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LGBT Film Distribution Companies
and the Gay Media Niche, 1985 to Present

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Bryan Wuest

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

LGBT Film Distribution Companies
and the Gay Media Niche, 1985 to Present

by

Bryan Wuest

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Kathleen A. McHugh, Chair

This dissertation examines the history and operations of niche LGBT media distribution companies in the past three decades. Since the rise of gay and lesbian film festivals in the 1970s, several distribution companies specifically devoted to LGBT media have made over a thousand titles available in theaters, on home video, or via digital streaming. By focusing on five companies (Ariztical Entertainment, Here Media, Strand Releasing, TLA Entertainment, and Wolfe Video), my research breaks new ground as a large-scale analysis of a sector of media largely unexplored by queer media studies. The texts produced by LGBT distributors are often perceived as conventional and uninteresting formally and politically. However, my project takes these “bad objects” seriously, recognizing their economic, cultural, and historical significance for a minority group and their larger impact on mainstream understandings of LGBT identity and politics. Partly an industrial history, this project deprioritizes textual and representational

analysis of the niche media itself, attending instead to the industrial and discursive circumstances surrounding these media and treating distribution as a collection of meaning-making practices revealing insights impossible through textual analysis alone. Each chapter demonstrates how LGBT texts circulate and activate differently in different contexts, focusing on the contingency of a text's categorization as LGBT, the signification of business practices with liberal LGBT politics, and the complexity of evaluating LGBT media based on differing expectations about what LGBT media should do and what LGBT viewers need. This project provides an untold history of a minority group's cultural production, and in doing so raises larger questions about LGBT media's contemporary and future relationship to categorization, identity, politics, economics, value, and affect.

The dissertation of Bryan Wuest is approved.

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Lucas Hilderbrand

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2017

For my parents, who gave me the space.

And for everyone who ever sat down and watched a gay movie with me.

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Introduction

Distributing Meaning in LGBT Media

At the 2010 Frameline Film Festival in San Francisco, film critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich presented the annual Frameline Award to Wolfe Video, the self-professed largest distributor of LGBT film in the world. The award honored the company for its twenty-five years of contributions to LGBT representation in film, and Rich praised them (as well as other LGBT-targeting home video distributors) as “an incredible service.” She compared home video’s function in the 1980s to that of gay and lesbian paperback books in the 50s, saying that companies like Wolfe “brought within reach the work that spoke to us, and finally made it possible for us to see in private what we still weren’t allowed to see in public.”¹ In her acceptance remarks that night, Wolfe Video founder and CEO Kathy Wolfe expressed her pride in “the way those authentic images [made available by Wolfe Video] have empowered so many individuals to be themselves.”² Company president Maria Lynn echoed this idea in an interview a couple of months later, reporting that Wolfe Video consistently receives letters from people around the world offering thanks for how the company’s products have helped them in the processes of coming out and self-acceptance.³

Wolfe Video is one of a handful of distribution companies that have had a significant impact in the past thirty years by contributing to what this dissertation will refer to as LGBT niche media. What unites the media and industrial practices on which my dissertation focuses is

¹ B. Ruby Rich, “Frameline Award presentation to Wolfe Video” (video of award ceremony), June 24, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sergcWtKsXA>.

² Kathy Wolfe, “Frameline Award presentation to Wolfe Video.”

³ Tiffany Razzano, “Wolfe Video Celebrates 25 Years Distributing LGBT Films,” *Daily Loaf* (blog), August 22, 2010, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://cltampa.com/dailyloaf/archives/2010/08/22/wolfe-video-celebrates-25-years-distributing-lgbt-films>.

a narrow conceptualization of the identity and market of media – it is intended for LGBT audiences, and is understood as identifiably “LGBT” itself. Often conventional in form and style, this kind of media now populates the pages of LGBT film festival programs and the “LGBT” categories of digital media platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. The films usually have limited if any theatrical release, and are generally promoted and made available through venues specifically targeting LGBT viewers. Following the overall market fragmentation that has become the norm since the 1960s and 70s, these organizations limit their potential viewer reach yet deepen their potential engagement with their chosen audience.⁴ Much marketing discourse during the so-called “Gay 90s,” a period heralded for its surge in representation of gay characters in mainstream media, described gay consumers as an incredibly loyal group because of their feelings of being generally underserved by mainstream business and media.⁵ Thus, at least in theory, media organizations specializing in content for gay viewers have access to a built-in audience eager to consume media understood as speaking specifically to their identities and experience.

Distributors play a crucial role in niche LGBT media, but my original entry point to looking at this sector of media was not a love of distribution but rather a deep, personal connection to the texts that LGBT distribution companies put on home video. My experience closely matched Rich and Wolfe’s remarks in this chapter’s opening paragraph. Newly out and living in St. Paul, Minnesota at the time, I would regularly bike to the nearby Quatrefoil Library,

⁴ Joseph Turow explains how advertisers have focused on segmented consumer groups rather than marketing more broadly, especially since the late 1960s, in *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵ This phenomenon has been discussed by several scholars, including Suzanna Danuta Walters in *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), Ron Becker in *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), and Katherine Sender in *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

an actual brick-and-mortar LGBT library that has moved to Minneapolis but still exists, to shyly borrow books and DVDs. Entirely unversed in any kind of queer culture, and having recently graduated college with a major in film studies, watching gay movies seemed like a good venue to the acculturation whose absence made me feel unmoored at best, and at worst entirely unqualified to be gay. I would watch many of these movies with an internet friend over Skype on stolen wifi, my friend and I carefully syncing our press of the play button so we would simultaneously react to remarkable moments in the movie. I was also lucky that one of my roommates was queer and, as one of the many ways she helped me come to terms with my queer identity, had plenty of recommendations of gay movies I should watch.

During this period, I devoured dozens of these films to learn how to be gay, a goal I didn't consciously realize at the moment but then spent some time thinking about later once I was doing my MA in Cinema and Media Studies with a vague focus on queer media. I knew I wanted to think about the phenomenon of niche LGBT media more, but I lacked a clear approach until I noticed the handful of distribution companies behind many of these films. Jenni Olson argues that "the gay and lesbian media distribution movement emerged in direct response to the rise of the festivals" centered on LGBT identity since the 1970s.⁶ Since then, Candace Moore explains, "what started as a collection of grassroots, festival-centered distribution efforts grew into a network of companies that promote queer media across theatrical, cable, merchandising, and digital venues."⁷ My project focuses on the history, products, discourses, and practices of five such companies in the U.S.: Wolfe Video, Strand Releasing, Ariztical Entertainment, TLA Entertainment, and Here Media. Founded between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s in

⁶ Olson, quoted in Candace Moore, "Distribution Is Queen: LGBTQ Media on Demand," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 139.

⁷ Moore, 140.

California, Arizona, and Pennsylvania, these companies vary in nature but all have a strong connection to distribution: Wolfe, Strand, and Ariztical began as and remain distribution companies (along with Ariztical and Strand occasionally producing films themselves); the conglomerate Here Media has its roots in a production and distribution company formed in the 1990s; and TLA Releasing launched in 2001 as the distribution arm of TLA Entertainment alongside its brick-and-mortar retailer TLA Video and its associated film festival, both of which the distribution arm and online retailer have outlived. Having collectively distributed over one thousand titles, these companies populate major chunks of digital platforms' LGBT media categories with their product. I became aware of these distribution companies around the same time I was trying to develop an original take on how LGBT content in media informed its signification and categorization, and distribution proved an ideal site of analysis. Using these companies, my dissertation approaches LGBT media through industrial analysis, specifically focusing on distribution, which I treat as a collection of meaning-making practices.

Two (relatively) high-profile films with LGBT content provide good examples of the uniquely curious nature of distributing such media, and its relationship to meaning. Much was made of the “de-gaying,” as it was commonly called, of *A Single Man* (2009) by its distributor The Weinstein Company. Colin Firth called the original trailers and one-sheets, which featured him and Julianne Moore in bed together, “deceptive....There’s nothing to sanitize. It’s a beautiful love story between two men and I see no point in hiding that.”⁸ Moore reported that director Tom Ford was “furious” and rejected this poster, which she called “ridiculous” because

⁸ Brandon Voss, “Colin Firth: Singled Out,” *The Advocate*, December 9, 2009, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2009/12/09/colin-firth-singled-out>.

it made the film resemble a heterosexual romcom.⁹ When a Vulture/NY Magazine writer asked Harvey Weinstein a follow-up question about whether “the poster seemed to play down the gay part,” Weinstein quickly ended the conversation, saying “I’m good. You got enough. Thank you.”¹⁰ Stuart Richards has also noted the differences in Tom Ford’s trailer (cut for the Toronto International Film Festival) and the Weinstein Company’s trailer. The former includes a kiss between Firth and Matthew Goode, a meaningful gaze between Firth and Nicholas Hoult, and “ultimately an equal pairing of Firth interacting with male characters as he does with female, particularly Julianne Moore.” The latter trailer removes Goode’s and Hoult’s names and the kiss, and includes “a conspicuously unsubtle attempt at pushing both Firth and Moore for Academy Awards.” Richards describes this as a common strategy by Indiewood distribution to “downplay...queer content to favor the ‘quality’ characteristics of the films.”¹¹

Around the time I was reading and thinking about this, I learned about another intriguing distributor strategy for a film with LGBT content, *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). According to Alice Royer, previously an Outfest staffer and at that time a film-screener for the festival, the film did not play at the festival “because it had already been picked up for distribution and [Focus Features] did not want it to be ghettoized as a gay film. And so they wouldn’t let it play at

⁹ Voss, “Julianne Moore: A Singular Woman,” *The Advocate*, January 13, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2010/01/13/singular-woman>; “Julianne Moore on the De-Gaying of ‘A Single Man,’” *BlackBook*, February 3, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://bbook.com/film/julianne-moore-on-the-de-gaying-of-a-single-man/>.

¹⁰ Harvey Weinstein quoted in Mike Vilensky, “Harvey Weinstein Explains A Single Man’s Marketing, Sort Of,” *Vulture*, November 23, 2009, accessed December 7, 2017, http://www.vulture.com/2009/11/harvey_weinstein_explains_a_si.html.

¹¹ Stuart Richards, “Overcoming the Stigma: The Queer Denial of Indiewood,” *Journal of Film and Video* 68, no. 1 (March 9, 2016): 19.

Outfest.”¹² To prevent the film from becoming imbued with too much “gayness,” Focus Features apparently disallowed its association with one of the country’s most visible LGBT film festivals for fear that the film would become irrevocably marked in a way that, presumably, the company expected would limit the reach and success of *The Kids Are All Right*. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin identify this strategy as happening decades earlier, when the Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (now Outfest) was unable to book *Prick Up Your Ears*, *Waiting for the Moon*, and *Maurice* in 1987 because the film producers did not want these titles to premiere at an LGBT film festival and possibly “be labeled as exclusively gay or lesbian.”¹³

In both examples above, potential meanings of a film were deliberately managed, and indeed created, not through the distributor’s control of the actual film content but rather through what was done with and around the text, or with its *paratexts*, as discussed below. The distributors’ choices regarding promotion or festival exhibition (itself a form of promotion) were intended to regulate these texts’ LGBT “identities.” Here I’m applying the dense concept of identity unusually - to a text, not a person - but this move is deliberate and, I hope, helpful. Whether these films are or aren’t “really” “gay” is not the right question here. The question is how distribution, as a set of framing practices, can produce meaning for texts in an LGBT, and larger cultural, context.

