Introduction: an Interdisciplinary Approach to LGBTQIAN+ Cinema

At the Academy Awards in 2006, one film drew special attention and is now widely considered a milestone in cinematic history. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) was nominated for eight awards – far and away the highest number of nominations for that season – of which it won three. Thereby, Ang Lee became the first Asian American to win an Oscar for Best Director. The film also got the awards for Best Adapted Screenplay and Original Score but eventually failed to get the award for Best Picture, which caused great indignation within the LGBTQIAN+[1] community. Nevertheless, the film is regarded a trailblazer for other LGBTQIAN+-themed films to follow. It was amongst the first LGBTQIAN+ films that was produced for mainstream (i.e. heterosexual) audiences.[2] Moreover, featuring a love story between two male lead characters it marks the entry of openly displayed homosexual romance into mainstream Hollywood. The success of *Brokeback Mountain* entails an important expansion of the scope of LGBTQIAN+-themed films that were still exclusively found in the subcultural spheres of independent cinema in the 1980s and 90s. Popular cinema that depicts marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQIAN+ community, can make an important contribution to a more open and tolerant society, because they might represent a counter-construct to (hetero)normative reality and create sympathy for their struggles. But it also often approaches the limits of what is possible and can contribute to the reproduction and consolidation of stereotypes. Thus, visibility alone does not seem to be a criterion for improving structural problems.

From the very beginning, especially mainstream Hollywood filmmaking in the U.S. was heavily censored and offered an unrelentingly negative if not

1 The abbreviation stands for **L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, **T**rans, **Q**ueer/**Q**uestioning, **I**nter, **A**sexual/**A**gender, **N**on-binary and + other sexual and gendered identities.

2 Of course, there have been films that entered the mainstream before 2005, consider for example *Philadelphia* (1993) for which Tom Hanks won the award for Best Actor, but for many scholars and critics *Brokeback Mountain* was a moment of change. This will be examined more closely in chapter 1.3 After *Brokeback Mountain*: New Paradigms in LGBTQIAN+ Cinema.

derogatory image of lesbian, gay, bi, trans*,[3] queer, inter, asexual/agender, and non-binary characters – even though they were never absent from the screen. As in most Hollywood films, white males were usually at the centre of attention in films depicting LGBTQIAN+ characters. In the 1950s and 60s, the most prevalent image of male homosexuals was the effeminate sissy (cf. Russo 4), exclusively serving as a source of humour (cf. Russo 59), whereas in the 1970s and 80s the dangerous, predatory queer villain dominated the screens of mainstream cinema. Fuelled by the AIDS crisis, the representation of homosexuals as dangerous and contagious additionally marked homosexuality as a threat to 'normal' society (cf. Russo 122). It was not until the 1990s, when the emergence of New Queer Cinema helped pave the way for films to thrive in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Film scholar B. Ruby Rich called the new wave of LGBTQIAN+-themed films during the 1990s New Queer Cinema. It was a subcultural movement consisting of independent films with a clear political agenda that sought to undercut the heteronormative structures in society (cf. Rich *Cinema* xix). Representing the perspective of the marginalised or oppressed, these films had the power to establish an alternative view and to comment on the political and social environment they emerged in. However, Rich identifies the beginning of yet another new era following the release of *Brokeback Mountain* (cf. Rich *Cinema* 185). Unlike the independent films of New Queer Cinema, these mainstream productions seemed to be geared towards heteronormative tastes and more commercially oriented (cf. Rich *Cinema* 185). Rich claims:

> Once taboo or titillating, queers were now the stuff of art films, crossover movies, and television series [...] the price of all that mainstreaming on television was the demise of the boundary-pushing, ideology-challenging New Queer Cinema. (Rich *Cinema* 262-263)

Other scholars argue that reaching a wider audience did not necessarily herald the end of the films' subversive potential towards heteronormativ-

3 In accordance with Jack Halberstam's suggestion in *Trans* – A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018), I use trans* with an asterisk to indicate an expanded version of transgender, which was introduced to include a greater variety of individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Next to denoting transgender and transsexual persons, the asterisk is thus a placeholder for other suffixes such as person, feminine, masculine, girl, woman, man, boy, and many more. Also, it highlights the fluidity of gendered identities, as "the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity" (Halberstam *Trans** 4).

