

“Queerbaiting” in Blockbuster Cinema

People who have seen recent major motion pictures like *Avengers Endgame* or *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* may or may not have noticed the LGBTQ representation in these films. In the first, this representation comes in the form of a side character’s anecdote, in which he uses the pronoun “he” when describing a recent date. The second consists of a two-second kiss between female background characters. While these scenes are firsts for their respective franchises, they’re hardly the kind of bold statements of affirmation that many in the LGBTQ community are looking for. To make matters worse, the *The Rise of Skywalker* scene was cut in Singapore Theaters, and the convenient use of the same pronoun for men and women in other international markets rendered the scene from *Avengers Endgame* moot. These are hardly isolated incidents. These “blink and you’ll miss it” scenes, sometimes called “queerbaiting,” are popular among moviemakers who want to capitalize on the queer community’s desire to be seen without being too overt. And just a little too much representation can doom a film among other audiences. In response to the inclusion of an implied gay character in Disney’s 2017 remake of *Beauty and the Beast*, Evangelist Franklin Graham called for a boycott of the film, saying they were attempting to “normalize this [gay] lifestyle”(Time 2017). This led many others to decry the film and several petitions were even sent to Disney with signatures in the hundred-thousands (OneMillionMoms.com, LifeSite). In analyzing the lack of LGBTQ representation in major motion pictures, it becomes evident that there are multiple reasons for this phenomenon,

including historical precedent, appeal to global markets, and internal biases of filmmakers due to their own backgrounds.

Filmmakers face little friction for queerbaiting since the historical precedent is no representation at all. It wasn't until recently that major motion pictures were even allowed to portray queer characters in a positive light. Under Will Hayes, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) began to severely limit what could be depicted in film. The Motion Picture Production Code, enacted in the early 1930s, states: "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden," ("The Motion Picture Production Code" 1930, 3) referring to anything outside of the cisgender heterosexual norm. This code was strictly enforced for decades, rendering LGBTQ representation effectively impossible during the golden age of cinema. But as the code fell out of practice, lack of queer representation did not. While there were likely other factors involved, it's not a stretch to say the code had already done its damage. The queer community, restricted in other realms as it was, never had the opportunity to stake its claim in film history. So now, when filmmakers put in the minimum effort for LGBTQ inclusion, it is made out (almost to a humorous extent) as groundbreaking. Joe Russo, co-director and actor portraying the character in *Avengers Endgame*, stated that "Representation is important" and that he played the character to "show it is so important to the filmmakers that one of us is representing that." ("Let's Talk About LGBTQ" 2019) As important as he says representation is, not one of the twenty-three Marvel movies to date portrays any of the dozens of main characters within it as queer. At the same time, a fair number of these characters are portrayed as being on the LGBTQ spectrum in the comics the films are based on.

Even as the US itself becomes more accepting of LGBTQ identities, big budget American films continue to shy away from inclusion due to the increasing importance of global markets in cinema. In the past, Hollywood films usually made most of their revenue in the US, but now, most of the money is being made overseas. According to a 2017 report from the MPAA, (“2017 Theme Report” 2018) studios made \$25.9 billion at the international box office, or 72.7% of total revenue. They attribute this trend to “growth in China” (“2017 Theme Report” 2018, 5). *Avengers Endgame*, for example, made \$629.1 million, or 22.5% of its global revenue in China alone, just behind the \$858,373,000 made domestically (The Numbers. “Avengers: Endgame” 2019). Given the importance of this market for the film’s revenue, its ability to resonate with Chinese audiences and avoid being banned by the Chinese government becomes a decisive factor. According to a 2013 global survey, only 21% of people in China think society should accept homosexuality, compared to 60% in the US. (“Pew Research Center” 2013). To boot, every film shown in Chinese theaters and film festivals has to receive a film permit, and must not “contain content that damages national dignity, honour and interests” (GBTIMES 2017). Because of the general population’s and government’s stance on LGBTQ issues, movie makers that want to take full advantage of the Chinese market need to account for a higher level of scrutiny when considering what LGBTQ content enters their films. Recent LGBTQ films like *Love, Simon* and *Call me by Your Name* weren’t even shown in Chinese theaters, and would have been banned had they tried. With attitudes towards homosexuality in Canada and many European Countries being more favorable, films like this can still be financially successful in the global market. Unfortunately, the allure of the Chinese market is too tempting for most big budget filmmakers to ignore.

However, the foremost reason why LGBTQ representation is so limited in big budget cinema is the demographic makeup of creative decision makers themselves. According to a study from 2007 to 2017 (Dry 2017), 95.7% of film directors were male. While the same study had data on LGB representation within film, such as only 19 of the top 100 films in 2017 containing even one LGB character, there was no data available, in this study or any others I could find, that mentioned LGBTQ representation in director, writer, and producer roles. While out LGBTQ directors exist, they typically helm smaller films that don't catch the public eye, like festival films. Meanwhile, mainstream cinema is dominated by cisgender, straight, white men, for whom LGBTQ representation is simply not as important as it is for those within the community.

Most filmmakers are motivated by capturing profitable markets, historical precedent, and their own internal biases. At worst, this means no or negative representation. At best, it means tiny crumbs, hidden from the general audience. Ironically, by portraying LGBTQ people in nearly invisible roles, the films condemn the characters to the same fate as many of the viewers they're meant to represent: erasure. When asked the underwhelming amount of queer representation in *Avengers Endgame*, Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, claimed that “[inclusivity is] coming and that there’s much more prominent LGBT heroes in the future.” Time will tell if the studio will follow through on this promise. Ultimately, widespread positive representation will not come until studios let members of the LGBTQ community into the creative process. That would mean a major ethical shift for studios, but it would also bring diverse perspectives and new narratives to big budget cinema, narratives that want to be told and heard.

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