But I'm a Cheerleader; a Camp Critique of Heteronormativity

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Abstract: The essay critically analyzes Jamie Babbit's 1999 film *But I'm a Cheerleader* as a subversive critique of heteronormativity through the lens of Camp. The film, set in a conversion therapy camp, uses humor and exaggerated gender roles to challenge societal expectations of gender and sexual orientation. By employing Camp, the movie undermines the seriousness of the conversion therapy process and highlights the absurdity of gender norms when taken to their most literal sense. The analysis draws on theories of gender performativity by Judith Butler and concepts of heteronormative discourse by Gayle Rubin, alongside various scholarly interpretations of Camp. This essay argues that the film reclaims Camp as a queer mode of expression, using it to ridicule dominant culture while validating queer identities and relationships. The film's excessive use of gendered symbolism, such as color-coding and gender-specific tasks, serves to expose the artificiality of these norms, ultimately positioning queer love as authentic and society's rigid expectations as flawed.

Conversion therapy continues to harm LGBTQIA+ individuals worldwide, with only a limited number of countries taking steps to ban this discriminatory practice, highlighting the urgent need for global action to end this homophobic injustice (Fleck, 2023). Jamie Babbit's 1999 film, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, critiques these harmful interventions by using a satirical conversion therapy camp as the setting for a heartfelt exploration of queer identity and love—a message that remains profoundly relevant today. The American Medical Association (2019) defines conversion therapy as an intervention aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation, behaviours, or gender identity (p. 1). The practice's inherent belief is that all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities are wrong and in need of fixing (American Medical Association, 2019, p. 1). Some health and religious institutions uphold this harmful misconception and develop methods like aversive conditioning (e.g., electric shocks, food deprivation, and chemically induced nausea), biofeedback, hypnosis, and masturbation reconditioning to convert non-conforming people to heteronormative standards (American Medical Association, 2019, p. 1). Evidence shows that conversion therapy is ineffective in its aim to change sexual orientation (American Medical Association, 2019). In actuality, the individual's gender and sexual identity remain the same, with the only difference being an increased likelihood of psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, self-blame, internalized homophobia, low self-esteem, and sexual dysfunction (American Medical Association, 2019). There are also tragic social and interpersonal outcomes, "such as alienation, loneliness, social isolation, interference with intimate relationships, and loss of social supports" (American Medical Association, 2019, p. 2). These repressive systems are violently unethical in their attempts to assimilate everyone into straight and cisgender binary norms and must be banned worldwide.

Jamie Babbit's 1999 film, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, uses conversion therapy as the setting for a budding romance between two girls and critiques the institution by discarding any rationality behind it. The main character, Megan, is a cheerleader in high school with good grades and a boyfriend who begins to discover her true identity when her parents stage an intervention to send her to True Directions, a conversion therapy camp for youth. The reason for this intervention comes from Megan's family and friends citing her "homosexual tendencies," encapsulated by her vegetarianism, pictures of bikini models in her locker, sexual or vaginal motifs in her bedroom decorations, gay iconography posters on her wall, and disinterest in kissing her boyfriend. Despite denying the lesbian allegations made against her, Megan is forced to attend the camp to "fix" her sexuality problem. While there, she meets other queer teens, and the camp tries to indoctrinate them into heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality. Eventually, she falls in love with Graham, another female camper, and rejects the harmful ideas True Directions has placed on them. The two run away together at the movie's end, leaving behind their families and prior lives to be their true selves.

Although one might assume a movie about the repressive process of conversion therapy would be painful and heavy, this movie chooses to ridicule the oppressive institution instead of presenting Megan and Graham as hopeless victims. Babbit uses Camp, an inherently queer form

of parody, to highlight the absurdity of dominant gender and sexuality norms through humor. The film's queer codes include exaggerated performances of femininity and masculinity, irony and parody of mainstream rhetoric, dramatic costuming that deliberately creates a sense of "fakeness" and a queer reinterpretation of conventional romance tropes. The film is a critique of heteronormative discourses and uplifts queer individuals instead of suppressing their difference (Horn, 2017, p. 59).

But I'm a Cheerleader uses parody derived from Camp's use of codes to challenge dominant heterosexual ideas of gender, their links to sexual orientation, and the invalidity of homosexuality. Gender norms are exaggerated to the point of artificiality; gender expression is shown with no correlation to sexual orientation, and queer love, specifically between lesbians, is presented as real, with external forces being the only obstacle in the film's main relationship. This analysis uses Butler's (2011) theories of gender performativity, Rubin's (2012) perspective of heteronormative discourse, and various frameworks for understanding the different presentations of Camp given by Ullman (2018), Meyer (1993), Kleinhans (1993), and Horn (2017). These texts provide an understanding of social constructionism concerning gender and sexuality and highlight how Camp is utilized to critique and subvert the dominant discourse.