ity (cf. Nowlan 16; Juett and Jones ix). Nonetheless, the heightened incorporation of gay films into the mainstream U.S. film industry led to an intertwining of neoliberalist hegemonic structures with the production and marketing of films with LGBTQIAN+ content (cf. Knegt 6). Rich suggests that this initiated a process of adaptation, whereby these films had to forfeit some of their subversive potential and were limited in their portrayal of LGBTQIAN+ themes to only specific, heteronormatively shaped representations. This process might marginalise LGBTQIAN+ individuals other than (white, cis-male) homosexuals, while at the same time feigning to raise tolerance and speaking in the interest of all LGBTQIAN+ people.

This dissonance amongst scholars already points to one of my basic premises in *Queer Enough? – Homonormativity and Hegemonic Gay Masculinity in Contemporary Biopics*, namely, that there is a fundamental difference between *queer cinema* and LGBTQIAN+ *cinema*. In order to understand this difference, it seems vital to briefly define the concept of queer for the scope of this work. The term was used as a discriminatory slur for most of the 20th century, until some members of the LGBTQIAN+ community started to re-appropriate it during the late 1980s. In recapturing the term, these individuals sought to offer new possibilities for emancipation, empowerment, and stripping off shame, while for others *queer* remained a pejorative, shaming, and insulting label that sustained their oppression (cf. Smith 281). First circulating among activist circles, *queer* became a concept in academia during the 1990s. This development called the viability of the term into question since it was increasingly criticised for being either too radical (cf. Smith 281) or too idealistic (cf. Jagose 106). Moreover, some scholars pointed to the tendency of engendering the misleading impression that the queer community was a homogeneous group of people with the same goals, concerns, and, above all, a collective political agenda (cf. Butler "Critically Queer" 19-20; Warner *Queer Planet* xxvi; Smith 283). Nevertheless, I agree with Michael Warner that "'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (Warner *Queer Planet* xxvi). This perspective constantly reassesses queer as a concept and aligns it with a utopian vision that transcends its own meaning (cf. Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 1). The inconceivability of the term becomes its constitutive feature, which, in its fluidity, can be used as a tool for subverting heteronormative structures. My conceptualisation of *queer cinema*, therefore, includes films that open up discursive spaces for critically engaging with (hetero)normative structures, while my use of LGBTQIAN+ *cinema* describes films that

represent LGBTQIAN+ themes or characters without necessarily reflecting the ways in which they are represented.

Based on this definition of queer cinema, *Queer Enough?* explores how LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters are represented in contemporary U.S. cinema. My central concern is to uncover structures in LGBTQIAN+ films that, on the one hand, possess a subversive potential aimed at heteronormative society, but, on the other hand, reproduce parameters that limit the representation of the LGBTQIAN+ community. For if one looks at popular LGBTQIAN+ films since the early 2000s, there appear to be reasonable grounds to suspect that only a less offensive, less radical and, so to speak, 'heteronormalised' form of queerness, i.e., predominantly the portrayal of cis-male, white, and monogamous gay men, finds appeal in mainstream cinema. Analysing a selection of films that followed *Brokeback Mountain*, I set out to scrutinise the visibility of LGBTQIAN+ characters in films to dissect in what ways they are depicted once their defamation in cinema seemingly ended. Thus, *Queer Enough?* raises the following questions: How are LGBTQIAN+ characters represented in contemporary LGBTQIAN+-themed cinema? Which aspects of their (queer) identity are shown, which are hidden? In what ways are especially white gay cis-men depicted in their negotiation of homosexuality and their gendered identity? How are other groups, for example LGBTQIAN+ members of non-white ethnic backgrounds, Blacks[4], lesbians, trans*, and drag queens, marginalised and misrepresented? In short, *Queer Enough?* examines to what extent the selected films engage with heteronormativity, homonormativity, and hegemonic masculinity.

