



Winter 2021

Personal Reflection on 'Boy Crazy: A Screenplay About Gay Fanfiction, Queerbaiting, and Asexual Identity'

Luci Mintiero

Western Washington University

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Personal Reflection on
"Boy Crazy: a screenplay about gay fanfiction, queerbaiting,
and asexual identity"

Luci Mintiero

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I. Introduction

For my honors capstone project, I chose to write a screenplay. Initially, my plan was to direct a full short film and submit that as my final project, but then the writing process took longer than I'd hoped, and COVID-19 happened, and in the end my advisor and I decided to just stick to a screenplay as my final submission.

However, at the suggestion of the Honors Program staff, I have decided not to show the screenplay to you here. I'm the kind of person who likes to make changes as I go, and since I'm hoping to turn the script into a film, I would prefer to keep it open to change all the way through production, and to not share it with anyone publicly until I have the *final* version ready (i.e. the finished film).

So instead, I'm going to take this time to share with you the thought process that went into writing this script – and to make the case for why this film, about a queer fan's relationship with fanfiction, is an important addition to the film world.

Why make a film?

I guess the best place to start would be with the question: *why did a Sociology major choose to make a film in the first place?*

Well, I've always been interested in stories. When I was a kid, I loved reading book series about magical adventures, like *Harry Potter*, *Redwall*, or *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Before that, I'd been obsessed with Disney Princesses, until my parents got tired of me prancing around our house singing at the top of my lungs and started showing me and my sister Studio Ghibli and Pixar movies instead. I think that as a child, the biggest draw of fiction for me was always escapism. I loved to step into alternate universes where everything was so much more exciting, and cozy, and just *more* than everyday life.

By the time I got to college, I'd become interested in the mechanics of stories – mainly, how a good book or movie can manipulate your emotions. As a college student navigating the border between childhood and adult independence, I found myself going through a lot of ups and downs on a daily basis. At times, it felt like wading through a storm of different thoughts, pushing me into different headspaces at random. I liked how stories could capture my attention and provide a reassuring sense of structure, guiding me from one emotion to the next, and giving catharsis and meaning to my otherwise chaotic life. That's part of why I became interested in making movies: I wanted to create cathartic, meaningful emotional experiences for other people too.

I'd also become interested in literary analysis in high school. It happened in a pretty nerdy way (which is a common theme throughout my life): I stumbled across an online forum where fans of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series (better known by its TV show, *Game of Thrones*) shared fan theories and picked through details from the books to try to predict how the series was going to end. The author, George R. R. Martin, had explicitly said that any attentive reader would be able to pick up on the hints he'd woven into the narrative, so pretty much every little detail or symbol was fair game to interpret as foreshadowing. English class suddenly became interesting when I realized I could do pretty much the same thing for the books on our reading list. I even ended up writing my big fancy IB Extended Essay about one of the characters in *ASOIAF*, Sansa Stark, arguing that Martin was using the metaphor of songs (basically, the equivalent of fairytales) throughout her storyline, and depicting her gradual disillusionment with them as a way of warning readers not to expect a typical fairytale happy ending.¹

Anyway, all this to say that by the time I got to college, I was: **1)** very interested in learning the mechanics of storytelling, so that I could understand how to tell my own stories and manage my emotions through fiction; **2)** eager to pick apart any piece of media that was handed to me and analyze it for deeper meanings; and **3)** newly obsessed with a TV show called *Sherlock*, that actively *encouraged* its viewers to pick it apart like a puzzle.

Fast forward five years, and I feel in many ways a lot like Sansa Stark: I used to idolize stories, blindly following them for emotional gratification, until those emotions got weaponized against me. I've become a little bit disillusioned, yes. But I'm also more sure of myself than ever, and now that I understand more about how stories work and how creators can wield them, either to help their audience or harm them, I have a greater appreciation for storytelling as a medium. In particular, I have come to realize just how powerful representation can be. Just the other day, I came across a video where the Youtuber Kat Blaque² perfectly summarized what I think of as the two main goals of representation. First of all, representation can help people empathize with others:

Here's the thing: most people aren't exposed to transgender people on a regular basis. And, you know, when they *are*, and once they *do* start to learn a bit more about who transgender people are beyond their *expectations* of who transgender people are, they realize that we are all very similar. That we have similar human emotions. And for me, that is the power and *use* of representation. That's *why* it's so important. Because it can humanize people who are otherwise misunderstood, through moments where you identify with a character who you assumed you were so different from.

¹ And hey, I mean, the ending of the TV show kind of implied that the books are headed in that direction too... but we don't have to talk about that finale.

² Kat Blaque. "Redesigning Snowflake and Safespace (again) + Representation | Kat Blaque" (April 30, 2020). *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_oowEWoKDE

And secondly (perhaps even more importantly), representation can enable you to imagine a future for yourself. When your identity is only shown in a bad light, or isn't represented at all, it can be hard to picture a future where you're truly happy:

When I was younger, I would close my eyes, and try to envision a future for myself. And when I would do that, I literally could come up with nothing. I literally could not even imagine what my future as a trans adult could possibly even look [like]... That's the power of representation. It's a power that maybe isn't totally obvious to people who are used to seeing themselves reflected in media, but you know, when you're a queer teenager, not being able to envision your future, it makes you feel so so hopeless that you start to think that maybe things would be better if you weren't there at all.