Paratexts and framing are two key concepts for this project. Jonathan Gray defines paratexts as “texts that prepare us for other texts,” and in an age of incredible volume and variety of choices for entertainment media, they help inform viewers’ decisions on where their time and

¹² Alice Royer, quoted in “The Mediascape Roundtable: Working at Film Festivals,” *Mediascape Blog*, September 26, 2013, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/blog/the-mediascape-roundtable-working-at-film-festivals/>.

¹³ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 194.

money is best invested. Paratexts include commercials, trailers, posters, cover art, merchandise, podcasts, interviews, reviews, and even audience discussion, among other examples. The role of paratexts is “conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among” what Gray describes as the “Big Three of media practice”: text, audience, and industry. Paratextual analysis is necessary, he argues, because close readings of individual texts cannot fully explain “social meanings and uses - what place a text has in society”; paratexts help us understand why and with what expectations a viewer comes to a text.¹⁴

The *A Single Man* and *The Kids Are All Right* examples above demonstrate the industrial importance of and attention to what Gray calls “entryway paratexts,” which offer consumers a preview of “what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, [and] what ‘effect’ it will have.”¹⁵ In these examples, the distributors’ paratextual choices were attuned to as broad of an audience appeal as possible. *Single Man*’s initial promotional materials attempted to decenter the film’s gayness and potentially draw a wider audience that might not intentionally go see a “gay film,” and Focus Features’ withholding of *Kids*’ from an LGBT film festival attempted to deflect too much “LGBTness” attaching to the film and potentially reducing its broader audience appeal upon wider release. With these choices, the distributors were to create and manage the “meaning” of these films not by requesting changes to the content itself, but by producing paratexts to influence the kinds of associations viewers would make with these films.

¹⁴ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 23-24.

¹⁵ Gray, 24.

As an active site of paratextual production, distribution is inextricably involved with how a text is framed. Robert M. Entman defines “framing” as a rhetorical positioning that “involves *selection and salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described.”¹⁶ For Entman, framing as a rhetorical activity takes place in a variety of sites, including the interpretative schemata that the message receiver brings to the communication, but I am most interested in how external industrial factors frame texts, selecting some content as salient in order to guide viewers in their media consumption. This selection and guiding process performed by distributors does not just shape a viewer’s engagement with a text’s extant meaning as produced by the media object’s creators, but rather produces meanings itself. This project’s attention to industrial framing processes and its participation in meaning creation makes an important intervention in queer media studies.

“What Makes Queerness Most?”: Categorization and Meaning in Queer Media Studies

Rather than broadly summarize the last four decades of scholarship on queer media, I want to focus on how scholarship has dealt with the question of what queer media *is*, which helps demonstrate why LGBT media distribution is so important to look at. A note on terminology is relevant to this topic and will help position this project within queer media studies. Outside of its derogatory sense, “queer” is currently usually used in one of two ways: either as a collective term for anyone with a sexual or gender identity that does not fit within a heteronormative framework, or as a deliberate ideological position aligned with leftist politics in opposition to

¹⁶ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 52, emphasis in original.

systemic intersectional oppression. In the latter use of the term, someone invested in queer politics might describe a man who has sex with other men, but who holds conservative ideas about race or gender, as gay but not queer. Some media scholars also make this distinction when describing media. For example, Bob Nowlan rejects the idea that the presence of LGBT characters makes a film “queer,” and instead offers several ways in which film can express tenets of queer theory and thus itself be understood, for him, as queer. He also argues for an instability within this very configuration, because “what is ‘queer’ – and what is ‘straight’ – in the context of a particular historical and social conjuncture may well not be in another....” Accordingly, following the work of Nick Davis he describes queer cinema as less a “genre” and more a “mobile sensibility.”¹⁷

To discuss LGBT distribution companies and their media, I will mostly use terms “LGBT” or “gay” instead of “queer” for two main reasons. First, I recognize the value and specific critical goals of a deliberate and prescriptive use of “queer” like Nowlan’s. This theoretical, politically-radical use of “queer” (in different forms) since the 90s is not what my project is organized around, so I don’t want to use the term carelessly and muddy the waters. However, I will continue to use “queer” when discussing the larger academic tradition of queer media studies, to which this project contributes. Second, my project is tracking industrial practice, and the distributors I study much more commonly use the terms “LGBT,” “gay,” or “gay and lesbian” than “queer.” I’m largely looking at “LGBT” as an industry practice - the way it is applied and signified, and what kinds of media practice it enables - so for my purposes it’s as much a marketing angle and media categorization logic as anything else.

¹⁷ Bob Nowlan, “Queer Theory, Queer Cinema,” in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 16, 14.

The categorization or identification of a film as “gay,” “LGBT,” “queer,” or any other related term, is a problem that academic literature has long tussled with, both explicitly and implicitly. Studies of queer media vary in how they articulate their logic for choosing and naming their research objects, if at all. However, common trends do emerge. Many of the past two decades’ large-scale studies on queer media define their objects as such based on authorship, spectatorship, and textual form/content. In the paragraphs below I limit my attention to scholarship that actually names texts as identifiably gay/lesbian or queer/queerable themselves; for example, Richard Barrios’ *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood From Edison to Stonewall* updates Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* by carefully tracking representations of homosexuality within Hollywood film, but he is not interested in applying labels to the texts themselves, even in the case of queer cast or crew members, and William J. Mann’s *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbian Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* is more a history of queer people working in the industry of Hollywood.¹⁸

Because much of American film history is marked by a policy-driven industrial disallowance of explicit LGBT content, spectatorship and reading strategies are important have been important sites for a text’s queerness. In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty delineates three ways in which mass culture can be queer: “influences during the production of texts”; “historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers”; and by spectators, regardless of self-identification, “adopting reception positions that can be considered ‘queer’ in some way.” He does acknowledge a potential fourth

¹⁸ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Richard Barrios, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall* (New York: Routledge, 2003); William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* (New York: Viking, 2001).

category, one centered on analyzing the content of the text itself, but “unless the text is about queers...the queerness of most mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception.” Accordingly, his study attends less to texts that explicitly denote queerness within the text, focusing more on spectatorship as a site of meaning-creation. He advocates taking connotation out of “the representational and interpretive closet” and allowing it to be a valid method of creating and reading meaning out of a text; he denies an epistemology of text-reading that favors a dominant, denotative reading and marginalizes all others as unnecessarily “reading into” the text.¹⁹ In this framework, Doty decenters textual content as the arbiter of reading validity, instead arguing for a dispersal of meaning among infinite reception positions. In *Flaming Classics*, Doty describes a similar theory of interpretation and applies it to a variety of films and TV shows without explicitly “queer content” that at least he as a viewer experiences as rich in queer reading potential; for example, he explores a lesbian reading of Dorothy and the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Doty’s concentration on spectatorship and reception’s role in understanding a text’s queerness demonstrates two of the common categorization methods listed above: authorship and reception. And in fact, he implicitly acknowledges the third common categorization, textual content and form, by outright dismissing it from his project’s parameters.²⁰

Richard Dyer uses the first lines of *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (1990, 2003) to explain his definition of lesbian/gay film as “films made by lesbians and gay men with lesbian and subject matter.”²¹ He limits his analysis to texts that fit both of these

¹⁹ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xi-xii.

²⁰ Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2000).

²¹ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

requirements of authorship and content. It is productive, however, to compare this methodology in the introduction to the second edition's, published thirteen years later after an expansion of literature on LGBT/queer media. The second edition adheres to the same "by, for, and about lesbians and gay men" parameters, but Dyer acknowledges this choice's "attendant problems." While he still finds it important "that lesbians and gay men speak for themselves...that homosexuality is openly and directed represented, and that lesbians and gay men have films that speak both on their behalf and also to them," he broadens the body of "homosexual, queer, lesbian, gay, Queer films" to include other methods of categorization, reflecting work like Doty's following the first edition of *Now You See It*.²²

Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin open *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* with a five-point explanation of "What Is Queer Film?" For their purposes, a film can be considered queer if: "it deals with characters that are queer"; "they are written, directed, or produced by queer people" or star queer actors; the film "is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators"; the film belongs to one of "various types of films or film genres [that] might be considered queer" such as the genres of horror or the musical, or modes of filmmaking like documentary or experimental, which Benshoff and Griffin suggest are queer because of their separation from the Hollywood narrative style they define as "the dominant mode of American (heterosexist) filmmaking."²³ Their fifth and final possibility proposes that film-viewing itself may be considered a queer process because it involves a temporary destabilization of personal identity in order to identify with characters onscreen, which could open up a variety of texts to be understood as potentially queer. Benshoff and Griffin's taxonomy exhibits all three of the

²² Dyer, 2nd ed., 6.

²³ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 9-12.

common categorization methods: textual form and content (the first, with queer characters, and the fourth, with queer genres or modes); authorship (the second, with above-the-line queers working on the film); and spectatorship (the third, with queer spectators, and the fifth, with film spectatorship in general). But while their history does briefly discuss the topic of distribution of media for queer viewers, this is absent from their theorization of the “queer film” category, and because of the nature of their project much of their historical analysis is specifically textual and cultural.²⁴

In these cases, academic work attends to how meaning is produced by a text’s author (often hinging on the idea of a queer sensibility permeating the text), produced through reading strategies and “use” of the text, and produced by the text explicitly presenting LGBT characters, issues, etc., or by the form of the text mirroring ideas about queerness. The approaches exemplified in this literature have been and are vital to research and analysis in the field. Rather than dismantling or replacing them, this project seeks to expand the breadth of analysis of LGBT/queer media by both offering a history organized around institutional business practice and analyzing how these texts’ “LGBTness” is defined according to industrial practice. This approach considers the strategic labeling of media as “gay” or “LGBT” and how LGBTness is produced by choices in how a text is described, categorized, marketed, and exhibited. Such an analysis has been suggested in existing scholarship, but is ultimately an area in which not as much sustained, in-depth analysis has been done. Considering the political and economic strategies and implications of institutional categorizing discourse is an important aspect of my project; I analyze the development of specific industrial practices around niche LGBT media.

²⁴ See Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 284-289.

This analysis also offers the possibility of complicating the idea of “LGBT media” and denaturalizing this category in the field of queer media studies in general.