As works of pop-cultural reproduction, films are ideally suited to highlight and critically engage with social structures. In order to achieve comparability and to be able to undertake a sound in-depth analysis, I settled on three films that address iconic moments and agents in the history of the gay rights movement. Organised by their historical chronology, not their release dates, these films are *Howl* (2010) directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedmann, *Stonewall* (2015) by Roland Emmerich, and *Milk* (2008) by Gus van Sant. My interest lies primarily in the representation of queer historiography, since it is an important means of empowerment for margin-

4 Black is capitalised in this book to mark it as the socially constructed racial identity rather than the colour black.

alised social groups. Thus, I chose to examine three contemporary biopics[5] which depict important figures and events in LGBTQIAN+ history. The introduction of LGBTQIAN+ films into the mainstream shows an interest in the cinematic reappraisal of the struggles for LGBTQIAN+ rights. Concomitantly, the prerogative of interpretation of these events is claimed by mainstream audiences. The films can be classified as mainstream cinema, as they are all distributed by larger Hollywood-related mainstream companies despite being produced by independent studios. In addition, they are made by established directors and all feature well-known actors, which is intended to appeal to a broader, mainstream audience. For these reasons, the three films seem to be a good starting point to examine the negotiation of hegemonic culture and the representation of LGBTQIAN+ history.

Howl is set in the late 1950s and consists of five narrative strands, that overlap and intermingle with each other and are accentuated by archival video footage, photographs, and newspaper articles. The first strand consists of an interview with Allen Ginsberg (James Franco) throughout which the film presents several flashbacks arising from Ginsberg's recounting, that show the genesis of the poem 'Howl,' which was to be banned due to its explicit references to homosexuality. The scenes in this narrative strand are marked as being in the past by their black-and-white colour scheme. Moreover, the plot constantly shifts to scenes re-enacting the obscenity trial against publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1957 as well as to the staging of the first public reading of the poem in San Francisco in 1955. Finally, an animated sequence that illustrates the content of the poem repeatedly disrupts the real-life scenes. Through this composition, the poem "Howl" gains special importance on the screen in structuring the whole narrative and aesthetic composition of the film. Not only does it serve as a connecting device at the intersection of the 'real' historic figures and events, the characters on screen, and the film as a work of art, but also accredits the poem a deeper metaphorical meaning: it symbolises Ginsberg's fight for the social acceptance of homosexuality and its release marks his coming out moment. Moreover, Ferlinghetti was ultimately acquitted, which was perceived as an important step for equal rights and freedom of expression. Thereby, the poem is presented as a tool to criticise social conditions and

5 Biopic stands for biographical picture, which usually depicts the life of a (famous) historical person. Strictly speaking, *Stonewall* is not a biopic in the typical sense of the genre since its central character is not modelled after a real-life person. This aspect and the reasons why the film was included anyway will be further explored in chapter 2.5.

becomes central for Ginsberg's struggle with his own sexuality, with the heteronormative structures that oppress him, and eventually for his emancipation.

Stonewall recounts the events that led to what is seen as the symbolic beginning of the gay rights movement in the U.S., the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Disowned by his parents because of his homosexuality, the film's fictional central character Danny Winters (Jeremy Irvine) has to make his way on the streets of New York City, where he meets a group of street youths who take him in. The film follows the protagonist closely and depicts personal as well as institutionalised oppression in his hometown via flashbacks, while inserting his story into the bigger picture of the history of discrimination against LGBTQIAN+ people. Since queers in the U.S. of the 1950s and 60s were not only oppressed by social exclusion and homophobia, but also by violent attacks by the police, they met secretly in clubs like the Stonewall Inn. There, the police repeatedly carried out raids, degrading the LGBTQIAN+ patrons of the club until they could not endure it anymore and launched a counterattack that would become known as the most famous uprising of the gay rights movement – the Stonewall Riots. Throughout the whole film, Danny is at the centre of attention, celebrating his emancipation by throwing the first brick, and hence initiating the riots. Thereby, the film relates one of the most iconic moments in queer history to his personal struggle. This contextualizing of the Stonewall Riots has earned the film a great deal of criticism, especially by members of the LGBTQIAN+ community, for having 'whitewashed' and 'straightwashed' the Riots. This is also due to the fact that Danny Winters is not modelled after the life of a real-life person, while *Stonewalls* narrative structure resembles that of the biopic tradition. Thus, Danny is presented to the viewer as if he *was* a historic figure – namely the person who sparked the gay liberation movement. Meanwhile the actual leading figures of the movement only get marginal roles in the film, if at all, or are portrayed in a stigmatising way.