Now, growing up as a transgender person and growing up as an asexual person are two very different experiences, and I personally cannot claim to understand the struggles that trans people face. However, looking back at the journey I went through during my college years, to try to figure out who I was, I can see my own experience reflected in her words: I *couldn't* see an appealing future for someone like me, represented in media. I think part of the reason why it took me so long to come around to identifying as asexual and aromantic,³ even though I knew about the labels at least by freshman year, was because I couldn't picture a future for myself where I was both of those things and also happy. There simply wasn't that representation there.

First of all, there weren't any depictions of openly asexual or aromantic characters in media. The couple of characters who I *did* see who might be interpreted as asexual, mainly Sherlock from the BBC show *Sherlock* and Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory*, were depicted as fairly cold and antisocial, and their asexuality had to do with a distaste for other people.⁴ The characters who seemed more or less aromantic to me were mostly the career-oriented women in rom-coms, or perhaps Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, who would start out the story very much against the idea of falling in love, but inevitably ended up in a romance by the end. I hadn't grown up watching *Star Trek*, but the image I had of Spock based on pop culture kind of straddled the two identities. He seemed to lack sexual or romantic attraction due to his unemotional nature, or at the very least to experience them differently from most other people. At any rate, the idea of asexuality that I had developed based on media was strongly associated with

³ *Asexuality is a sexual orientation where you don't experience sexual attraction to anyone. Aromanticism is a romantic orientation where you don't experience romantic attraction to anyone – basically, you never get those "in love" feelings, or feel the compulsion to date someone and do lovey-dovey couples things with them, or get crushes. Check out the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network website if you want to learn more about these identities.*

⁴ *Both were also coded as neurodivergent; I feel like mainstream stereotypes about asexual people and neurodivergent people often overlap, resulting in one kind of overarching "not human enough" image.*

coldness, and a lack of emotion, and the only examples of aromanticism that I saw all turned out to just be instances where the heroine's icy heart thawed in the end and she admitted that love wasn't so bad after all. Both were framed more as character flaws, or choices, rather than legitimate identities. I couldn't relate to most of the romances I saw in movies or on TV, feeling like they were rushed or unnecessary or like I would rather be alone, but at the same time, when I learned about asexuality in college, I became worried that accepting that label for myself would mean ending up as a lonely, robotic social outcast.

The funny thing is, the place where I *did* see myself most represented was in fanfiction, which is perhaps best known for its depictions of sexual and romantic relationships. Personally, I just found it really nice to see alternate visions of relationships that often deeper and more fleshed-out than what I saw in mainstream media, populated by some of my favorite characters and written by fans who cared as much about the characters as I did. I didn't see myself as an emotionless robot; I wanted a life full of love and affection too, just without the romance. Fanfiction was validating. But I feel like mainstream depictions of fanfic readers and writers generally don't consider that aspect of fanfiction. So that's something that I want to offer my perspective on, through this script.

II. Fanfiction

Okay. So one of the main things that propelled me to write a screenplay about fanfiction in the first place was a movie called *Slash*, which came out in 2016. I think I watched it midway through college, maybe in 2018 or so, after I'd already taken the plunge and gotten absorbed into the fanfic part of online fandom.

Now, as far as I know, *Slash* is the only film that exists about fanfiction readers and writers... and the picture it painted felt wildly at odds with the fanfic community I had grown to know and care about.

Outsider POV: The gendered stigma of fanfic

First of all, you have to understand that the gender demographics of the fanfic community are *heavily* skewed towards female readers and writers. As far as I know, the most comprehensive demographic survey of the fanfic community was done in 2013, by a user named "centreftheselights."⁵ They surveyed 10,000 users of the popular fanfic website Archive of Our Own ("AO3"), and found that 84.6% identified as female. They also found that nonbinary users

⁵ Centreoftheselights. "AO3 Census 2013" (2013 - 2015). *Archive Of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/series/1215111>

(11.6%) actually outnumbered male users (3%), and they didn't even account for trans men vs. cisgender men – all this to say that cisgender men tend to be a minority in fanfic communities.

I did my own survey earlier this year (not limited to AO3), on fanfic readers who identify as asexual or aromantic, and found similar results: just glancing over the 1107 responses I got to the gender question on my survey, it looks like only 96 (8.67%) wrote a male-ish identity.⁶ Of those, the number for cis men was anywhere between 4 ("cis male" responses only) and 65 ("cis male" + "male"), or 0.36% - 5.87% of total responses to the gender question. (I should also point out that the asexual community also tends to skew female and nonbinary – but usually not *this* much, indicating that there is still a significant lack of cisgender men in the fanfic-reading part of the community.)