There is overlap between my project and the existing criteria described above. All of the media discussed in this project have LGBT characters/themes, and many are written and/or directed by artists who identify as LGBT. But my project focuses on media output by institutions that organize their identities and business practice around the concept of LGBT identity. My particular focus is distribution companies, due partly to the innovative ways they enable for thinking about meaning and categorization. But while my specific attention to distribution is somewhat unique, I see my work emerging in a recent flurry of work in what Alfred L. Martin Jr has called “queer production studies.” This approach applies general media industry studies specifically to queer issues, combining the methods of this field with the insights of queer studies.

It has not been uncommon to see queer scholarship on LGBT-focused networks like Logo and Here TV, such as in the work of Anthony Freitas, Ben Aslinger, and Bridget Kies. Work like this often locates networks and shows in a complex context of technology, marketing, broadcast trends, and economic challenges, reading the political implications of their assumptions and representations.²⁵ Eve Ng uses fascinating primary materials to offer a behind-the-scenes look of Logo and its recent attempts to “gaystream” through changing both the network’s content and the ways in which such content and the network itself were framed to

²⁵ Anthony Freitas, “Gay Programming, Gay Publics: Public and Private Tensions in Lesbian and Gay Cable Channels,” in *Cable Visions: Television beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 213–33; Ben Aslinger, “Creating a Network for Queer Audiences at Logo TV,” *Popular Communication* 7, no. 2 (April 20, 2009): 107–21; Bridget Kies, “Sexploitation on YouTube: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Gay Network,” in *Queer TV in the 21st Century: Essays on Broadcasting from Taboo to Acceptance*, ed. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 194–209.

viewers.²⁶ While not focusing on a niche venue like Logo or Here, Martin analyzes how the writing room structure of the television industry introduces complications into representations of queerness, with writing room outlines, individual writers, showrunners, and producers all contributing to the final object that appears on a viewer's screen.²⁷ Martin's analysis attends to individual authorship, but he carefully grounds it in the material context of television sitcom production. He thereby explores how industrial factors influence the creation of authorial meaning rather than performing a textual analysis that simply evaluates what appeared on screen. Ng and Martin have continued such scholarship in yet-unpublished work where they examine how meaning and "LGBTness" are determined by promotion and casting decisions.²⁸

Other similar work I draw from considers the limited conglomeration of LGBT media industries. Joshua Gamson and Aslinger track the recent history, enabling factors, and varying impacts of merging and centralization of LGBT entities online, activities that birthed Here Media, one of the companies my project analyzes.²⁹ Equally important as LGBT business history and economic analysis is human subject research and discourse analysis. Kathleen Farrell uses extensive interviews with Logo and Here employees to understand period the motivations, investments, and personal logics behind the companies and conglomerates that enable LGBT

²⁶ Eve Ng, "A 'Post-Gay' Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 258–83.

²⁷ Alfred L. Martin, "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (November 1, 2015): 648–63.

²⁸ Eve Ng, "'Just a Movie About Love' or 'Too Gay?': *Carol*, *Freeheld*, and Production Contexts for Contemporary Queer Films" and Alfred Martin, "Queerly Cast: Television Production, Casting, and the Erasure of Queer Labor," (papers presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, March 25, 2017).

²⁹ Joshua Gamson, "Gay Media, Inc.: Media Structures, the New Gay Conglomerates, and Collective Sexual Identities," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 255–78. Ben Aslinger, "PlanetOut and the Dichotomies of Queer Media Conglomeration," in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York: Routledge, 2010), 113–24.

media production in the U.S.³⁰ This kind of self-theorizing is a crucial window into the operation of an industry, and I'll further discuss the use and significance of practitioner discourse and interviews below. But first I will provide an overview of recent work and theorization about *how* to study "the industry," which provides a methodological basis for my dissertation's approach.

"The Invisible, or Taken-For-Granted, Link": Media Industry Studies and Distribution

My particular entry point to queer media studies is rooted in the wider field of media industry studies. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren's 2009 collection *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* helps to establish the parameters of the field as such.³¹ In their introduction, Holt and Perren answer their own question of whether "the world really need[s] one more field of study" by illustrating a history of how industries and production have historically been examined. They demonstrate how the field of media industries studies moves away from earlier models with monolithic ideas like "mass culture" and "mass communication" in order to make way for a more flexible approach that can "engage with an extraordinary range of texts, markets, economies, artistic traditions, business models, cultural policies, technologies, regulations, and creative expression." Such an approach, they argue, must be "interdisciplinary and multi-methodological" and "acknowledge the complexity and contradictions of media texts as well as have a respect for media audiences consuming these texts."³² Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Caldwell's *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* uses similar

³⁰ Kathleen P. Farrell, "Backstage Politics: Gay TV Professionals and Their Work," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 11 (August 2011): 26–37.

³¹ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

³² Holt and Perren, "Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1, 8.

methodologies to look at culture production at a variety of sites. They call for scholars to “address the subjective, and often self-reflexive, identities of media practitioners as they represent themselves and their communities,” an approach that is doubly productive for my project examining figures representing both independent media distribution and LGBT media culture.³³

Media industry studies addressing the work of varied media practitioners necessitates a shift in assumptions about where knowledge and theory is produced. One of the axioms of John Caldwell’s approach to this field is that media industries self-theorize. He describes the practice-defining logics of industry workers from grips to CEOs as “lay theorizing” or “‘indigenous’ interpretive frameworks,” and insists that media industry scholars pay attention to them.³⁴ He argues that “practitioners constantly dialogue and negotiate a series of questions that we traditionally value as part of film studies - including questions about what film/video is, how film/video works, how the viewer responds to film/video, and how film/video reflects or forms culture.” Yet practitioners don’t typically delineate the details of their industrial theorizing in the same way an academic would; instead, Caldwell, says, “this form of embedded theoretical ‘discussion’ in the work world takes place in and through the tools, machines, artifacts, iconographies, working methods, professional rituals, and narrative that film practitioners circulate and enact in film/video trade cultures and subcultures.”³⁵

³³ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, “Production Studies: Roots and Routes,” in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 7.

³⁴ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), 14.

³⁵ Caldwell, 26.

Centering analysis on “the industry” challenges conventional approaches to authorship.

Michelle Hilmes argues that

industry study is the translation of authorship into a dispersed site marked by multiple, intersecting agendas and interests, where individual authorship in the traditional sense still most certainly takes place, but within a framework that robs it, to a greater or lesser degree, of its putative autonomy.

She describes this shift as a potentially “deeply disturbing displacement” but also a “necessary corrective to the narrow categories of traditional scholarship.”³⁶ Following Hilmes, I look at distribution as one site of this dispersed authorship. To avoid slipping from one oversimplification to another, I do not claim that a distributor is *the* author any more than a director or writer or producer is. Rather, I see distribution as one crucial contributor in the long line of framings and interactions that infuse a text with (multiple) meanings. Along with Caldwell, I prioritize tracking the industry logics, plural, because of the varied investments and strategies I observed among the five companies I study. These logics inform the choices made by these distributors and as such ripple out to shape what we understand as niche LGBT media in the U.S. I illuminate these logics by analyzing distributor practices like categorization, description, and promotion as material manifestations of the underlying and sometimes unspoken theories upon which these practitioners rely. The methodology section below provides more detail about exactly how this dissertation engages with these practices as data.

Scholars regularly posit that distribution is the industry sector least attended to by the academy, including Philip Drake in his brief, informative explanation of recent Hollywood distribution up to 2008.³⁷ Julia Knight and Peter Thomas emphasize that distribution is not

³⁶ Michele Hilmes, “Nailing Mercury: The Problem of Media Industry Historiography,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 22.

³⁷ Philip Drake, “Distribution and Marketing in Contemporary Hollywood,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford, England: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 63–82.

simply a “physical delivery system,” but rather plays “a crucial role in determining what we as audiences get to see.”³⁸ Thinking particularly about non-Hollywood media, they push back against an overly optimistic view of the equality granted by digital technology, arguing that although more media is technically *available*, this increase in content volume makes attending to distribution all the more important for its role in directing audiences to certain texts and not to others: “what the internet does not do of course is ensure that people watch and engage with the work it makes available.”³⁹

Because of their immense power as cultural and economic gatekeepers, the biggest global media companies are the most likely to draw the attention of researchers. Alisa Perren calls for more work to take a from-the-ground approach to distribution, one that “tak[es] us beyond examinations of the largest Western corporate players and biggest government funding bodies” and looks instead at “the contributions made by smaller-scale entities and less well-funded operations.”⁴⁰ My project partly adheres to this method: I do take a top-down approach insofar as I examine these main LGBT media companies as my central objects and especially attend to what is said and done by the company heads. At the same time, these companies play a tiny role in the overall mediascape, a far cry from the centralized movers and shakers of U.S. media. So within LGBT media I’m addressing some of the large players, but within the larger media context these companies are very minor in comparison. Working with this kind of company also changes the access I am able to wrangle; the founder and CEO of Ariztical Entertainment was

³⁸ Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2012), 14.

³⁹ Knight and Thomas, 268.

⁴⁰ Alisa Perren, “Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 169.

interested in sitting down and talking with me, while the CEO of Paramount presumably would not be.

Beyond the importance of stronger focus on distribution in media industry analysis, Perren also notes the pedagogical advantages. She argues that “whereas students often come into courses with a clear interest in learning about how media are made or consumed, the concept of distribution remains much murkier for them.”⁴¹ I can confirm this claim from my own experience cajoling undergraduate students to engage with LGBT media from this specific perspective and think beyond solely-textual analysis. But undergrads are not the only thinkers who may overlook distribution when studying media. A 2015 special issue of *The Velvet Light Trap* about distribution summarizes how academia has approached the topic and how this has shifted in recent years. Its introduction notes that scholars universally accept that distribution is “the economic linchpin of the media industries” and enables the continued industry domination by the few largest conglomerates. But while scholars have recognized the importance of distribution, the issue editors argue, they have not always found it as intriguing as other subjects. They worry that in comparison to more enticing aspects of media studies, like “the drama of production, the pleasures of the text, or the struggle over meaning,” distribution has not enjoyed the same attention because as a sector of media industries it “perhaps conjur[es] images of dour economists combing through dusty ledgers and laboring over forbidding spreadsheets.” But the editors identify a change in the field; while once perceived as “the invisible, or taken-for-granted, link between production and consumption,” in recent years distribution has been treated as “a fruitful site for investigating the major struggles over cultural and economic power that have

⁴¹ Perren, 171.

long invigorated the field.”⁴² This perspective on distribution is what informs my approach to these niche LGBT media companies.

“Policing Reading Strategies”: Frames, Identity, and Meaning in “LGBT Media”

We need to think about distribution differently. The *Velvet Light Trap* special issues suggests that scholars might overlook distribution in pursuit of a juicier topic like “the struggle over meaning.” But distribution *is* a crucial site of meaning-making, one that sometimes goes unnoticed when this part of the mediascape is “invisible” or “taken-for-granted,” in the *VLT* editors’ words. My project renders distribution visible not only by recounting the histories of these five companies, but also by engaging with conceptual questions about the “work” performed by distribution and these companies’ participation in meaning production.