Defining Camp

Camp is widely misunderstood today as any use of irony or parody in popular culture, ignoring its origins as an inherently queer method of identity construction (Meyer, 1993). In actuality, Camp is the use of signifying codes to create social visibility for queer people, with its roots tied to creating communities for gay men throughout history when there were no spaces for them (Meyer, 1993). For example, Vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment in the early 20th century that used burlesque and cross-dressing to create comedy for mainstream audiences but also created a reasonably safe space for queer performance and gender deconstruction (Ullman, 2018). This form of entertainment led to Camp (and the use of queer codes in general) becoming a presentation style that "exaggerate[d] and mock[ed] dominant values, and aesthetics" (Ullman, 2018, p. 361). By subverting the expectations held by mainstream society, Camp created visibility and representation for queer individuals to see themselves in popular culture (Ullman, 2018). However, these representations were forced to uphold repressive ideas from the dominant culture surrounding gender and sexuality differences, making Camp function as both a form of visibility and oppression for queer individuals (Ullman, 2018, p. 363). Unfortunately, conforming to these stereotypes was the only way queer performers could achieve any representation—without the humor, they would have been viewed as too radical or immoral. This phenomenon highlights the hegemonic power of heteronormativity, as it forces queer individuals to oppress themselves in exchange for limited progress.

During the mid-twentieth century, Camp was understood as a frivolous style of comedy, losing its subversive and critical nature (Meyer, 1993, p. 1). Trace Camp is an appropriation of Camp, where queer performance is assimilated into heteronormative discourse, and the potential for Camp to critique society is neutralized as it becomes an apolitical form of comedy for non-queer audiences (Meyer, 1993). More recent Camp productions, like

But I'm a Cheerleader, reclaim the queer form back from its roots of coding and subversion of dominant ideals (Kleinhans, 1993). Self-aware kitsch is often used with Camp by queer cinema to highlight the absurdities of mainstream society in a coded manner that stands out to queer audiences (Kleinhans, 1993). The parody of the self-aware Camp allows marginalized people to mock the dominant culture while the dominant culture remains blind to the joke, understanding it on the surface level but not in the same way as queer viewers (Kleinhans, 1993, p. 170). Camp is the strategy of using parody to critique heteronormative ideals through codes that appear to reinforce the dominant order but in actuality challenge it (Meyer, 1993).

The Artificiality of Gender Norms

One of the most striking aspects of *But I'm a Cheerleader* is the obnoxious colour-coding seen in the True Directions camp. The mandatory clothing for the girls is entirely pink with skirts and blouses, while the boys wear all-blue shirts, shorts, and ties (see Figure 1). To an audience immersed in dominant discourse, this colour-coding, while taken to extremes, does not appear to be anything unordinary. According to Butler (2011), gendering is a compulsory practice where individuals repetitively embody the norms set out by societal expectations, making it performative. People cite previous performances of gender to know what constitutes a man and woman, and the colours pink and blue have, over time, become associated with their assigned genders (Butler, 2011). In an ideal heteronormative society, everyone would perform their gender perfectly in line with the expectations. However, these expectations are impossible, and as a result, society is full of individuals whose gender presentations may stray from the expectations placed on them (Butler, 2011). *But I'm a Cheerleader* makes use of excessive gendered colouring in the clothing and in the bedroom's design to demonstrate the absurdity of "ideal" femininity and masculinity when taken to its most literal form. The use of plastic formal attire in the graduation ceremony and plastic bed sheets can also be interpreted as the artificiality of gender norms, mocking the significance they hold in the dominant culture (Butler, 2011). Gender norms are essential to heterosexual power because, without them, people may see that gender and sexuality are merely social constructs as opposed to natural forms of existence (Butler, 2011). *But I'm a Cheerleader* furthers this ridicule through the activities the teens are forced to perform: fixing cars and playing football for the boys, and cleaning and changing diapers for the girls (see Figure 2). These patriarchal concepts of specific duties being masculine or feminine, once again, reinforce the heteronormative gender binary.

However, the film uses double entendres to make audiences question the straight reading of these roles; the teens are engaged in physical contact during these activities, making these straight practices appear somewhat homoerotic to make fun of the self-repression that is essential to heteronormativity (Horn, 2017). The exaggeration of dominant gender roles "serves to emphasize how both [sexuality and gender identity] are constructs whose 'correct' performance takes effort" (Horn, 2017, p. 84). Camp is used in *But I'm a Cheerleader* to show heteronormative ideals as ridiculous and queer identities and spaces as normal, ruining the illusion that upholds heterosexual power and oppresses individuals who do not conform (Horn, 2017).

Figure 1

True Directions orientation scene

Note. Directed by Jamie Babbit, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 1999.

Figure 2

Diaper changing scene

Note. Directed by Jamie Babbit, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 1999.

