offers us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems...Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope” (89).*

B.How does Halberstam’s argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* relate to the graduation scene in *But I’m A Cheerleader?* Explain how the formal elements of the scene underscore the connections you see.

* *PFLAG and the value of failure: The final moment in the film is a very brief scene that highlights how Megan’s failure to become her parents’ expectation at True Directions “disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between and adults and children, winners and losers” (3). Her failure prompts her parents to attend a PFLAG meeting, suggesting that they are the ones who must change because of her “failure.” Her mother’s obvious discomfort, demonstrated by her large hat and scarf, suggest that she feels discomfort similar to what Megan felt when she was asked to become someone else. Additionally, this scene takes place in a classroom, and Megan’s mother sits at a student desk, disrupting the lines between childhood and adult. Megan’s failure to become an adult in the way her parents initially intended succeeds in leading them to become the ones who must learn and change.*
* *Clayton: Halberstam explains that “The queer art of failure” is a narrative that “quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). Clayton’s disappearance from the graduation ceremony is a narrative of “quietly losing” at becoming a “happy heterosexual;” Mary observes him running with Dolph off in the distance, and his absence is marked only by his name on a bench where he should be seated. Clayton is not shown again in the film, since he and Dolph are not visible in the front of the pickup truck, but it is clear that this “failure” to graduate enables Clayton to go off script, and imagine “other goals” for his future.*

1. Review p. 24-25. One could argue that “failing better” is a good way to approach this course. How do you hope to “get lost, “stay lost,” or “fail better” in this course?

*Answers may vary. This may be a good time to discuss the challenges of reading scholarly texts and being comfortable with not understanding everything you read, the value of having open-ended discussions in which not everything is resolved, and the importance of following one’s interests and trying out new ideas.*