Above I demonstrated distributors’ deliberate paratextual activity surrounding *A Single Man* and *The Kids Are All Right* and how it attempted to frame these films as *not* specifically LGBT. Another Focus Features film with LGBT content offers an example of paratextual production of meaning, in this case by film critics. Brenda Cooper and Edward C. Pease, in a true labor of love, tracked 113 reviews of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and found that the majority framed the film as a “universal love story like any other.”⁴³ Roger Ebert’s review is representative: he describes the film’s “gay cowboy movie” label as “a cruel simplification” because “their tragedy is universal. It could be about two women, or lovers from different religious or ethnic groups -- any ‘forbidden’ love” or any instance when one must deny a great passion. He goes on to say that one might as easily identify with or cry at the film because “he

⁴² Editors, “Introduction,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 75 (March 1, 2015): 1.

⁴³ Brenda Cooper and Edward C. Pease, “Framing Brokeback Mountain: How the Popular Press Corralled the ‘Gay Cowboy Movie,’” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2008): 257.

always wanted to stay in the Marines, or be an artist or a cabinetmaker.”⁴⁴ Reviews can certainly have the kind of paratextual effects described above that attempt to broaden audience appeal, and Ebert’s particular take may have even been well-meaning in order to convince more people to see a film he found important. But Cooper and Pease, also relying on Entman’s theorization of framing, are more interested in how paratexts like these universalizing reviews may have “encouraged the audience to overlook queer subjectivity” by offering particular kinds of framing for audiences’ viewing responses. In short, these paratexts would not just increase or decrease the chances any individual viewer would go see the film, but rather inform their reading of the film.⁴⁵

While entryway paratexts prepare viewers for engagement with a text, what Gray calls “in medias res paratexts” inform, resignify, or reinvigorate viewers’ relationship with a text after they have begun (or “finished”) engaging with it. This latter kind of paratext is especially helpful for its illustration of the malleability of a text’s meaning. Rather than *being*, a text actually *happens* through the reading process. Gray cites the “previously on…” segments that often precede an episode of a serial TV show. These segments emphasize certain events from recent episodes that the creators deem important to understanding the events of the current episode, and thus inform how viewers read the motivations and morality of characters’ actions.

Gray differentiates between entryway and in medias res paratexts, arguing in a key phrase that the latter attempts to “police certain reading strategies,” but both forms of paratexts have this effect.⁴⁶ A viewer might read one of Cooper and Pease’s “universalizing” reviews before seeing

⁴⁴ Roger Ebert, “Brokeback Mountain,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 15, 2005, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/brokeback-mountain-2005>.

⁴⁵ Cooper and Pease, 252.

⁴⁶ Gray, 23.

Brokeback and be prepared to read the relationship between Jack and Ennis in a particular way, or a viewer might read the review afterward while attempting to sort out their thoughts on the film and decide how to discuss it with others. As Cooper and Pease would argue, these frames can shape the meaning-making experience a viewer has with a text. But framing choices can also unleash a host of economic and marketing effects, as Richards would note. However, while Richards focuses on how deprioritizing the LGBT content in a text like *A Single Man* can act as a marketing strategy, I want to look at the inverse: how a text's LGBT content can be selected as salient in order to activate a set of promotion, distribution, and exhibition circuits.

To think through how LGBT content can become a defining element of a text, I draw from work on meaning and identity. I first engaged with Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* due to fascination at the pure *novelty* of a full-length research project on a set of films without actually analyzing the film texts themselves. But in Klinger's work I found a theory of interpretation and meaning that ended up giving foundation to the work I would eventually do in this project. By foregoing traditional textual analysis, Klinger "consider[s] the contributions that contextual factors, as opposed to textual devices or viewer subjectivities, make to an understanding of *how texts mean*." I add emphasis there because of my own approach's close adherence to hers: rather than argue our interpretations of *what* our chosen films mean, we argue *how* they mean, what factors go into creating potential (and in my case, industry-intended) meanings around a text. She argues that "the contextual factors that accompany the presentation of a film, including such materials as film reviews and industry promotions as well as specific historical conditions, serve as signs of the vital semiotic and cultural space that superintend the viewing experience." She rejects that

texts have any “intrinsic, formally verifiable significance,” insisting instead on “the importance of analyzing contextual factors in discussions of the social meaning of texts.”⁴⁷

This approach to how a text’s meaning is created parallels work on identity formation. Stuart Hall prefers the term “identification” over “identity” because the former illuminates the ongoing contingency that is part of any “identity.” As a product of discourse (as opposed to intrinsic nature, as he and many others argue), identification is “a construction, a process never completed - always ‘in process.’ It...can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost,’ sustained or abandoned.” For Hall, identification is “a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption,” and in the same way that Klinger argues that a text’s context produces its meaning, Hall argues that identity is “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.”⁴⁸ These enunciative strategies necessarily involve as much exclusion as inclusion, creating “points of temporary attachment” that always contain “‘too much’ or ‘too little’...never a proper fit, a totality.”⁴⁹ Here Entman is helpful when he claims “frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements,” an idea that matches almost exactly with Hall; in Entman’s case, inclusion and exclusion of particular elements leads audiences to particular interpretations of a film, while for Hall, inclusion and exclusion of particular aspects of themselves lead people to identify themselves and others in particular ways, with both subject to revision upon a change in how these inclusion decisions are made.⁵⁰ Klinger makes a similar

⁴⁷ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi-xvii, emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 2-4.

⁴⁹ Hall, 6, 3.

⁵⁰ Entman, 55.

argument when she demonstrates how the meaning and significance of Douglas Sirk's films were redefined according to changes in historical insights and academic film criticism from the 1950s to the 1980s.⁵¹

In the same way that Sirk's axiomatic place as a progressive auteur directs contemporary viewing of his films in an academic seminar on melodrama, in the same way that universalizing reviews of *Brokeback Mountain* discourage viewers from focusing on queer specificity in Ennis and Jack's relationship, and in the same way that popular understandings of sexual orientation and identity provide people an organizing framework to understand and label their feelings of difference, a distributor's practices prepare us for a certain relationship with and understanding of a film. Few would argue that point; in "Overcoming the Stigma," Richards makes this case specifically regarding LGBT film. But implicit in his argument is that the films he discusses *are* LGBT films - sometimes he calls them films with LGBT content, but as often he calls them "LGBT films" or "LGBT Indiewood films" - whose queerness distributors attempt to manage or buffer through their promotional choices. I note this minor distinction because I want to move that analysis one step backwards and suggest that there may *be* no such thing as an intrinsically, definably LGBT film. I read Klinger, Hall, and Entman together because they all demonstrate, if not the *arbitrariness* of meaning and interpretation, at least their *contingency*. Queer scholarship has offered us similar lessons; plenty of queer history and theory has spent considerable time deconstructing the medical, economic, cultural, and political factors that have shaped different understandings of sexuality in different periods. This denaturalizes the admittedly politically-

⁵¹ Klinger, 1-35.

expedient idea that LGBT identity as currently understood is an inborn and historically-constant reality, and I want to extend this analysis to what now gets called “LGBT media.”⁵²

For example, John D’Emilio demonstrates how the rise of wage labor and urban living in the U.S. lessened the importance of the nuclear family as a social structure for survival, which better enabled people to “construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex.” Homosexual behavior in the U.S. had existed previously, but not homosexual *identity* in the same way we think of it now because there was “no ‘social space’ in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay” as a claimable social identity.⁵³ Hall would describe this as an example of “discursive practices construct[ing]...points of temporary attachment” for subjects; a man who desires to have sex with another man, when “presented” with the idea of a gay sexual identity, can choose to use that as a framework for understanding and organizing these impulses, or not. For Hall, this is a “successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse.”⁵⁴

A similar process occurs in categorizing media as “LGBT.” Queerness, whether connoted or denoted, has appeared in American film throughout its history, albeit in a variety of forms and more or less commonly depending on the period. But there have not always been media industry infrastructures predicated upon the centralization of LGBT content as a text’s definitive core.

⁵² John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, ed. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey, Women in the Political Economy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 131–41; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma,” *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (August 1, 1995): 390–407; Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, U.K. : Malden, Mass: Polity Press ; Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Jeffrey Weeks, “Necessary Fictions: Sexual Identities and the Politics of Diversity,” in *Sexualities & Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, ed. Karen Lovaas and Mercilee M Jenkins (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 41–53.

⁵³ D’Emilio, 134.

⁵⁴ Hall, 6.

Beginning to categorize media this way wasn't the result of finally recognizing the true nature of a body of texts and finally identifying them correctly. Rather, it was one particular way to name and organize texts that has become increasingly tenable and strategic. This categorization isn't the *origin* of LGBT content in media any more than recent understandings of sexual identity are the origin of all same-sex interest or activity. But it provided a logic and commonality with which to think about media, and this "flow of discourse," as Hall would phrase it, became a place that extant and future texts could "chain into." The creation of these categorical space encourages continued activity within it, whether that be claiming a personal queer identity or producing more media with LGBT content.

This process could be denaturalized and analyzed at a variety of sites: for example, queer film criticism and queer film festivals both by their nature establish a body of texts and argue that they share a common element that can become a first-order point of categorization.⁵⁵ Elsewhere I have demonstrated the deliberate discursive work to produce a category for narrative gay-themed films in the late 1960s and early 1970s; there I argued that framing and grouping choices (i.e., describing films as "homosexual love stories" or organizing a variety of films under a common "homosexual film festival" banner) were as vital to the apparent newness of this media as was actual differences in its content.⁵⁶ This project, however, focuses on LGBT distributors, another vital site of this implicit categorical argument.

⁵⁵ See: Candace Moore, "Proto-Queer Media Criticism: 'Cinema Ramblings' from an RKO Secretary," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 4-28; Joshua Gamson, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 2 (June 1, 1996): 231-61.

⁵⁶ Bryan Wuest, "Defining Homosexual Love Stories: Pat Rocco, Categorization, and the Legitimation of Gay Narrative Film," *Film History* 29, no. 4 (forthcoming December 2017).

These sites make LGBTness a sort of center of gravity in a text; we might say that here LGBT content exerts a centripetal force that gathers meaning around itself. In these cases, the LGBT content will often act as a center of meaning or identity, marking the text itself as LGBT and demoting other “generic” features as secondary. That is, a film might be described as a “gay film” before it’s described as a “romcom” or a “drama.” I don’t argue that this is inherent or intrinsic, but rather that cultural and industrial infrastructures of the past couple decades create conditions that activate this centripetal force. I also don’t argue that it is inevitable; this dissertation will provide examples both of companies deliberately constructing LGBT meaning around a text and of companies deliberately *avoiding* LGBT meaning. But LGBT content in a text is easily activatable as a focus of meaning, certainly through reception practices, but also through industrial positioning. The imminent “threat” of this centripetal force is demonstrated in the *A Single Man* and *The Kids Are All Right* examples above, where industry practitioners warily attempted to avoid “activating” it in a certain moment through careful promotion and exhibition choices. Chapter One will examine these concepts in more depth, thinking about these questions of categorization alongside genre theory, and examining the impact of this kind of centripetal force.

