

Queer Couples in Visual Media

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In most cinematography pieces, especially those that focus on the LGBTQ community, there is one predictable trope: the queer couple must stay hidden or secret. This narrative of queer couples needing to keep their relationship a secret is not exclusive to “older” time settings. No matter the circumstance, time period, or characters, if a queer couple is being represented, their relationship is only for themselves, such as in *Portrait of A Lady On Fire*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Carol*, and *Call Me By Your Name*. We see more contemporary examples of this trope in *The Society*, *Sex Education*, *Elite*, and *Euphoria*, which are set in the mid-2000s. As this trope continues to become a default in cinematic queer media, it can strengthen the idea that same-sex couples are “unnatural” and “wrong.” This reinforces the homophobic perspective: “if they’re not doing anything wrong, why are they hiding it?” The “hidden queer couple” trope in films and TV harms LGBTQ individuals by reinforcing the stigma behind non-heteronormative love and stalls progress toward queer representation.

Most films and TV shows have heterosexual main characters, shown through romantic plotlines with love interests of the opposite sex. When visual media defaults to having these kinds of characters with no other representation, it promotes heteronormativity, which views heterosexuality as the “normal” sexual orientation. When queer characters are introduced into these media pieces, they are sidelined and not given enough screen time, unlike their straight peers. These queer characters (and their romantic relationships) become silenced. If queer love in heteronormative media does get any screentime, it is forced to be kept secret. The queer characters show that they love each other in private, and their relationship or sexual identity is reserved so that the rest of the characters do not know. As society progresses and pieces of queer media become mainstream, we see the same issue in a different light. Instead of lack of screen time, the queer relationship remains hidden. In private, they love and touch as they want, whereas, in public, they keep their distance, use eye contact, and are restricted to very subtle touches to express their love.

John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing” implements the idea of questioning art and the artist by exploring perspective through visual media like photography and cinematography. Berger states that “to touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it” (Berger 142). When queer characters are not given the space to be vocal and visible, their romantic relationships go unacknowledged. If there is any cue that a character is dating someone of the same sex, their status, relationships with friends, family, and coworkers can be ruined. Therefore, being cold to their lover in public saves them from negative backlash. They cannot touch their partner affectionately because then there is, according to Berger, something to be related to it. This “relation” is used as a pathway for clarification. A touch seen by heterosexual characters could make these queer characters’ sexualities be questioned and follows a possibility of their identities and relationship being exposed. This adds to the stigma that anyone who is not in a heterosexual relationship has something that they are ashamed of, which is why it is kept secret because it has not been normalized. The “hidden queer couple” trope holds back on normalizing queer love as it hides something that has been seen through heterosexual love, which the media has already been focusing on for centuries.

While not all visual media pieces have characters that are successful in keeping their queer relationship a secret, these instances of queer media are still not vocal about the LGBTQ+ relationship and continue the trope of staying hidden. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is a film about two men whose relationship has been kept secret for twenty years. Set in Wyoming during the 1960s, the film follows the lives of Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar and how difficult it is to be able to be with the person you love. They both married women, and eventually, Ennis' wife, Alma, finds out about his affair with Jack which ultimately leads to their divorce. Berger states, "we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice" (142). Alma did not suspect anything about Ennis' relationship with Jack and only found out about the affair because she saw their kiss by looking outside a window of her home. When she sees them kiss, she immediately looks away. From then on, she hardly looks at Ennis. When she does have the courage to look at Ennis, the connection is immediately destroyed when Ennis brings up Jack in a conversation about their plans to be out of town to go fishing.

Despite this, Alma never tells Ennis that she knows about the affair until years later. Alma ignored the affair for as long as she could during her marriage to Ennis. From her perspective, if she can persuade herself that she imagined the kiss by failing to acknowledge when Ennis and Jack are near each other, she and Ennis will be okay. Alma's character *chooses* not to *see* their relationship, making it seem like it does not exist because the ignorance of the situation makes it innocent. By not embracing Ennis with acceptance, support, and love, Alma contributes to the "hidden queer couple" trope. If Alma changed the narrative, it could have changed the outcome of the love story between Jack and Ennis, and they could have avoided being in a secret relationship for the remainder of their lives. Instead, Jack and Ennis' non-heteronormative love ends in punishment as the film ends with Jack dying, and while it is not explicitly said, it is hinted that Jack was killed by men who found out he was queer.