Additionally, I feel like the general image that people have of what fanfiction is, particularly among those who have never read fanfic themselves, is that it overwhelmingly consists of badly-written porn. And it's true that there's more freedom to write about sexual content in unpublished work – AO3, for example, has an extensive content tagging system, and allows users to filter search results based on rating or on specific content, if there's something that they want to seek out or avoid. But much like the gendered stigma that romance novel readers and writers face,⁷ I think that part of the reason why fanfic is stigmatized in mainstream culture is because the community is so female, and our society tends to shame female expressions of sexuality. I would point to what is probably the most well-known fanfic in mainstream culture today, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as an example of how outsider attitudes towards fanfiction and romance novels can overlap. The book series began as *Twilight* fanfic, and went on to become a widely popular bestseller while also becoming widely derided as "mommy porn"⁸ for its explicit sexual content and primarily older female fanbase. Its infamy (especially as "badly-written" literature, which, fair) has likely informed a lot of people's mental images of what both romance novels and fanfic look like.

The only other film or TV depiction of fanfic that I know of aside from *Slash* is in an episode of the HBO show *Euphoria*. In the episode, which aired in 2019, the high school

⁶ It should be noted that I have not fully processed all of the data, and several of the responses to this question were sexual orientations instead of gender identity, or may have been duplicates of the same person restarting the survey. To get the number for this paper, I just skimmed through the responses and wrote down everything that was in any way masculine: "male" (61), "transmasculine nonbinary" (13), "trans male/FTM" (12), "cis male" (4), "questioning if cis male or nonbinary" (2), "boyflux" (1), "gender nonconforming male" (1), "demi-man" (1), and "genderqueer man" (1). The other responses were for the most part "female" and "nonbinary/agender/genderqueer," with a great many people questioning, and a handful of trans women too.

⁷ Jennifer Lois and Joanna Gregson. "Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and Gendered Sexual Stigma." (2015). *Gender & Society*, Vol. 29 No. 4 (459-483).

⁸ Edward Helmore. "The rise of 'mommy porn': UK writer lures Hollywood with bestselling erotic trilogy *Fifty Shades*" (March 24, 2012). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/mar/25/fifty-shades-mommy-porn>

character Kat is shown writing erotic fanfiction on Tumblr. The scene included an animated sequence depicting one of her fanfics, about real-life One Direction band members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson in a sex scene together. The showrunner, Sam Levinson, said that he wanted to show the subjective perspective of Kat when she wrote fanfic.⁹ Fans of the two celebrities, however, felt that the show had crossed a line by depicting such an explicit scene with real-life people, regardless of how accurately it might have reflected actual "Larry Stylinson" fics that people have written.¹⁰ There's a phenomenon in fandom called the "Fourth Wall," referencing the boundary between fandom, particularly fanworks such as fanart or fanfiction, and the creators/writers/actors who make the source material. Some fans welcome creators to break the Fourth Wall, and find it validating when actors retweet fanart of their characters, for example. However, other fans believe that the Fourth Wall should not be broken, since it often results in scrutiny and judgement from outsiders (including the creators/actors themselves), particularly when there is sexual content and/or an LGBT+ relationship involved in the fanworks in question.

In the case of *Euphoria*, I felt that the controversy overshadowed whatever empathy the creators were trying to create for Kat as a fanfic writer, and by extension, for fanfic readers and writers in general. They certainly could have used different subjects for the fanfic (I think the fact that it was real-life celebrities, and not fictional characters, made the reaction much bigger than it might have been otherwise), and the focus on the purely sexual nature of fanfic was a little disappointing to me given that fanfic was never brought up again on the show. Mainly, the fact that this is one of the only mainstream TV depictions of fanfic is unfortunate, since I felt that audiences who are unfamiliar with fanfic would see it and sensationalize their idea of what fanfic is and why people write it, rather than empathizing with Kat and understanding why people might write it aside from purely sexual reasons.

Anyway, the 2016 film *Slash* was written and directed by a man, the main character was a teenage boy named Neil, and the main sympathetic adult fan character was a middle-aged man. There was also a female teenage character named Julia who I thought was pretty cool, but it was hard to ignore the fact that she kind of fulfilled the love interest role for the main character. (And I felt that her presence was kind of detracted from by the way that the fanfic spaces were depicted as majority-male – and the fact that the other main female fan character in the film was an antagonistic adult woman who used her fanfic site moderating powers to gatekeep Neil, and who read underage incestuous *Brady Bunch* fanfic.) The film seemed to take a very sex-positive

⁹ Zack Sharf. "Louis Tomlinson Speaks Out of 'Euphoria' Sex Scene With Harry Styles: 'I Didn't Approve It'" (July 2, 2019). *IndieWire*. <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/07/louis-tomlinson-slams-euphoria-one-direction-sex-scene-harry-styles-1202155023/>

¹⁰ Ellie Bate. "Fans Are Furious After HBO's 'Euphoria' Included An Animated Sex Scene Between Harry Styles And Louis Tomlinson" (July 2, 2019). *BuzzFeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/eleanorbate/hbo-euphoria-harry-styles-louis-tomlinson-larry-scene>

stance, which I applaud – but at the same time, I felt like the film was almost *too* focused on sex. For the teenage characters, it made sense that they were using fanfic to explore their sexualities. But it just felt a little out of place that the adult fan characters seemed much more interested in objectifying their favorite fictional characters, rather than talking about how much they liked the characters' personalities, or storylines, or relationships. I came away from the film feeling like I had just watched a typical male coming-of-age story, complete with a hetero-presenting love story, just with the concepts of fanfic and queerness transposed onto it rather than being integrated into the story from a place of personal experience.