Before moving to the next section, let me say that although above I cited Richards’ phrasing as an example to theorize against, I have already used and will continue to use terms like “LGBT media” in this project. I’m thinking specifically about how a text’s LGBT “identity” is produced by industry/distribution practice, so if I’m talking about a Wolfe Video film, I’m indeed talking about an “LGBT film” within this system of logic. But more pragmatically, this choice is a shortcut to avoid endless syntactic gymnastics throughout the dissertation. But readers

are invited to keep the complications of identifying a text as “LGBT” in the back of their minds throughout the analyses that follow.

“Cloying and Conformist Manifestations”: Taking Niche LGBT Media Seriously and Generously

While this project’s goal is partly to offer a complementary approach to how much of queer media studies has approached its objects, it is also an industry study to fill in gaps in historical work on LGBT media, focusing particularly on an underresearched sector of media. Much (though certainly not all) scholarship has simply ignored these titles, either focusing on more exceptional, politically- and aesthetically-radical work or on work that is made for mainstream audiences but includes LGBT characters and themes (and such media’s attendant visible mainstream impact). I focus my attention on more conventional or middle-of-the-road media. Historically it has played an important cultural role for LGBT people lacking media representation. Economically the media companies that produce it operate within a small but very active cottage industry of production, distribution, marketing, and exhibition. In terms of impact, the rapid spread of LGBT characters and stories in popular media, and the media category “LGBT” itself builds upon the past work of these companies and their continuing presence in providing media not deemed viable enough for mainstream contexts.

Like Bob Nowlan, whose work I discussed above, Alexandra Juhasz attempts to limit a broad, ostensibly-apolitical usage of “queer” to describe media. Rejecting much of what is currently termed “queer cinema,” she takes a position that “dismiss[es] queer cinema’s cloying and conformist manifestations – those replicas or copies of dominant forms where LGBT people are merely transplanted into the already-written and acceptable roles of melodrama or reality

tv....”⁵⁷ She argues that queer cinema, to be labeled as such, must be “productive,” which for her entails active dissonance against formal norms and audience expectations. One of the noteworthy differences between my work and that of scholars like Nowlan and Juhasz is that their approach is prescriptive, using queer theory as a basis from which to evaluate films, while my approach is descriptive. I track the media production that LGBT media structures have enabled, and analyze their defining strategies and practices. [bring in Caldwell?] This project aims to meet this media and micro-industry where they are, and as such, my research interest is in exactly these “cloying and conformist manifestations” Juhasz criticizes. Michael Bronski has similar feelings as Juhasz about much of niche LGBT media, but asks a vital question - these films are here, so what do we do with them? In an article / book review about “the changing nature of queer film criticism,” he reflects on the nature of LGBT film in 2008 and academia’s relationship to it. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Remember those hundreds of films in the TLA catalog - it also raises two important issues. In this plethora of new queer film there is an amazing amount of commercial, sometimes even unwatchable, junk. This is, of course, simply a byproduct of capitalism - if there is a perceived audience someone, somewhere, will make a product to market to it - but film scholars will have to begin deciding how to understand and write about this phenomena. Does this mean that, along with articles on the queer sensibility of George Cukor or Dorothy Arzner, we will be seeing scholarly pieces on "The Queerness of Chucky" or "Narratives of Orality in *Eating Out* and *Eating Out 2*," two highly popular, but inanely stupid, gay male films? The question "Is the proliferation of junky queer films a good thing" is beside the point; they are there and many are quite popular. But scholars will have to come to grips with not only what this new cultural moment might mean, but also with the idea that as the very category of "queer film" has grown enormously, the category itself may have become meaningless, both commercially and critically. These are new questions - queer film studies being such a new field - that have never had to be faced in the past.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Alexandra Juhasz, “A Stake in the Future: Transforming Queer Cinema, Staying Dissonant,” in Juett and Jones, 257.

⁵⁸ Michael Bronski, “From The Celluloid Closet to Brokeback Mountain: The Changing Nature of Queer Film Criticism,” *Cinéaste* 33, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 25.

This passage is something like a scholarly call to action to which my project responds. Besides specifically naming both a company and a film series that my project examines, Bronski also touches on the three topics that organize this dissertation's structure: the complications of "queer film" as a category, which I explore in chapter one chapter one; the relationship of LGBT media to capitalism and markets, which I address in chapter two; and the evaluation of contemporary LGBT media's quality (described by Bronski as "junk"), one of the complex discourses I consider in chapter three. Methodologically, he also introduces the problem of *how* to research this media. He sees less value in asking whether "the proliferation of junky queer films a good thing," since they are here and people watch them; rather, he wants to ask what this media means and how scholars can approach this question.

I treat this media phenomenon seriously, rigorously, and generously, and three scholars particularly influence my thinking on how to do this: F. Hollis Griffin, Lisa Henderson, and Eve Sedgwick. Although our specific methods diverge, Griffin and I take similar positions on similar texts. While he describes much of contemporary LGBT media as "banal" and notes that it "run[s] afoul of many of the aesthetic, political, and economic value codings generated by industry professionals, reviewers, and academic critics," this does not preclude his interest in it.⁵⁹ He is highly attentive to LGBT texts and their "use-value," an idea that runs throughout his book, and insists on the importance of texts that media professionals and consumers are invested in. He argues that "those investments warrant more careful scrutiny than an evaluation in which they are deemed unproblematically 'normative' as a result of being 'commercial.'"⁶⁰ Griffin's specific

⁵⁹ F. Hollis Griffin, *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 6, 18.

⁶⁰ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 15.

focus on this uneasy interaction of commerce and politics will be explored further in chapter two, but here I'm interested in his insistence on taking seriously media that holds meaning for people, even when it has earned popular and academic dismissal. This approach cleaves closely to Lisa Henderson's advocating for "softness" in one's analytical perspective. She claims the possibility, and indeed the importance, of openness and generosity in our reading strategies. This does not preclude critique; Griffin and I both value Henderson's argument that

paranoid critique is not enough...but nor does a reparative disposition claim that social damage or threat isn't occurring all around us. Rather, it claims that stepping into the critical cycle of threat and defense disables other forms of reading, other insights, and ultimately, other forms of living.

Henderson makes similar arguments in discussions at academic conferences, where she compellingly questions what she sees as a field orthodoxy of "paranoid reading." She productively asks what other approaches might augment our thinking about a text. Henderson insists it is possible to attend to how creators and consumers value texts "without disavowing insights from the route taken through negative or even paranoid critique."⁶¹

The term "paranoid reading" comes from Sedgwick's essay in *Touching Feeling*, wherein she proposes that the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Paul Ricoeur's meta-analysis of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche's collective impact on critical theory) have become "entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds."⁶² Sedgwick doesn't want to shut down paranoid reading, but rather denaturalize it as what good critical thought *is*. Inspiring scholars like

⁶¹ Lisa Henderson, *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 13.

⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 126. Among other texts, Sedgwick is working with Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

Henderson, Sedgwick clarifies that analysis coming from a position *other* than paranoia reading “does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression,” (128) but can bring to view what is made “invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic,” (147) such as “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture - even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”⁶³

None of these scholars use this exact term, but a common thread I see is a deliberately-theorized position of ambivalence. They identify and consider both the value and critiques of a media phenomenon and refuse to foreclose on either, using this tension as a site of productive thinking rather than feeling obligated to land on a “correct” critical position. Sedgwick uses Melanie Klein’s ideas of *positions* to emphasize “the flexible to-and-fro movement” that can underlie “paranoid and reparative critical *practices*” and enable scholars to take “changing and heterogeneous relational stances” to their objects of study.⁶⁴

My approach to niche LGBT media has changed over the course of this project. Newly-equipped with some critical theory in the first couple quarters of grad school, I was eager to write a blazing missive about why these films were bad and normative. As I learned more, read more, thought more, wrote more, and conversed more, I realized there were questions I could ask that, at this moment, would be more original and (hopefully) more interesting. Others’ writing inspired me to take a position of both curiosity and critique, even in the case of films that were so personally significant for me a decade ago. To frame his analysis of *Paris is Burning*, Lucas Hilderbrand acknowledges the challenges of “writing about a formative text,” and states his goal

⁶³ Sedgwick, 128, 147, 150-151.

⁶⁴ Sedgwick, 128, emphasis in original. To engage with Klein’s theories, Sedgwick draws on R. D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 2nd ed. (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1991).

to “treat *Paris* with love and rigor, to subject it to extended study without losing sight of its spirit.”⁶⁵ Love and rigor, skepticism and generosity, paranoia and reparation: these are binaries I find inspiring and productive.

Scope and Method

It should be noted that while Wolfe, Ariztical, TLA Releasing, and Here Media all identify themselves as LGBT companies, Strand does not; Strand’s public relationship to LGBT media has changed over the past 15 years, and the founder explained to me that they are not an LGBT company. Nonetheless, Strand is an important example for a couple reasons. Even though the company does not identify as LGBT, historically trades and press have identified them at least partly therewith, and my own experience indicates that people both inside and outside academia tend to associate them with LGBT media. This is not to mention that Strand founder Marcus Hu won the 1995 Frameline Award, which honors those who have “made a major contribution to LGBTQ representation in film, television, or the media arts.”⁶⁶ My second reason is that Strand’s disidentification with this label provides an especially valuable case study of how and why LGBT content attaches (or doesn’t attach) an LGBT identity to a text and a company. Strand is a company that at least attempts to dispel or weaken that centripetal force described above, an action that is instructive in its own right.

These five are not the only companies in the US focused on or associated with LGBT media, but I chose them based on both what I perceived to be their cultural significance and their relevance to the kind of analysis my project pursues. As such, it’s worth briefly explaining some

⁶⁵ Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*, Queer Film Classics (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013), 23.

⁶⁶ This is the same award that was given to Wolfe Video in 2010, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

of the companies I excluded. Two companies were logical to eliminate based on their limited impact: Jour de Fete, created when a Strand founder left to form his own company, operated for a relatively short time, and Breaking Glass Pictures, while proving to be a very prolific company, was only established in 2009 (by former TLA employees) and as such is still a relatively new distributor. I also chose to focus on companies that are still extant and active, unlike Picture This! and Water Bearer Films. The former folded in 2009, and the latter's films are now supposedly distributed through the recently-founded FilmRise, although their website does not seem to currently include Water Bearer titles.⁶⁷

Frameline's exclusion is the most likely to give readers pause.⁶⁸ Frameline is a well-known, hugely significant institution in LGBT media in the U.S. Perhaps best known for the Frameline Film Festival, the country's oldest LGBT film festival, this media arts nonprofit, also maintains a distribution catalog, among other activities. I chose not to include Frameline in this project based on the *kinds* of distribution and texts the company is involved with. This distributor operates as a nonprofit, and focuses on less commercial, "alternative" distribution; for example, several of Wolfe's titles like *Big Eden* (2001), *Were the World Mine* (2008), *A Marine Story* (2010), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), and *Naz & Maalik* (2015) have distribution through Frameline solely for educational sales. In fact, the Frameline staffer who runs distribution holds the title "Director of Distribution & Educational Programming," which to me emphasizes Frameline's particular distribution focus. The organization's distribution webpage also boasts "partnerships with universities, public libraries, film festivals, and community groups."⁶⁹ In

⁶⁷ Dave McNary, "FilmRise to Distribute Water Bearer's LGBT Movies," *Variety*, June 12, 2015.