Milk presents the political career of Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), one of the first openly living homosexuals elected to a political office. After serving only 11 months in office, Milk was assassinated by his colleague Dan White in 1978. The plot of the film mainly covers the final eight years of Milk's life and, thus, the timeframe of his political activism, during which he ran for public office four times. Having concealed his sexual identity for the largest part of his life, he now becomes an advocate for gay rights in San Francisco, striving for absolute visibility, eager to end homophobia and institutionalised discrimination. In an endeavour to show how the historical events

'really' took place from the perspective of the marginalised gay community, the film includes a frame narration that shows Milk recording an audio tape which was taken from the recorded will by the real-life Harvey Milk. Moreover, the film addresses the intense setbacks the gay rights movement had to endure during the 1970s due to the newly uprising religious right. Focusing on his relentless activism in the political environment in the U.S. of the 1970s, the film illustrates Milk's struggle to contribute new themes and variegated perspectives to the discourse on homosexuality negotiating heteronormativity as well as anti-homosexual and homophobic activism. Thereby, even though Milk is murdered in the end, the film emphasises Milk's legacy as a freedom fighter and his persistence on giving hope, to make a persuasive appeal to contemporary society.

The beat poet Allen Ginsberg, the rioters of Stonewall and the politician Harvey Milk, despite their diverging backgrounds, most clearly share that they have been stylised into iconic figures of queer American history and are collectively memorialised. The three films take this as an opportunity to create an appealing cinematic experience with the aura of historical importance through the choice of the biopic genre. Thereby, they delimit important developments in the history of gay rights and relate contemporary culture to these historic events. The most pervasive common features of the films are the framing of heteronormative structures as oppressive and discriminatory, the enactment of the protagonists' emancipation from these oppressive structures and the depiction of their efforts towards more tolerance. Their impact on the developments in the collective fight for equal rights in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s respectively is emphasised by presenting them as archetypes of male heroism such as the genius, the rebel, or the martyr, contributing to the mythologisation of the historical figures and themes. For all three protagonists same-sex attraction is central to their identity and affects their life and relationships with their close relatives, friends, and loved ones, especially, once they start challenging heteronormative structures. They all struggle with the ongoing negotiation process between their homosexuality, their own masculinity, and the masculine gender role that is upheld and enforced on them by society. Moreover, due to special features innate to the genre of the biopic, all three films seek to establish a different view on 'real' historic events. Thus, the films attempt to forge a cinematic gaze from the perspective of the marginalised or oppressed in order to rewrite historic moments and translate them into contemporary times.

Following the path of *Brokeback Mountain*, the films are marketed to a broader, heteronormative audience, seeking mainstream appeal. They all feature white cis-male actors who conform to normative ideals of beauty and masculinity (cf. Knegt 82). Moreover, the DVD covers also indicate this marketing strategy. *Milk* and *Howl* are presented like typical biopics. The covers emphasise the vocation or achievement of the historical figures portrayed, but not their queer identity: *Milk* highlights Harvey Milk's political role, *Howl* Allen Ginsberg's literary accomplishments. Moreover, the names of the main actors, Sean Penn and James Franco, are probably meant to appeal to the widest possible audience. Putting its subtitle "Where Pride Began" in capital letters on the cover, *Stonewall* follows a different marketing strategy, but with the same goal. Instead of showing the characters queer identity, it draws on its own claim to present the real historical background to the Stonewall Riots. An analysis of the three films, hence, gives valuable insights into the question of how the representation of homosexuality interlaces with heteronormative assimilation or subversion. Therefore, *Queer Enough?* sets out to examine in what ways the films might be able to criticise heteronormativity on the content level, while at the same time contradicting themselves on the formal-aesthetic level as they seem to remain entrenched in heteronormative structures and exhibit an aesthetics of homonormativity.