This is what the writer/director had to say, when he was interviewed for a fandom podcast:¹¹

I was kind of thinking about stuff, my high school experience and feeling, you know, like I was into stuff that nobody else was into... I was considered a dork or I was ostracized because I was into Star Trek but now, frat boys watch Star Trek now, so it's not what it used to be. So I was kind of looking for a metaphor, something that gave me a feeling that I felt at the time that was still kind of, you know, a little bit more modern, and I can remember being a con kid and going to conventions and there was always the 18-up room, the place, you know, it was not for kids and that always made me fascinated by that.

I've watched this film a couple of times now, and I can definitely see how it started as one story about outcast fans, and then the fanfic just got kind of placed *over* it, like set dressing. And I think Liford meant well. As a sociology student, I have to respect his attempt to depict a subculture that he wasn't a part of. But at the same time, we also have to recognize that the typical "fanboy" experience and the typical "fangirl" experience are two very different things, and the fanfic community itself is very different from how outsiders often characterize it.

Insider POV: Shipping, Slash, and the Female Gaze

Fanfic as we think of it today was started in the 1970s, by female fans of the original *Star Trek* show. Before that, there were plenty of other examples that we could categorize as fanfic: the way that the Brothers Grimm reworked folktales when they wrote them down for publishing; how Shakespeare took historical figures and wrote his own stories about them; even the countless *Sherlock Holmes* adaptations that have been made throughout the 20th century. Fanfiction at its core is just the practice of taking someone else's characters and creating your own art with them. But when men have done it, it's tended to have be taken more seriously, treated as an

¹¹ (Interview transcript with Clay Liford) "Episode 18: Slash: The Movie" (March 28, 2016). *Fansplaining: The podcast by, for, and about fandom*. <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/18-slash-the-movie>

"adaptation" or "reworking" and given legitimacy through publishing and critical approval. On the other hand, the kind of modern-day fanfic that we're talking about, primarily written by women and starting from those first Kirk/Spock fanzines in the 1970s, has been much more secretive, relationship-focused, and more motivated by community and personal fulfillment than literary clout or profit.

I have a sociology professor who says that in order to understand what people in a subculture value, you should look at what specialized words and phrases they have created to talk about things. For what we're talking about with fanfic, I would say that "shipping" and "slash" are the two main ones to know. "Slash" comes from "Kirk/Spock" ("Kirk-slash-Spock"), the romantic and/or sexual relationship between Kirk and Spock as depicted in early fanfics.¹² "Shipping" comes from fans of *The X-Files* in the 1990s, who were called "relationshipers" because they wanted the characters Mulder and Scully to end up in a romantic relationship. Over time, the term got shortened to "shipper," and is now also a verb as well as a noun. (You can "ship" two characters together; that pairing is a "ship.") While "shipping" refers to any combination of characters, "slash" is generally used just to talk about male/male ships. The existence of the term "femslash," used to refer to female/female ships, is a good indication of how fans tend to ship female characters together much less than male ones.

While the gender breakdown of ships varies across fanfic sites,¹³ it is true at least on the popular site AO3 that there is a significantly large proportion of M/M slash, which raises the question: why do female fans ship slash pairings? Well, there are a couple of possible reasons. Perhaps the easiest one that outsiders reach for is that M/M fics are like the equivalent of lesbian porn for straight men, and that women simply ship men together because men are hot. While this may certainly be a factor (heterosexual, bisexual, and pansexual women make up over 50% of M/M writers on AO3, according to the 2013 "AO3 Census"¹⁴), it is also important to note that asexual women, lesbians, and nonbinary folks who are not necessarily attracted to men make up a significant chunk of M/M readers and writers.¹⁵

One reason that I've heard a lot of fanfic readers suggest is that there simply aren't a lot of well-developed female characters in popular media. Not only are men more likely to be the leads of TV shows, for example, but their prevalence means that there are also way *more* complicated

¹² *These days, portmanteaus tend to be more common for ship names than the "/"*. For example, the ship "Kirk/Spock" is often referred to as "Spirk."

¹³ Destinationtoast. "Toastystats: Shipping on Wattpad vs. AO3 and FFN" (May 2019). *Tumblr*. <https://destinationtoast.tumblr.com/post/184831759889/toastystats-shipping-on-wattpad-vs-ao3-and-ffn>

¹⁴ Centreoftheselights. "AO3 Census 2013" (2013 - 2015). *Archive Of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/series/1215111>

¹⁵ *Also, it's significant to note how queer the fanfic community is in general: heterosexual women on their own made up only 25.8% of M/M writers in this dataset; 77% of total M/M writers identified as queer, including the 42.7% bi/pansexual women.*

and interesting relationships between male characters. This includes enemies, workplace rivalries, bromances, well-developed friendships, etc. – whereas female characters are less likely to be given those relationships, period. Additionally, many fans have grown up with heteronormative genre conventions where the male hero is expected to receive a female love interest by the end of the story, regardless of whether that relationship has had time to bloom naturally or not. For sci-fi and action movies in particular, it's common to see the lone female character walk into the room, and think, "oh boy, here's the love interest." For female viewers, female love interests written by men can often feel hollow, and like male wish fulfillment more than like actual fully-developed humans that they can relate to. So maybe part of the reason why M/M fanfic is so popular among female fans is that the male characters are just presented in a more plentiful and interesting way in canon than the female characters typically are.