⁶⁸ While he focuses on the festival aspect of the organization, Stuart Richards provides a history of Frameline in *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics, Framing Film Festivals* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 42-61.

⁶⁹ "About," *Frameline*, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.frameline.org/about>.

terms of Frameline's own titles, much of their catalog consists of shorts and documentaries. The companies this project considers certainly distribute these, but their focus is on commercial narrative features unlike Frameline's interests as a nonprofit.

This dissertation is largely an industrial history. I trace the development of niche LGBT media by analyzing distributors' institutional practice as sites of the definition, development, and exploitation of the LGBT media category. This project deprioritizes textual and representational analysis of the niche media itself. Instead, I attend to the industrial and discursive circumstances surrounding these media. While it is not my primary focus, I include textual analysis when it helps illustrate the broader ideas and distributor strategies that this dissertation tracks. In chapter one, for example, I consider correlations (and contrasts) between a film's LGBT content and its LGBT *categorization*, and in chapter three I examine how sexual content matches and builds a distributor's specific brand. The films and shows themselves are an important part of my understanding of the companies and I've watched hundreds of them, but as in Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning* discussed above, they are not my main research objects.

Similarly, my focus is on distribution rather than production or reception. I use company websites, catalogues, acquisition decisions, advertisements, and self-descriptions as the "texts" that can illuminate the industrial logics and nature of a media phenomenon. The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine has been an important tool for this kind of research. Because it captures and archives webpages only occasionally, it contains many gaps and peculiarities (though what archive doesn't?), but the materials available through this resource let me observe multiple manifestations of these distributors' websites over the course of, in some cases, more than fifteen years. This helps me understand the changes in how these companies have

understood themselves, their product, and LGBT media in general. For example, a website emphasizing a certain film, news story, or company development could indicate what moments or artifacts in a distributor's history held importance at any one time.

Trade, popular, and LGBT press have all been important for my research, both in the construction of company/industry histories and in uncovering popular ideas about LGBT media that have acted as historical and cultural contexts for these distributors throughout their history. Holt and Perren argue that sources like “trade publication writers and members of the popular press” provide indispensable data for media industries studies, and they encourage researchers to use such sources to get “a sense of the prominent discourses circulating among various stakeholders at given historical moments.”⁷⁰ For similar reasons, interviews are crucial to my project. The lion's share of interviews I use in my research come from publicly-available articles in a variety of LGBT- or media-focused press - the past fifteen years have provided the companies I study plenty of platforms to publicly situate themselves in the media landscape. In addition, I conducted my own interviews with the founders and leaders of (most of) the distributors I examine so I could both clarify what previous accounts have left out, and direct my interviewees to specific topics with which this dissertation grapples. I treat this human subject research as two kinds of data: as valuable primary historical research, and as discourses ripe for careful analysis of the strategies and assumptions at play in how subjects frame their companies' histories, practices, and futures. This method affords me both historical background on institutional practice as well as examples of how these subjects see themselves, the institutions, and their media operating in the larger context of queer history, culture, politics, and the media landscape.

⁷⁰ Holt and Perren, Introduction, 8

Considering the importance of ambivalence and generosity, my dual approach to interview data deserves some brief reflection. Caldwell in no uncertain terms advocates for human subject research and the insights it provides, but he advises against “deferring entirely to the local categories and aesthetic paradigms of producers, at least as final guarantors of authenticity or meaning...We should never lose sight of the fact that such statements are almost always offered from some perspectives of self interest, promotion, and spin.” He emphasizes that statements by media practitioners, especially those higher up on their individual “food chains,” are always “embedded within broader cultural commitments, economies, and industrial traditions that in turn inflect and transpose those very expressions.”⁷¹ Caldwell’s careful approach to analysis has been constitutive for me as a researcher, and I share his caution even while noting Sedgwick and Henderson’s advice to consciously situate critical interlocution among *other* ways of thinking as well. It’s not only possible but also productive to consider the particular contexts and investments a speaker has when producing discourse *alongside* genuinely looking to learn from what subjects say and potentially adjust theoretical frameworks or assumptions in response to their insights. Henderson calls her interview subjects “situated purveyors of discourses about art, media, and queerness,” and frames such discourses as “expressions in context, statements whose truth-value is neither in doubt nor transparent.” Rather than reading subjects’ statements against what she “knows,” as either evidence for her argument or a demonstration of a practitioner being intentionally evasive or obfuscating their *real* motive, Henderson aims to “witness the movement of their claims and counterclaims on the field of queer filmmaking and their attachments to social and professional imperatives,” which allows her, even briefly, to “exit

⁷¹ Caldwell, 14

familiar oppositions, rather than reproduce them.”⁷² Ultimately, Caldwell and Henderson employ similar approaches to human subject research, but frame things differently in response to the contexts and tendencies of their particular subfields, both of which I draw on for my own work.

Chapter Breakdown

The following chapters are structured around not the distribution companies individually but rather the common themes and questions that define their operation in this media niche. Instead of constantly revisiting how categorization works using each company’s particular relationship to certain labels as examples, I gathered this information into chapter one and considered what each company could contribute to our understanding of the topic. The constant appearance of political-progress rhetoric from these companies, and such rhetoric’s fascinating relationship to more capital-focused discourses and practices, encouraged me to shape chapter two around this micro-industry’s navigation of profit and politics. And the frequency with which queer people outside academia asked my expert opinion on why gay movies are “so bad” (along with my own complicated feelings towards them) convinced me that this question needed to be directly addressed in the third chapter. Structurally, the five companies’ individual histories unfold throughout the dissertation, invoked where they provide context for and help illustrate the broader topics my project addresses. At times I will discuss a company whose origins and history have not yet been fully explained yet, but each chapter provides the context necessary to understand these examples.

Chapter One examines the use of “LGBT” as a label, category, or even genre in the context of niche distribution. Although Wolfe Video and Ariztical Entertainment’s histories are

⁷² Henderson, 118

foregrounded, all five distributors are vital to understanding how this niche media circuit has informed and benefitted from the categorization of film by sexual identity. The chapter begins with Wolfe, which over the past couple of decades has deliberately contributed to the codification of “LGBT” as a category of media. Ariztical in its turn demonstrates how a film with LGBT content can benefit from this codification, and how a film’s paratexts help inform how media is categorized as LGBT. Strand Releasing and TLA Entertainment illustrate how and why distributors sometimes resist the label of “LGBT” and attempt to shift the popular or historical conceptions of what makes a “gay film.” Finally, Here Media complicates this categorization process by combining gay film with conventionally recognized genres.

Chapter Two considers the interplay between business and politics when a distributor’s industrial logic is grounded in LGBT identity. This topic is relevant to all the distributors this dissertation considers, but two companies in particular are particularly valuable as objects of analysis. This chapter gives significant space to Here Media, the company most inclined to big-business types of activities. A pre-history of the company provides a context for understanding the later vertical integration and conglomeration constitutive to the current structure and operations of Here Media. Besides providing a history of Here, this account also serves as a site for analyzing the precarious discursive relationship between LGBT politics and business. This relationship will be further explored through an analysis of Wolfe Video and its use of political and community obligations (particularly for lesbians) to encourage certain kinds of activity around and consumption of its product. Essentially, this chapter asks how companies sustain their politics with business, signify their business with politics, and marshal LGBT identity as a logic of labor and consumption for their employees and customers.

Chapter Three analyzes the complex relationship between distributor discourses around goodness, badness, pleasure, and sex. Of the companies this dissertation examines, Strand Releasing produces the most discussion about how LGBT media is evaluated and where it has fallen short of expectations, and the company uses this kind of discourse to differentiate itself from other distributors. Ariztical's titles, especially the *Eating Out* series, offer a counterexample wherein a film's "badness" can be more complex. Marketing and reception of this series suggests a text's badness may produce *political* goodness according to a rubric of representational parity and progress. Questions of sexual imagery, pornography, affect, and what LGBT viewers want, need, and deserve closely relate to evaluations of goodness and badness, and these distributors maintain different relationships to sexual representation (or "gratuity"). TLA Entertainment offers a useful case study: it has historically maintained a much closer relationship to porn than any of the other distributors, and in its current form privileges content offering (gay male) sexual titillation. Here Media also proves helpful for its large amount of explicit sexual content that is simultaneously presented for sexualized consumption and ridiculed as a cringe-worthy aspect of LGBT media. Both companies employ the idea of "guilty pleasures" in order to activate media in certain ways and to distance yet justify textual pleasure.

Chapter One

A Shelf of One's Own: Category and Genre in Niche LGBT Media

For a long time gay and lesbian movies were put in an actual category called “special interest” – with the likes of exercise and hunting videos. The gay genre was perceived as too small to be a real category or topic – too small to have its own place or enough consumers interested in it to call it a real genre. Now, gay film really is its own genre. GLBT films now have their own category, just as do those in horror, or adventure.

- Maria Lynn, Former President of Wolfe Video⁷³

There are two ways to dismiss gay film, [Richard Dyer] pronounced: one is to say, “Oh, it’s just a gay film,” while the other is to proclaim, “Oh, it’s a great film, it just happens to be gay.”

- B. Ruby Rich⁷⁴

Reviews, social media, and other means of nonacademic discourse debate and evaluate the category of LGBT media. On *The Straight Dope* online question-and-answer forum associated with the *Chicago Reader* alt-weekly, user “Lord Ashtar” instigated a 2005 conversation about what makes a film gay. This user “noticed there's a Gay/Lesbian genre. I thought, ‘Wat's up wit dat?’ So I checked it out. It seems to me that most of these movies would actually belong in other genres.” This user then recategorizes a handful of movies they found in this Netflix genre: *Philadelphia*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *Bound* as drama, and *Go* and *Notorious C.H.O.* (a Margaret Cho stand-up special) as comedy. The user closes by wondering why “any movie that has any sort of gay or lesbian relationship (or even a mention of one) goes in this genre” then asks if other forum users can explain Netflix’s choice. Responses vary widely:

⁷³ Maria Lynn, quoted in James van Maanen, “Wolfe Video Celebrates a Healthy 25th Anniversary; Q&A w/ President Maria Lynn,” *TrustMovies* (blog), August 22, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://trustmovies.blogspot.com/2010/08/wolfe-video-celebrates-healthy-25th.html>.

