Emily Wolfrum

Professor Simon

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Colors and Contrast in Queer Movies

Even as society grows more accepting of culturally alternate lifestyles, certain negative perceptions will remain. Films that explore, and challenge, these perceptions often prove to be the most provocative films of their time. Their strength lies in their ability to powerfully separate and juxtapose the opposing perceptions, effectively parodying or vilifying the more negative, repressive viewpoint. This tactic is perhaps most prevalent in the queer film genre. By juxtaposing various aspects of queer life, including romance, with the traditional perception thereof, queer film directors challenge the prevailing mindsets of the hetero-normative world. A common tool of such directors has been the manipulation of color and contrast in their films in order to visually, as well as philosophically, dichotomize the opposing lifestyles.

Movies such as *A Single Man* and *V for Vendetta* contain lowly saturated and predominantly gray or dark settings, which are juxtaposed with brighter-colored anecdotes of queer love throughout the film. In these cases, the distinction subtly demonstrates the persecution such characters face from their hetero-normative societies; a sort of dark isolation which is escaped only through their respective romances. In the French film *Ma Vie en Rose*, a young boy struggling with gender identity faces similar persecution. The happiness he feels while dressing in girls’ clothing and adopting a feminine identity are enhanced with bright colors and animation to contrast the disapproving nature of the world around him. Inferably, a filmmaker’s use of lighting and color saturation in queer films serve to deeply emphasize the isolating nature of the commonly held perceptions of queer culture.

*Looking at Movies* text describes this technique as “interplay of fantasy and reality,” where “reality” is shown through darker, naturally lit scenes, and “fantasy” refers to the queer romance scenes, which contradict that which is deemed acceptable and “real” within society. It goes on to state, “the use of rich, varied, and sometimes surreal palette…often interrupts seemingly naturalistic scenes with bursts of intense and dreamlike color.” (Barsam 236) These surreal and dreamlike sequences can be interpreted as representative of the queer culture in general, or as cinematic manifestations of the queer characters’ mindsets and desires. These sequences, then, serve as visions of a world not controlled by hetero-normative standards, and instead encapsulate the wishes of the queer community.

This concept is seen in the 2009 film, *A Single Man*. Colin Firth plays George Falconer, a gay man in the 1960’s, who is emotionally recovering from the recent death of his partner, Jim (Matthew Goode). In the opening scene of the movie, George dreams of discovering Jim’s body following the car accident that took his life. George approaches Jim’s corpse, now lying in the snow, and kisses him in a close up shot, establishing his sexuality and inner conflict that persist for the remainder of the film. The setting is heavily reliant upon the pure white snow, which covers both the Jim’s body and the surrounding wreckage, creating a very bright, whitewashed scene. This serves as an introduction of the queer relationship, and of the love, the two men shared. Directly following this scene, George is shown awaking from his nightmare in a similarly white-pallet scene. The bed sheets surrounding him -- much like the snow surrounding Jim’s body -- are pure white, but the lighting is much darker, creating shadows not visible in the previous scene. Additionally, the explosion of George’s black pen beside him interrupts the continuity of color by further darkening the scene. From the start, a contrast is established between the sadness of George’s everyday life, and his more hidden, uplifting queer romance.

Moments later, George envisions Jim playing with a dog in the backyard. The scene is only a figment of his imagination, as demonstrated by the color saturation’s increase. The scene is very bright with an almost vintage look, contrasting the darker, more natural color scheme of George, within the house, looking out the window. Harsh shadows reflect the pain and sadness he feels without his partner. In an intimate flashback of the two, this bright color scheme is continued. Not all flashbacks contain this cheerful lighting and color, however. One scene shows George receiving a phone call that Jim had passed from a relative. Upon receiving the news, George is told that he is not welcome at his partner’s funeral service, further demonstrating the persecution he faces as a homosexual man. The scene takes place at night during a rainstorm. A single dim light shines from the left, casting dark, irregular shadows from the large angular chair he is seated in. George wears a black sweater, further darkening the scene. The overall blackness of the sequence is representative of George’s return to his unpleasant reality. Similarly, scenes from his childhood, especially those containing his disapproving father, do not possess the bright lighting and oversaturation of those containing Jim or other assorted male characters in the film. While at the university where he works, George sees two shirtless men playing tennis, shown in close up scenes in slow motion. As the shot closes in on the men’s’ sweating chests, the color saturation is increased, emphasizing George’s queer internal fixation on them that is so unaccepted by the darker outside world. These memories and fixations continue throughout the film, so as to separate moments of joy and sadness in George’s day. These moments of joy predominantly feature gay romance scenes, flashbacks of Jim, or close ups of other attractive men that George encounters, and all feature some level of oversaturation and bright, artificial lighting.

Similar production techniques are used in a very specific scene from the 2005 film *V for Vendetta*. Set in a dystopian world of the future, the movie features an oppressive, totalitarian society which has banned all forms of political and social progression by imprisoning political protestors and nonconformists. The entirety of the movie features very sparse lighting and an abundance of black colors. Major scenes within the movie take place at night in dark streets with tall buildings that cast large black shadows. Towards the end of the movie, Natalie Portman’s character, Evey, is captured and jailed. The scene opens with Evey in her cell after she has discovered a letter which was planted there. Her head has been shaven and there is very limited light, which casts a shadow on much of her face and body. As her eyes scan the letter, written on a piece of toilet paper and left in the cell by its former inhabitant, a voiceover narration by the letter’s author, Valerie, reads its contents. A brightly lit flashback shows Valerie as a child, recounting her first love in school: a girl named Sarah. She further recalls the difficulty of coming out to her parents, saying, “I couldn’t have done it without Chris holding my hand.” Despite the hardships of this life event, the support of her girlfriend and the described freedom and sense of integrity that Valerie describes sheds a positive light on her lifestyle. The colors are vivid with a yellow hue, sharply contrasting the blacks and grays of the jail, which is an unwelcoming place indicative of the society’s rules and order.

The 1997 French film *Ma Vie en Rose* features a different kind of queer conflict, telling the story of a young boy Ludovic who is struggling with gender identity. As the boy experiments with girls’ clothing and feminine interests, his family and neighbors shun him and his behavior, which results in the loss of his father’s job and his removal from school after an incident at a school play. While the film is shot predominantly with very natural lighting and coloration, certain moments from the film highlight Ludovic’s inner comfort and happiness when he is adopting the persona of a female. He is shown at the beginning of the film watching a television show called “Le Monde de Pam” or “Pam’s World,” featuring a Barbie Doll-like female character that embodies the standard expectation of femininity. Ludovic’s idolatry of Pam and her relationship with a Ken Doll-like character, Ben, brings him into their world of bright and colorful animation in which he is wearing his dresses, removed from the ridicule of an unaccepting society. These scenes are obviously of the imagination, but express a joy and innocence which resonates with Ludovic’s situation and demonizes the stern adversity of the hetero-normative opposition.

The conflict between LGBT characters and the scrutiny of society is often explored in queer films, and is a conflict that requires much focus on internal emotions not easily conveyed through plot and story alone. Through careful use of production techniques, primarily color and lighting, the directors and cinematographers are able to capture such feelings of isolation and sadness in a humanistic, instinctive way, and then contrast them with the liberation and happiness which is so often sought by the queer community. Whether expressing the love between two queer characters or the happiness and security felt by a little boy in a dress, bright lighting and oversaturation connect the audience to personal feelings of joy and love. By building these emotional bridges between society at large and the queer community, these techniques, and the films they strengthen, help to show that the queer community is worthy of respect, acceptance, and happiness.

Works Cited

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