I'm also going to go out on a limb here and say that personally, I suspect that the result of the very "no-homo" attitude that many male creators have when it comes to writing male relationships into TV shows is that, exactly *because* they don't intend for it any of it to be interpreted romantically, they often end up writing really compelling relationships that feel much more intriguing than the heterosexual romances that they do try to force in. I think that for a lot of fans, typical romance plots can be kind of boring, especially if it feels like the people writing it don't care about female characters as much as they do about the male heroes. But two guys whose fates are tied together, and who keep sacrificing themselves to save each others' lives? Two men who have a fun love-hate rivalry with more chemistry than the main character has with his obligatory girlfriend? Two friends who are given more screentime and treated with more depth than the random women they run into in their subplots? Well... sorry, writers, but you've got yourselves a popular ship there!

Also, I think there's an argument to be made that fanfic offers women an escape from the ever-prevalent Male Gaze.¹⁶ I've heard some queer men say that fanfic often feels more like "women writing men" than what men are *actually* like, which makes sense given that a lot of male-written things don't feel like they accurately represent real women. But the point of fanfic isn't to write something that men will feel represented by; it's largely written *by* women, *for* other women. I think that part of the appeal of M/M fic is that women and nonbinary folks can write their own interpretations of healthy masculinity and non-threatening men. There might be more of a sense of equality between the characters, and I've heard people describe it as "genderless" in comparison to F/F or M/F fics. For people who are raised with the Male Gaze all around them in media (often including in the work they are writing fanfic about), and are used to seeing female bodies sexually objectified, it might feel freeing to kind of forget about all that for the moment and focus on sexuality through more "neutral" male avatars instead.

¹⁶ Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

The "Female Gaze" proposed by Joey Soloway in 2016¹⁷ also happens to align with much of the fanfic I'm familiar with. They outline three general guidelines for this new concept of the Female Gaze: **1)** "the feeling camera," which attempts to get *inside* of the protagonist (particularly when the protagonist is not a cisgender man) and help the audience *feel* an experience rather than just watching it; **2)** "the gazed gaze," which shows the audience how it feels to be looked at; and **3)** "returning the gaze," where the character looks at the audience and challenges them by gazing upon them as an active subject. I feel that fanfic particularly fits with the concept of "the feeling camera," and also allows people who would typically be objects of the Male Gaze (female and nonbinary fans) or societal gazes more broadly (queer and trans people), to take agency and write their own perspectives through fictional characters, as subjects.

Fanfic in general has been found to be more emotion-based than mainstream fiction, including its source material.¹⁸ I mentioned earlier that there's a content tagging system on AO3; some of the most-used tags are "Angst," "Fluff," and "Hurt/Comfort," which refer to specific emotional tones. Unlike mainstream fiction, fanfiction does not necessarily stick to an action-based plot with the usual slew of different emotions. When readers see a fic tagged as "Fluff," for example, they know that the fic is going to be light-hearted all the way through. In the article I just cited, Barnes pointed out that in contrast to the mainstream idea of a "tragedy," where characters typically only reach their terrible end at the *end* of the story, "Angst" is meant for when you just want to wallow in angsty painful feelings, and those emotions usually saturate the majority of the fic. "Hurt/Comfort" is an entire sub-genre of fanfic where one character is hurt and the other(s) comfort them. Fans are able to choose what they read based on what specific emotions they want to experience.¹⁹

III. Queer Subtext in Media

The impulse of queer fans to read characters or relationships as queer is nothing new. I'm going to link you to a couple of videos by Youtube media critics James Somerton, Jessie Gender, and Rowan Ellis, who have all spoken at length about the way that queerness has been pushed to the realm of subtext in TV and movies: In his video about the importance of queer film theory,²⁰

¹⁷ TIFF Talks. "[Joey] Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016" (September 11, 2016). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riKVQjZK1z8>

¹⁸ Jennifer L. Barnes. "Fanfiction As Imaginary Play: What Fan-Written Stories Can Tell Us About the Cognitive Science of Fiction." (2015). *Poetics*, Vol. 28 (69-82).

¹⁹ Natalia Samutina. "Emotional Landscapes of Reading: Fan Fiction in the Context of Contemporary Reading Practices." (2017). *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 3 (253-269).