Queer characters have not only gone unacknowledged by their straight peers, but they are also constricted by the heteronormative society they are in. LGBTQ characters, especially males, who are out of the closet, are stereotyped by the media as having a feminine style. This style can include items such as crop tops, skirts, skin-tight bottoms, jewelry, nails painted, and some makeup. Thus, to avoid falling into this stereotype, many characters avoid dressing effeminately. Susan Bordo explores this in "Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body," an essay contrasting women, men, and their roles in fashion. Bordo states, "a man[']s...style...is aggressively heterosexual...[and] the process for their gender consciousness...[is] stress[ed]... [by] how 'real men' should feel" (Bordo 206). "Real men" are not too flamboyant, unaware of their attractiveness, and dismissive of "feminine" things, such as fashion, style, and beauty. Men are restricted in the sense of their fashion to avoid a disadvantage in a heteronormative world, and this affects progress towards LGBTQ representation as it forces queer people into stereotypes.

Many queer people dress and follow the heteronormative style to avoid suspicion of their sexuality and find it difficult to explore their sexuality. We see this in *Euphoria* through Cal Jacobs' backstory. Cal and his best friend, Derek, were aggressively heterosexual to diminish any sexual tension between them. They both played sports, talked about girls, and hung out nearly every day. Derek took Cal to an LGBTQ+ friendly bar on the last day before he left for college, and only then did they ever acknowledge their romantic love for each other. They share a kiss and are presumed to have never continued their friendship after that day. Although there was always tension between Derek and Cal, there was never a foundation for it. There was no hint that they were queer as they both followed heteronormativity (playing "manly" sports and talking about girls). In fear that the other would not reciprocate their feelings, or worse, decide to out him, Cal

and Derek were never given a chance to explore or confess their love until it was too late. As queer characters reflect real human beings, the consistent trope of queer individuals having to constantly suppress their feelings and keep their relationships with a same-sex individual a secret harms the LGBTQ individuals watching these mainstream visual media. This is harmful as it creates the narrative that queer love can only be explored when a relationship is kept secret. This adds to the stigma that queer individuals already face, which reinforces the homophobic perspective that non-heteronormative love is shameful, so queer people must feel the need to hide it.

As queer relationships and identities have been silenced through cinematography, it is important to emphasize that these mainstream media outlets favor straight storytellers. They favor heterosexual actors, directors, and writers for the content of queer media. While some of these content creators do a phenomenal job, it is more meaningful to LGBTQ+ individuals to have someone in the community representing them, to have someone who knows and understands the struggles queer people go through. Instead of having authentic people in the LGBTQ+ share their stories and have them in the spotlight, we praise straight people for their performances of characters with a different sexual orientation than themselves. The Academy Awards reward and acknowledge queer films that follow stereotypical tropes, including the “hidden queer couple” trope. The mainstream films that have this trope are *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Carol* (2015), and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). All of these films were based on adaptations of books. *Brokeback Mountain*'s author is a straight white woman, and the film's director is a straight Taiwanese man. A queer white woman wrote the *Price of Salt*, and a queer white man adapted the film *Carol* (2015). *Call Me By Your Name* was written by a straight white man and directed by an openly queer white man. The actors in the film adaptations that play the main queer characters are all straight and white. Although these films that receive recognition have at least some LGBTQ background and foundation, it is still not enough.

While it is true that these films have changed queer media and have helped the LGBTQ community in receiving more content that caters to and favors them, their impact does not diminish the lack of spotlight that LGBTQ creators face. David R. Coon explores this in “Turning the Page: Storytelling as Activism in Queer Film and Media” and explains that as queer media becomes more mainstream, queer individuals must use this as an advantage to tell their stories to reach bigger audiences. Although this is the goal, Coon emphasizes that it should not be an ambition that queer storytellers strive for. Coon states that queer storytellers “need...to tell honest stories that...will reflect and validate the experiences of other queer people who may feel marginalized and silenced by the expectations of society” (Coon 46). Progress towards mainstream queer media has not always been linear. Still, it can start with LGBTQ creators such as actors, writers, and directors, telling their stories through the lens of a queer person and a team that represents the community they are advocating for. Suppose tropes such as the “queer hidden couple” continue through queer creators. In that case, its harmfulness can be redefined or rewritten to have a different meaning than what has been mainstreamed by people in cinematography.

The “hidden queer couple” trope in films and TV harm LGBTQ individuals by reinforcing the stigma behind non-heteronormative love, which stalls progress toward queer representation. As we progress and are more openly supportive of different representations of love, the media content during these times must reflect that. For decades, queer love and representations of it have been something that has been fought for. The world still has a long way to come, and producing queer love stories that depict all types of queerness, including the variety

of people's stories, characters, personalities, and romance, is the least cinematography can do. It is important to give LGBTQ storytellers a safe space to share media that represents the community, as queer love is nothing to be ashamed of and should be tolerated and celebrated.

Works Cited

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