Locating *Queer Enough?* in the context of film studies, CHAPTER 1 will give a survey of the developments of queer cinema. Particularly important is the fundamental study *The Celluloid Closet - Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981) by Vito Russo, in which he shows the social mechanisms that created a negative image of homosexuals in films from the beginning of US-American film history until the early 1980s. In his view, the strongly heteronormative film industry can even be held partly responsible for the homophobia that was rampant in the United States (cf. Russo 248). As has already been pointed out, the independent films of the New Queer Cinema ushered in a new era of queer representation in the early 1990s (cf. Rich xix). Like many other scholars (e.g. Davies 173; Etherington-Wright and Doughty 196; Juett und Jones xi;103; Knegt 8; McKinnon 171), Rich recognises the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as initiating LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters into the mainstream and raises the question of how far the increased visibility has affected the subversive potential of films that followed. Engaging the debate on the effects of mainstreaming films with queer content, it connects the research question of *Queer Enough?* to the current state of research in the field.

Proceeding from these findings of queer cinema studies, my theoretical approach outlined in CHAPTER 2 is based on postmodern constructivist theories that question the concepts of sexuality and gender in general, and the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality in particular. In addition to Michel Foucault's deliberations on the social construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality (cf. Foucault *Sexualities* 47-48), Judith Butler fundamentally influenced the discourse on heteronormativity (cf. Butler *Gender Trouble* 208). Moreover, the discussion on the definition of queer and possibilities for subverting heteronormative structures will be taken up again in the second subchapter. Building on this basic framework, I will explain the newer concept of homonormativity, which was coined by Lisa Duggan in 2003 and refers to a stratification within the LGBTQIAN+ community (cf. Duggan *Twilight* 50). Using the concept of homonormativity, I set out to advance Raewyn Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (cf. Connell *Masculinities* 77-78) and analogously introduce the term 'hegemonic gay masculinity,' describing the hegemonic gradient within the group of (male) homosexuals. In order to look beyond the content to the formal-aesthetic components, the theoretical concepts will be extended by methodological approaches referring to narrative structure and cinematography. For this purpose, I will draw on Judith Roof's concept of the 'heteronarrative' and Laura Mulvey's gaze theory and show to what extent the narrative structure and the established gaze support the films' modes of representation.

These historical, theoretical, and methodological frameworks serve as the basis for the analysis in CHAPTER 3. A combination of a broad examination of the content of the films with in-depth analyses of individual sequences, as well as the formal-aesthetic framing leads to the interpretations of the depicted forms of masculinity and homosexuality. After a brief historical outline that provides the factual background to the films as well as some methodological remarks, the analysis is divided into two major parts; in the first (chapters 3.1 and 3.2), I focus primarily on the content of the films, elaborating on how they portray heteronormative structures as negative for the characters and how the protagonists' emancipation from these structures is enacted. The second part of the analysis (chapters 3.3 and 3.4) then moves on to the formal-aesthetic level and unravels how the depiction of homosexuality is supported by the established gaze and the narrative structure to determine how the interplay of content and form might produce a homonormative aesthetic. My findings will be compared

in a conclusion that seeks to taper my theses and relate them to current debates.

In its interdisciplinary approach, *Queer Enough?* intends to give valuable insights into considerations of LGBTQIAN+ films and their mainstreaming. Focusing on the correlation between heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the formation of a queer subjectivity in popular films and their interrelation to contemporary cultural and political issues will provide vital background knowledge to an enhanced understanding of the depiction of LGBTQIAN+ themes and characters. Referencing important moments and agents of LGBTQIAN+ history, the exemplary analysis of the films *Howl*, *Milk*, and *Stonewall* serves to critically examine the ways in which the representation of homosexuality in contemporary mainstream U.S. cinema might denounce and to some extent also subvert heteronormative structures in society, while at the same time establishing and reproducing an aesthetics of homonormativity. Overall, my work therefore seeks to unveil hegemonic structures within the LGBTQIAN+ community but also contributes to the theoretical framework at the intersection of gender, masculinity, and queer cinema studies.