²⁰ James Somerton. "CODEBREAKERS: Queer film theory and why it matters" (December 4, 2020). *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_mLM6fUhhQ

James Somerton described how the erasure of queer figures in history by historians (either for homophobic reasons, or due to claims that there's simply "not enough evidence" to label the identities of various people in history) is part of the reason why queer people look to fictional media to find representation. All three Youtubers talked about the Hays Code, which was in place from 1934-1968, and which prevented Hollywood films from depicting queerness among other things. Under the code, characters were only allowed to be depicted as queer if they were punished by the end of the film, so that viewers wouldn't get the wrong idea and think that queer behaviors were okay. Rowan Ellis and Jessie Gender both talked about how this practice led to the association of villains with subtextual queercoding, which has informed our current image of what a "villain" looks like – particularly through animated Disney films, where many of the villains have been depicted as flamboyant or otherwise stereotypically "queer."²¹ (Jessie Gender addressed this in the context of how most of the recent live-action Disney reboots have stripped their villains of these traits, since the queer stereotyping would more obvious in live-action and would probably be criticized as homophobic by modern audiences.)

Additionally, the code's requirement for punishing queer characters has continued on past the days of the Hays Code, and into the modern "Bury Your Gays" trope. This trope refers to how LGBT+ characters are disproportionately killed, often to further straight cisgender characters' storylines. This trope reached particular infamy in the world of TV in 2016, with fans pushing TV writers to sign the "Lexa Pledge"²² and agree not to kill LGBT+ characters senselessly, after a queer female character on *The 100* was killed immediately after finally starting a same-gender relationship that the show had been hinting at for some time.

The other big result of the Hays Code has been the subtextual queercoding of characters, and the practice of queer viewers looking to non-explicit cues for subtle forms of representation. Even after the days of the Hays Code, TV network censorship and the threat of lower ratings has kept various shows from depicting queer relationships explicitly, leading to shows such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which many fans have embraced as a lesbian cult classic due to its queer subtext. Additionally, sometimes queer creators have written parts of themselves into characters without direction from the showrunners, as in the case of *Sesame Street* writer Mark Saltzman modeling Bert and Ernie off of his own relationship with his male partner.²³

This subtextual approach to queer representation has unfortunately also led to the modern-day practice of "queerbaiting," which is where creators intentionally hint at a queer

²¹ Jessie Gender. "Disney: Gay Villains Made Straight (& Boring)" (October 11, 2019). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41rnLqV1Hxo>

²² Nix Santos. "The Lexa Pledge Gains Traction, Urging TV Writers To Be More Considerate When Killing LGBT Characters" (April 29, 2016). *IndieWire*. <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/04/the-lexa-pledge-gains-traction-urging-tv-writers-to-be-more-considerate-when-killing-lgbt-characters-291567/>

²³ David Reddish. "EXCLUSIVE: Are Bert & Ernie a Couple? We Finally Have an Answer..." (September 16, 2018). *Queerty*. <https://www.queerty.com/exclusive-bert-ernie-couple-finally-answer-20180916>

character or queer relationship through subtext, in order to attract queer viewers, without ever planning to confirm the queerness explicitly. Now, it's a bit difficult to pin down any examples of definite queerbaiting, since creators understandably have no reason to admit that they've engaged in such a deceptive marketing strategy. But there is a specific subtype of queerbaiting, coined by Rowan Ellis as "queercatching,"²⁴ that I feel is easier to see. So we'll start there.

Queercatching

"Queercatching" refers to the recent trend where blockbuster movies stir up publicity by declaring that they'll feature an openly LGBT+ character prior to the film's release, but then the so-called representation turns out to be just a blink-and-you'll miss it moment. These moments often feature inconsequential side characters, or are so subtle that you wouldn't know they were there unless you've read the headline and are actively looking for them. They also happen to be easy for studios to edit out if they want to censor the film for a more homophobic audience, and are easy for straight audiences to ignore or to not even notice.

Here's a chart I've made of the instances I remember seeing:

the headline	what they said	what we got
<p>"Beauty and the Beast": Josh Gad Plays Disney's First-Ever Gay Character <i>The Hollywood Reporter</i> (March 1, 2017)</p> <p>https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/beauty-beast-disneys-first-ever-gay-character-is-lefou-voiced-by-josh-gad-981928</p>	<p>"LeFou is somebody who on one day wants to be Gaston and on another day wants to kiss Gaston," director Bill Condon tells <i>Attitude</i>. "He's confused about what he wants. It's somebody who's just realizing that he has these feelings. And Josh makes something really subtle and delicious out of it. And that's what has its payoff at the end, which I don't want to give away. But it is a nice, exclusively gay moment in a Disney movie."</p>	<p>- at the end of the movie, there's a big crowd scene where all the characters are dancing; LeFou starts out dancing with a woman, and then there's a split second where people change partners and he ends up with a male partner and then the camera immediately cuts away from him</p>

²⁴ Rowan Ellis. "The Evolution Of Queerbaiting: From Queercoding to Queercatching" (January 30, 2019). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riKVQjZK1z8>