⁷⁴ B. Ruby Rich, “The New Queer Cinema: Director’s Cut,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press Books, 2013), 29.

some point out that digital categorization allowed for media to be tagged with *several* labels, some see it as pure marketing, some attribute it to the heterocentrism of most media and some LGBT viewers' desire to pinpoint the exceptions, and some criticize LGBTs for wanting to remain within narrow, LGBT-centric cultural worlds, "a very sad but true thing."⁷⁵

Far-right venues have also addressed the existence of this category and the politics underlying it. In a 2017 post on Godlike Productions, a bizarre conservative forum that seems at least partly designed for ironically-reactionary politics common with internet trolls, one user decried Netflix including an "LBGT MOVIES" category, which they saw as part of "the new normal" and the "Obozo effect." They worried that "even a dynamo like President Trump" will be unable to reverse the increasing social acceptance of LGBT people. They ask whether "Liberal Snowflake Favorites" will be the next category introduced, with another user suggesting the category "Relationship movies where the uncle is a raging pedo," which at least does follow the syntax of Netflix subcategories. In this comment thread, Netflix's organization and categorization practice is criticized as a method of indoctrination and normalization, with one commenter concerned that "they're trying to make the faggots look like they're normal and accepted."⁷⁶ While a lot of the site seems highly ironic in the style of notorious troll site 4chan, I read these comments as genuine. Less ambiguous is white nationalist forum Stormfront, which includes Netflix's category in a 2012 list of the ways that liberals push the gay agenda, unsurprisingly connecting it to a Jewish conspiracy to weaken the (heterosexual) white family. The category encouraged one forum user to close their account, although they admitted their

⁷⁵ Lord Ashtar, "I Don't Understand Why There's a Gay/Lesbian Film Section on Netflix." *The Straight Dope* (message board), March 4, 2005, accessed August 15, 2017, <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=305302>.

⁷⁶ "Now NETFLIX Has A New Category, LGBT Movies!" *Godlike Productions*, March 17, 2017, accessed August 15, 2017, <http://www.godlikeproductions.com/forum1/message3478686/pg1?disclaimer=1>.

hesitation because “it’s kind of hard to find movie rental service that doesn’t cater to the marxist/zionist will of the jewish media moguls.”⁷⁷

In 1998, film critic Dustin Putman wrote about *Wild Reeds* (1994) on his personal film review website. Addressing the film’s LGBT content, he states that “regardless of what the film is about, it is not a ‘gay’ film, and the film is far too complex for it to be labeled such a thing.” The film is instead “about the uncertainties and insecurities of growing up, and the picture understands and cares about the characters so much that the audience can’t help but do the same thing.”⁷⁸ And finally, in 2010, YouTube user “MADWORLD1427” uploaded a homemade music video that placed footage from *The Rules of Attraction* (2002) over a cover of R.E.M.’s 1991 single “Losing My Religion,” performed here by Colton Ford, a former gay porn actor who began releasing music in 2008. The uploader’s chosen footage includes the variety of sexual interactions in the film, homo and hetero, which prompted commenter “AmyLeeEvan94” to ask, “is this a gay movie ?” MADWORLD1427 responded, “it has a gay character, but has many straight characters too, it is just a movie.”⁷⁹

This mix of intentionally oddball, and sometimes horrifying, examples of public, casual discussion of LGBT categorization and its effects show some of the “lay theorizing” that has long circulated on the topic. In these examples, we see consideration of the political effects of such a category, the various reasons a platform like Netflix would employ it, and the overall

⁷⁷ Pete527, “Why Are Liberals Pushing the Gay Agenda so Hard?” *Stormfront* (forum), March 3, 2012, accessed August 15, 2017, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t870146/>.

⁷⁸ Dustin Putman, “Wild Reeds (1994).” *The Film File*, 1998, accessed December 2, 2017, http://www.thefilmfile.com/reviews/w/94_wildreeds.htm.

⁷⁹ MADWORLD1427, “THE RULES OF ATTRACTION (2002) ‘COLTON FORD’” (music video), July 12, 2010, accessed August 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUa3Wywf8E0>.

complexities of attaching meaning to a text. Such theorizing often entails a counter-impulse to *detach* any such meaning to rescue a text from the ghettoization often imputed to this category.

Companies that not only benefit from but also cultivate this category include LGBT niche distributors. The companies considered in this dissertation have different specializations and corporate identities – Wolfe, for example, is known for carrying more lesbian-focused titles than many companies, and Strand is known for foreign and arthouse content - but their existence is mostly rooted in the very concept of “LGBT media,” a concept which entails a whole industrial logic, which I track in my dissertation. Strand Releasing is the partial outlier here, which I’ll address in a following section.

Popular LGBT media distribution becomes a context in which a wide variety of texts are gathered according to claims or assumptions about their LGBTness. Then they are accordingly marketed towards a narrowly-conceived niche audience. Rather than simply providing an efficient label that describes some essential nature of a text, this practice of categorizing media as “LGBT” is a complex, highly-contestable, and historically-contingent process. By its existence and use, the LGBT label enables specific production and reception practices that themselves reify this same categorizing logic.

As detailed in the introduction, scholarly work on queer media has grappled for decades with this question of how we come to understand and describe a film as “LGBT” or “gay” or “queer,” with many of the past two decades’ large-scale studies on LGBT/queer media defining their objects as LGBT based on textual form and content, authorship, and spectatorship. Keeping these helpful approaches in mind, I’d like to expand this analysis of by thinking about how LGBTness is defined by industrial practice around a text. As a part of understanding these texts’ “LGBTness” through the lens of industrial practice, I want to consider the often-deliberate work

involved in labeling media as LGBT. This chapter analyzes how careful choices in description, categorization, marketing, and exhibition help construct a text's identity, specifically within the context of these niche distributors. To do so, I will examine materials like company websites, video store shelving strategies, cover art, promotional press coverage, festival programming, and trailers.

Niche marketing and branding practice are often intimately related, as a company can define its image according to the narrow audience it hopes to attract. Catherine Johnson explores this connection in *Branding Television*, where she argues that television has a unique relationship to branding because of its ability to brand not just specific products (i.e. shows) but also channels, which can develop brand identities of their own that imply viewer interest not according to the specifics of separate shows, but rather based on assumptions about the channel as a whole.⁸⁰ Johnson uses Fox, MTV, and HBO as examples of networks that sold themselves according to an overall network aesthetic. Their different specializations suggested that whatever shows they carry would be of interest to their targeted audiences. She cites research on Fox viewers that claims audience members would say "Let's watch Fox" without thinking of a specific program – they assumed that whatever was on Fox at the moment was something they would want to watch.

Johnson's overall theory of branding is vital to my approach to how LGBT media is categorized. In the same way that Fox could use branding to establish its network identity, and draw specific audience segments based on this identity instead of individual shows, these distribution companies have established "LGBT" as their institutional brands. This branding suggests that individual texts they carry are identifiably LGBT and of interest to LGBT viewers.

⁸⁰ Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 15-36.

To be sure, most of the holdings of a company like this will probably share some textual features like LGBT characters and same-gender intimacy, but this institutional branding functions to imply two things: one, a collective, often flattening identity to a body of diverse texts that supersedes other kinds of categorization; and two, the consequent draw of all of the company's texts for any of its targeted viewers. As an example, John Waters has called Strand "the Grove Press of the millennium...I'm a satisfied Strand customer. They make movies I want to see."⁸¹ Referencing the New York-based publisher famous for publishing avant-garde and countercultural literature, Waters frames Strand as an umbrella company whose titles, which vary in origin, form, and content, he trusts he will enjoy.

To take Johnson's theorization one step further, it is even productive to conceive of LGBT itself as a sort of conceptual brand. This brand transcends specific distribution companies or festivals to provide the most encompassing construct possible. At this point, the way that LGBT is popularly framed and discussed often resembles genre, but while conventional genres like horror or westerns are for the most part organized around certain formal, semantic, and narrative features, LGBT represents an ambiguous categorization perhaps based on the sexuality / gender identity of characters in the film or perhaps based on imagined appeal of the text for specific audiences.

Thinking about genre alongside these niche LGBT distributors introduces a new set of complications that should be addressed. My goal here is not so much to argue that LGBT need be enshrined by media academia as a capital-G "Genre"; I am equally content with the term "category." However due to the insights it offers about categorization logic and practice, some genre theory is quite helpful in thinking through the relationship between industries, categories,

⁸¹ John Waters, quoted in Cliff Rothman, "Indie Hit-Makers Blazed Trail That Keeps Them on the Edge," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1999.

media, and audiences. The trend in contemporary writing on genre is to complicate easy understandings of how genres and their corpuses are composed, which correlates with my interest in questioning how LGBT has come to be understood as a category. For instance, Geoff King wants to diversify the criteria by which genres are defined. He offers subject matter (“the western, science fiction, the biopic”) and intended audience responses (“horror, comedy, the weepie”) as different logics by which to organize genres. While we might question some of his generic examples - classifying the western by subject matter, for example, ignores the narrative/thematic analysis usually associated with the genre - King’s most important assertion here is that “there is no single essence of what constitutes a genre. Genre labels are flags of convenience more than markers of entirely distinct territories.”⁸²

Complicating the definitional criteria for genre is an important first step, but as evidenced by his tidy categorization of genres, here King is still simplifying generic operation. While he suggests different criteria by which to understand genre, he still identifies the genres above with just one criterion each. In response, Rick Altman would argue that genre simultaneously takes place in “a multiplicity of locations.”⁸³ He critiques “genre theoreticians [who] invariably adopt an exclusionary discourse, championing either the author(s) or the text(s) or the audience or generic institutions as genre’s primary location.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Steve Neale describes genre as “a multi-dimensional phenomenon that encompasses...systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and groups or corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all.”⁸⁵

⁸² Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 142.

⁸³ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 84.

⁸⁴ Altman, 85.

⁸⁵ Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, Sightlines (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

There are a few reasons why it is helpful to bring a complex understanding of genre into this discussion of LGBT niche media. As alluded to above, LGBT is treated like a genre by various branches of media industries: for example, streaming video platforms like Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon all list different iterations of the term alongside more conventional genres like horror, comedy, and thriller. Even in cases where the comparison to genre is not as explicit, LGBT can function industrially in ways similar to how genre has been theorized. For example, Geoff King states that

the attraction of genre to the industry is closely linked to its presumed appeal to viewers....Genres are constituted not just by bodies of films but also by the established expectations of viewers. A sense of genre identity might be one of the factors that helps us decide what films to see.⁸⁶

As King's last comment suggests, viewers themselves often come at LGBT like a genre. Steven Neale considers how genre discourse actually informs not just the description of a film, but the actual viewing process. He argues that genres "consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process."⁸⁷ A viewers' conception of a film as "definably" LGBT affects how they use and read and signify it, which can be informed by paratexts like advertising, venue, and press coverage.

For my purposes of thinking about genre and niche media industry, Rick Altman also proves helpful. One of the four main functions of genre he identifies is as *label*, (alongside *blueprint*, *structure*, and *contract*). In this function genre provides "the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors."⁸⁸ Naturally I would

⁸⁶ King, 119.