Decoupling Gender Presentation from Sexual Orientation

One of the strictest norms in 'correctly' performing gender is the individual's sexuality; dominant culture requires regulation of sexuality to maintain the ideal femininity and masculinity (Butler, 2011, p. 238). *But I'm a Cheerleader* uses the female character Jan to demonstrate how gender presentation does not have to align with sexual desires. Jan's character is very masculine-presenting with a buzzcut and facial hair—which is the reason she is in the camp as everyone assumes this gender expression must mean she is a lesbian. Later in the film, Jan has a "coming out" scene, where she admits to being heterosexual despite playing softball and wearing baggy clothes. The camp leader and other teens are so conditioned to stereotypical gender norms and their association with sexual orientation that they fail to believe that she could possibly be straight and therefore label her as in denial (Horn, 2017). This reaction is ironic because despite

being straight, the desired outcome of the camp, Jan's failure to represent ideal femininity demonstrates the hypocritical nature of these institutions and beliefs. The idea that someone's gender or self-expression has any relation to their sexuality is an invention by dominant discourse to stabilize the heterosexual gender norms; both concepts are socially constructed and, therefore, must not have a relation (Butler, 2011). Butler (2011) points out that "the heterosexual logic that requires identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments" (p. 239). Megan's character also subverts typical expectations for a lesbian with her feminine looks and love for cheerleading. While most lesbian representations in media force women to be masculine or at least very confident and 'cool' feminine women, Megan's character remains sweet and 'girly' throughout the film (Horn, 2017). Megan does not conform to society's expectations; instead, she is her authentic self, forcing audiences to change their expectations and assumptions of what a lesbian looks and acts like (Horn, 2017). Both Jan and Megan have humorous scenes showing the dissonance between what dominant culture would expect of them and who they are, using Camp to show the misconceptions heteronormative society holds about queer identities.

Challenging the Conventions of the Romance Genre

The fear of gender norms being broken fuels the greater anxiety of homosexuality within a dominant heteronormative society (Butler, 2011). This fear is understood as the 'domino theory' expressed by Rubin (2012), suggesting that once someone starts to stray away from acceptable sexuality and gender norms, a catastrophe will occur, leading to sexual deviance and chaos (p. 151). *But I'm a Cheerleader* uses Camp humour to satirize and mock this belief of a domino effect. This is illustrated clearly in the intervention scene (Figure 3) where Megan's family and friends attempt to "heal" her from her "homosexual tendencies" and allude to posters of female pop stars and vegetarianism as signals of a descent down a path of terrifying sexual deviance. The melodramatic and over-exaggerated reactions highlight how nonsensical the domino effect theory is and mock the characters for their absurd beliefs. Since homosexuality is treated as sinful and shameful in the dominant culture, Megan's parents and friends feel the need to save her from this illness of homoerotic tendencies. Megan's non-conforming sexual identity is viewed as invalid and indicative of a mental disorder, and the normative response to this is forced rehabilitative treatment. The film's Camp humour demonstrates, however, that her identity is not responsible for the problems she faces; it is the repressive society she lives in that creates this invalidity and a more beneficial solution to these problems would be the deconstruction of society's harmful standards (Rubin, 2012).

To subvert the traditional romance genre through Camp, *But I'm a Cheerleader* also offers a queer perspective on love and relationships. Megan and Graham's love story validates lesbian love even though the dominant culture often rejects it as an invalid, sinful desire (Rubin, 2012). The only obstacles these two must overcome are external, such as the camp splitting them up by kicking Megan out of True Directions. In conventional romance films, the conflict between the two main characters is often the result of interpersonal struggles or incompatibility, but this film subverts that practice by only creating conflict from external factors; this portrays

Megan and Graham's relationship as healthy and their environment as problematic (Horn, 2017, p. 59). The film's Camp subversion not only validates queer love but also creates hope and resilience in queer viewers who feel hopeless in a rigid world that does not accept them (Kleinhans, 1993). At the film's end, the two women leave their families, economic standing, schools, and lives behind to be together despite all the discrimination and bigotry they face, emphasizing the strength and authenticity of their love (Figure 4). The heteronormative society denies the love shared between these two girls, but it is apparent that their relationship is genuine and that they will get their happy ending. This Camp film critiques the dominant culture's beliefs on non-conforming individuals while simultaneously celebrating and uplifting queer romance and identities.

Figure 3

Family intervention scene

Note. Directed by Jamie Babbit, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 1999.

Figure 4

Megan and Graham's happy ending

Note. Directed by Jamie Babbit, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 1999.

But I'm a Cheerleader uses Camp to code heteronormative society and, specifically, the institution of conversion therapy as irregular and flawed to deconstruct the dominant ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. One of the key functions of gender norms is to uphold heterosexual values, and they do so by othering people who fail to achieve hegemonic ideals; this includes assuming non-conforming individuals must be homosexual and, therefore, are inferior. There is still significant progress to be made in society's acceptance of queer identities. However, popular Camp films such as *But I'm a Cheerleader* can help in this process by exposing the flawed nature of the dominant order and openly critiquing the oppressive institutions upholding these harmful beliefs. The film reclaims Camp as a queer mode of expression by celebrating queer identities and love while simultaneously imitating the heteronormative order in its most exaggerated form, presenting its assumptions and rules as unnatural and ridiculous. This deconstruction of heteronormative ideals in *But I'm a Cheerleader* challenges the rigid definitions of gender and sexuality and advocates for a more inclusive society where queer identities are recognized, celebrated, and seen as valid expressions of human experience.

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