<p>"Power Rangers" Breaks Ground With First Queer Big-Screen Superhero <i>The Hollywood Reporter</i> (March 20, 2017)</p> <p>https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/power-rangers-gay-character-storyline-yellow-ranger-plot-explained-987236</p>	<p>There's a scene in which the titular heroes learn that the Yellow Ranger, Trini (Becky G), is coming to terms with her sexual orientation, with one character assuming she's having "boyfriend problems," and soon realizing that perhaps she's actually having "girlfriend problems." It's a small moment, but one director Dean Israelite calls "pivotal" for the entire film. "For Trini, really she's questioning a lot about who she is," Israelite tells <i>The Hollywood Reporter</i>. "She hasn't fully figured it out yet. I think what's great about that scene and what that scene propels for the rest of the movie is, 'That's OK.' The movie is saying, 'That's OK,' and all of the kids have to own who they are and find their tribe."</p>	<p>- there's a scene where the characters are sitting around a fire and Trini says that her parents have problems with her relationships; another character asks "boyfriend troubles?", she replies "yeah, boyfriend troubles" sarcastically, he says "...girlfriend troubles?" and she just says "my parents like labels" and the conversation moves on to something else</p>
<p>"Star Wars" Writer Confirms Donald Glover's Character Is Pansexual in "Solo" <i>Huffpost</i> (May 17, 2018)</p> <p>https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lando-calrissian-sexual-fluidity-solo-star-wars_n_5af77d59e4b00d7e4c1b37a9</p>	<p>So, given the opportunity to speak with father-and-son "Solo" co-writers Lawrence and Jonathan Kasdan, I asked them about Lando's possible sexual fluidity. Is he pansexual? "I would say yes," Jonathan Kasdan emphatically said. "There's a fluidity to Donald and Billy Dee's [portrayal of Lando's] sexuality... I mean, I would have loved to have gotten a more explicitly LGBT character into this movie. I think it's time, certainly, for that, and I love the fluidity — sort of the spectrum of sexuality that Donald appeals to and that droids are a part of... He doesn't make any hard and fast rules. I think it's fun... I don't know where it will go."</p>	<p>- yeah, no, there's nothing in the film to confirm this</p>

<p>It Will Be Clear Dumbledore is Gay in New Fantastic Beasts Film, Says Director <i>The Telegraph</i> (October 3, 2018)</p> <p>https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2018/10/03/will-clear-dumbledore-gay-new-fantastic-beasts-film-says-director/</p>	<p>It will be "clear" that Harry Potter's headmaster Dumbledore is gay in the franchise's next film, according to its director David Yates. Yates provoked a backlash from Harry Potter fans earlier this year when he said the character's sexuality would "not explicitly" be addressed in the forthcoming film, <i>Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald</i>. But in a new interview with <i>Empire</i> magazine, Yates tried to clarify his earlier comments. "In that earlier interview, I didn't say Dumbledore's not gay. He is," he asserted. "This part of this huge narrative that Jo is creating doesn't focus on his sexuality, but we're not airbrushing or hiding it," Yates continued. He said that although Dumbledore is "not out as a gay man in this film," it will still be obvious to viewers. "A couple of scenes we shot are very sensual moments of him and the young Grindelwald... The story [of their romance] isn't there in this particular movie but it's clear in what you see... that he is gay," said Yates. "[The Crimes of Grindelwald] is about other things, fundamentally, but the story of Grindelwald and Dumbledore, going forward, that <i>is</i> the story."</p>	<p>- in true J.K. Rowling fashion, the very character that she retroactively announced was gay (Dumbledore) was not depicted as queer at all, despite this being a film featuring him and Grindelwald, the supposed object of his romantic feelings, in a storyline that <i>directly</i> talks about the importance of their relationship... "it's clear"?? What's clear?? Where is the representation, Mr. Yates???</p>
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I've highlighted what I see as the three main trends of these quotes: **1)** the writer or director's promise of a queer character, or confirmation that they *are* intended to be queer; **2)** the "but" statement, where they admit that it's not actually *that* explicit; and **3)** their hurried explanation for why it wouldn't make sense for them to give the character an explicit label in the text. (I'm all for people choosing not to identify with labels in real life, but when it comes to fiction, if a LGBT+ identity isn't named, people are going to deny that it exists, so labels are very important when it comes to representation of queer characters in media.)

There's also a couple other instances of queercatching that don't necessarily follow that formula; instead, I think of them as the "we know you fans like to read these popular characters

as queer BUT we're going to throw in this random gay character – representation!" examples. This includes *Star Trek Beyond*, which actually predates *Beauty and the Beast* (which is thought of as the leader of this trend); in 2016, actor John Cho confirmed in an interview that director Justin Lin and writer Simon Pegg had decided to make his character, Sulu, gay.²⁵ This was done partly as an homage to Sulu's original actor, George Takei, who is gay and had to remain closeted when he was part of the original TV show in the late 1960s. However, Takei criticized the decision, saying that he was "delighted that there's a gay character," but that the filmmakers should "be imaginative and create a character who has a history of being gay, rather than Sulu, who had been straight all this time, suddenly being revealed as being closeted... Honor [Gene Roddenberry] and create a new character."²⁶ I agree with him. (*At the same time, I can't help but note the context of this, as the same franchise that features Kirk and Spock, one of the most famous ships of all time... eh, all I'm saying is that it would have been cool for Kirk and Spock to be the ones "revealed as being closeted," though that certainly would have been more controversial.*)

Similarly, *Avengers: Endgame* directors Joe and Anthony Russo decided to write in a minor queer character, but received some backlash from fans who felt like it was a hollow gesture given the Marvel Cinematic Universe's previous track record with LGBT+ representation. The MCU's first openly LGBT+ character, as revealed in *Endgame*, was a random guy who just casually mentioned that he went on a date with a man, and then was never seen onscreen again. The directors clearly wanted it to be a casual moment of inclusion, saying that "representation is really important... It was important to us as we did four of these films, we wanted a gay character somewhere in them."²⁷ To me, it felt a little bit like a throwaway moment, especially when more important characters like Valkyrie, who is canonically bisexual in the comics, have not been allowed to be explicitly confirmed as bisexual in the movies yet, and characters like Steve Rogers and his friend Bucky Barnes, who are another fan favorite pairing when it comes to interpreting characters as queer, are definitely not allowed to come close to an explicitly queer identity.

Probably the biggest of the three, in my opinion, was *Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker*, where director J.J. Abrams hinted at LGBT+ representation while shooting down fans' hopes for a popular queer ship in the same breath. *Star Wars*' "first gay kiss" turned out to be a kiss between

²⁵ Graeme McMillan. "'Star Trek' Gets Its First LGBTQ Character: Sulu Is Revealed to Be Gay" (July 7, 2016). *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/star-treks-first-lgbtq-character-909032>

²⁶ Seth Abramovitch. "George Takei Reacts to Gay Sulu News: 'I Think It's Really Unfortunate'" (July 7, 2016). *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/george-takei-reacts-gay-sulu-909154>

²⁷ AJ Caulfield. "Avengers: Endgame Features MCU's First Openly Gay Character" (April 29, 2019). *Looper*. <https://www.looper.com/151498/avengers-endgame-features-mcus-first-openly-gay-character/>

a couple of background actors who were barely visible at all, throwing salt in the wounds of queer fans who got excited for the potential of a relationship between Poe and Finn based on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and then watched as the second and third movies aggressively "no-homo'd" the two once it became clear just how popular the pairing was.

So, that's "queercatching." "Queerbaiting," more generally, tends to refer to TV shows and other long-form media, where a relationship is teased and hinted at over the course of several episodes, seasons, sometimes even *years*. You can think of it as a "will-they/won't-they" romantic arc, except that unlike with straight couples, the odds of same-gender pairings actually ending in a "they will!" are very slim. But *still* – the chance of it happening, the little hints that writers throw into the dialogue or that actors flirt with in interviews, the *hope* that maybe, just maybe, if LGBT+ fans keep watching a show it might eventually reward them with the queer representation that they're starved for – that's what keeps queer fans hooked. Personally, the thing that I find so appealing about queerbait-y shows is that the characters tend to be so much more nuanced, so much more interesting and three-dimensional than any canonically LGBT+ character that they might include, because canonically LGBT+ characters are often reduced to tokens, defined by their identities, or only allowed to be side characters. It's just so much more relatable to see a major character who you can recognize parts of yourself in, and start to notice that they happen to feel pretty queer as well. I think that queer people generally don't think of their queerness as a big factor that determines everything about their life, and yet with onscreen portrayals, it can feel like straight writers assume that the only point of including a queer character is to talk about their queerness. But sometimes we just want to kill monsters and go on adventures and form deep bonds with same-gender friends that might happen to spill over into romance, you know?

The only really explicit example that I can think of, where you can point to a show, and say "yes, that was definitely queerbaiting" is *Teen Wolf*, because there was one promotional video where they tried to get fans to vote for them at the Teen Choice Awards by implying that if they won, they might write the fan-favorite ship "Sterek" into the show. Other than that, it's really hard to pinpoint instances of queerbaiting. I'm sure that not all queerbait-y shows set out with the intention of deceiving the LGBT+ portion of their fanbase. Things just kind of happen sometimes. Actors have chemistry. Fans go wild. Writers realize that writing "fanservice" moments into their show increases fan engagement, and assume that queer fans will appreciate them for those scraps, without realizing that putting in little hints and encouraging a queer ship will just make fans feel all the more betrayed when that ship does not become canon.

IV. Conclusion / The Pitch

I wanted to write a screenplay addressing these experiences, told from the perspective of a queer fan, without the feeling of an outsider gawking at fanfic and shipping. I know that my script will not depict every fanfic reader's experience, but I feel that there's value in sharing what I feel to be truthful about my experience, since so much of what I've seen reflected back at me by mainstream society has felt misrepresentative of the fanfic community that I'm familiar with. Going back to Joey Soloway's *Female Gaze*, I feel like fanfic readers and writers have been scrutinized as objects for a while, and I would like to gaze back at the audience (including queerbait-y TV show creators) as an active subject, thank you very much.

I know that I didn't go into detail about asexual identity here, but I think I want to save that for the film itself, rather than trying to explain all of my thoughts here. Much of my feelings asexuality and aromanticism do weave into my experiences with fanfiction and queerbaiting, and so I felt that that aspect of my identity was important to explore in the film as well. At its core, the film is about a female college student navigating friendships and queerness, and eventually coming around to identifying as asexual. I also thought it would be really fun to make up a fictional sci-fi show that she is a fan of, and to include scenes both from the show and from various fanfics, using the same actors. I think it's going to be an interesting exercise in trying out different genres and tones, to figure out how to film the different fanfic scenes. I've had a lot of fun so far with creating the fictional show.