⁸⁷ Neale, 27.

⁸⁸ Altman, 14.

relate this to the distributors this dissertation features, whose businesses are based on LGBTness as a central organizing logic to their acquisition and marketing decisions.

Names and labels are important; as Steve Neale says, “their existence is one of the hallmarks of a genre, one of the signs of its institutional and social existence.”⁸⁹ But the logic of how an object is grouped and then accordingly labeled is not self-evident, and is itself largely based on what aspect of the object the categorizer is choosing to prioritize. To this point, in *Film/Genre*, Altman tells an extended story about shopping for and storing nuts to illustrate the context-dependent nature of categorization. He found that “each new location brings out a differing aspect of nuts: their size, weight, composition, growth patterns, packaging, perishability, orthography, social functions, and so forth.”⁹⁰ Instead of containing “a single common characteristic defining all nuts,” some unique and essential “nutness”, the objects labeled as “nuts” are diverse and exhibit characteristics also found in other objects not labeled as “nuts.” Different characteristics are activated in different locations: their edibility placed nuts in a grocery store; their oiliness placed them in on a shelf next to cooking oils; their intended use placed them either next to baking supplies or other snacks in Altman’s pantry; their packaging sizes placed them among similarly-sized and -shaped cans and jars in a grocery store warehouse; and their growth patterns placed different “nuts” in different scientific classifications.

This exploration of categorization demonstrates the artificiality and context-specificity of how objects are gathered, classified, and labeled. In this vein, Altman draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of the variety of activities categorized under the label of “games,” stating that “the emphasis on naming reminds us that the very notion of games is a social construction,

⁸⁹ Neale, 36.

⁹⁰ Altman, 97.

with authors and purposes.”⁹¹ Instead of “games” we could think of the idea of LGBT media as a social construction. Films that are categorized as LGBT could also be organized according to other logics, like the conventional genres they often resemble such as romantic comedies or coming of age films, or modes like documentary or short films. But in the context of the LGBT niche, their “LGBTness” is foregrounded as their first level of identification, the primary categorization logic to which everything else is secondary.

Using terms like *socially-constructed* and *artificial* here is indeed meant to denaturalize categorization practice and expose its partial arbitrariness. However it is not meant to suggest that the process is random, accidental, or without order. To the contrary, there is a logic undergirding the organization of media under the label or genre of “LGBT,” a fact that is increasingly easy to forget as more and more media is categorized as such and the category becomes increasingly “naturalized.” Although working with much more entrenched categories, Altman has a similar goal when he deconstructs and historicizes the musical, western, and biopic genres by examining production choices, exhibition practice, the use of labels, and criticism and scholarship.⁹² He hypothesizes that genres are “heavily dependent on the purposes of those who name, package, store, serve or consume them.”⁹³ Here he is still referencing his nut analogy, but his choice of terms also helpfully draw attention to the often less-noted sites at which genre is produced like distribution, marketing, and exhibition.

Accordingly, the task of this chapter is to examine how LGBT categorization works in the distribution context of packaging, storing, and serving - i.e., how “LGBT” as a label,

⁹¹ Altman 98. Here he is drawing from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1953).

⁹² Altman, 30-48.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

category, or genre is part of how distributors brand themselves and sell their films. Though this chapter will foreground Wolfe Video and Ariztical Entertainment's histories, all five distributors are vital to understanding how this niche media circuit has informed and benefitted from the definition of film by sexual identity. The first section will examine the development and use of this label. I will begin with Wolfe Video, which over the past couple of decades recognized the power of "LGBT" as a recognizable, discrete category, and worked very deliberately to popularize and enact this product identity. Then I follow how Ariztical Entertainment, by virtue of this category's existence, could gather meaning and attention around the limited LGBT content in a film, thereby enacting a set of promotional practices predicated on the film being understood as LGBT. The second section will consider the intentional disavowal or complication of this category by Strand Releasing and TLA Entertainment, which demonstrate the variability or contingency of "LGBT" as a category. Strand, a company with longstanding ambivalence towards this label, often wants to avoid being "pigeonholed" as LGBT and prefers to create alternate centers of gravity for meaning such as auteurism, foreignness, or arthouse prestige. Similarly, TLA Entertainment's film festival in Philadelphia provides an example of curatorial and discursive practices troubling the categorization of texts with LGBT content, in this case to a political end of "de-ghettoizing" what might, in some contexts, be understood as LGBT films. And the third and final section will follow the complicated case of Here Media's production and distribution of (LGBT) genre films, which further calls into question what defines a film as LGBT, and how slight differences in textual content can encourage different textual identities and create different cultural functions for a film.

“This Simple But Important Distinction”: Mainstreaming, Categorizing, and Promoting Film as LGBT

We started putting our logo on the cover of all our DVD boxes well before most companies did this.... But we thought it [was] important to do this – sort of in the way that seeing the American Heart Association logo on a box of fat-free brownies conveys something to the consumer. So the Wolfe logo conveys something, too. It says, This is a gay movie, and because Wolfe knows about this market, you can trust us to bring you something worthwhile.

- Maria Lynn, President of Wolfe Video⁹⁴

Company History: Wolfe Video

First, it is helpful to understand a history of Wolfe Video’s early days; here I’ll discuss how the company began and how it became a significant player in the LGBT media landscape. After growing up in Menlo Park, a town in the Bay Area of California, Kathy Wolfe attended San Jose State University for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in art. To help fund her final years of school, she co-founded a graphics and advertising company called Arrow Graphics with her friend Bill Plate, a business student. Wolfe finished her graduate degree in 1972, moved to New Almaden (near San Jose) in 1974, and by the early 1980s had developed Arrow Graphics into a highly successful company with 150 employees in 13 offices nationwide.

In 1979, Wolfe had seen a screening of *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977) at Frameline, which she claims as her inspiration to start doing her own documentation of lesbian and feminist culture.⁹⁵ In the early 80s, at the same time that Arrow Graphics was becoming a multi-million dollar business, Wolfe was videographing Pride parades, lesbian vacation cruises, and concerts by woman musicians. When De Anza College in Cupertino (about 25 miles northwest of New Almaden) built a public access television studio on campus while Wolfe was

⁹⁴ Maria Lynn, quoted in van Maanen, “Wolfe Video Celebrates.”

⁹⁵ Chloe Veltman, “Moving Gay Films into the Mainstream,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2010.

running Arrow Graphics, she got involved. She produced a home-improvement series featuring female contractors called *Fix It Now*, and soon she was creating her own work, such as *West Coast Crones: A Glimpse into the Lives of Nine Old Lesbians*, a short documentary about ageism and sexism. After a few years of video production and collaboration, Wolfe had accumulated several titles, and through De Anza's public access television channel she had even begun to attract the interest of viewers who wanted to buy her work. In 1985, Wolfe applied for a business license and officially established Wolfe Video as a distribution company.

Meanwhile, in spite of Arrow Graphics' success, Wolfe found her work there unsatisfying; she describes it as "meaningless....I was promoting products that I didn't believe in, and breaking my neck for goals that didn't make sense."⁹⁶ At the same time, in the lesbian community she identified "a subculture that was starved of images of itself" where she saw "an opportunity to make a difference."⁹⁷ After two years of running both companies, Wolfe sold her stake in Arrow Graphics in 1987 in order to focus exclusively on Wolfe Video.

In the company's early days, Wolfe advertised her titles by buying mailing lists of gay and lesbian bookstores across the U.S. and sending hundreds of envelopes hand-stuffed with her catalogue, the earliest of which consisted of a single page with less than a dozen titles. As Wolfe continued building her mailing list, bookstore owners would sometimes ask whether she could get them some other title they thought would sell (for example, a k.d. lang concert video). Accordingly, Wolfe Video's catalogue continued to expand both with work Wolfe was involved in making and with others' films that she acquired.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Kathy Wolfe, quoted in Monica Levin, "Wolfe Video: Women of Vision Who Are Visible, Viable, and Victorious," *Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, September 1994.

⁹⁷ Veltman, "Moving Gay Films."

⁹⁸ Peter Bowen, "Wolfe @ 25," *Filmmaker - The Magazine of Independent Film* 19, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 70.

At this time Wolfe Video was not yet turning a profit, but during the early 90s the company established both its financial viability and its corporate profile. In 1991, Wolfe hired her first full-time employee, Jennifer Bergman, who helped in the company's handling of *Claire of the Moon* (1991). In the same year, Wolfe Video served as the official videographer for the National Lesbian Conference in Atlanta, a meeting of about 3,000 women with the goal of establishing a national agenda specific to lesbians (as opposed to the straight-women or gay-male focus of many women's and queer advocacy groups). While Wolfe Video's involvement with the conference increased the company's national prominence (sales rose significantly that year), the next two years would prove definitive for the company. In 1992, Wolfe Video published a much fuller catalog ("with staples in it!" Wolfe remarks) listing sixty titles.⁹⁹ The next year, Wolfe hired Silicon Valley veteran Maria Lynn as vice president of distribution (later to become company president in 2002), and with Lynn's help, Wolfe negotiated a deal with actress and comedian Lily Tomlin to distribute her comedy video collection, including the feature *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1991), the film that helped Wolfe Video to begin crossing over to mainstream markets.¹⁰⁰ At the time Tomlin was distributing videos out of her garage and had placed an ad on a women's-issues mailing list because, according to Wolfe, the actress "really liked the idea of having a women's company with a personal touch distribute her videos."¹⁰¹

After the distribution deal was struck but before the November release of the videos, the Wolfe Video booth at the 1993 Video Software Dealers Association featured a personal

⁹⁹ Levin, "Wolfe Video."

¹⁰⁰ Veltman, "Moving Gay Films."

¹⁰¹ Levin, "Wolfe Video"; van Maanen, "Wolfe Video Celebrates"; Razzano, "Wolfe Video Celebrates 25 Years."

appearance by Tomlin. Her presence earned the booth very long lines of excited fans as well as coverage by CNN and Entertainment Tonight.¹⁰² Wolfe Video's very visible profile at this event and its acquisition of the exclusive distribution rights to Tomlin's videos changed the course of the company. "It allowed us to get into distribution," Lynn says. "The Tomlin videos gave us credibility in the mainstream and helped launch a new era of the company." According to Lynn, sales tripled in 1993.¹⁰³

Wolfe Video's growth at this time set the stage for the company to contribute directly and deliberately to LGBT media as a discrete category. "Mainstreaming" was a key idea in this process, as will be demonstrated below. The next section will explore the company's investment in and application of its mainstreaming strategy, and trace its relationship to the building of a conceptual space for LGBT media in brick-and-mortar stores, in digital venues, and in the contemporary mediascape in general.

Making Shelf Space

The idea of mainstreaming has been central to much of Wolfe Video's work since the mid-1990s, and is an important element in an analysis of the company's distribution strategies. The term itself repeatedly occurs in journalists' coverage of the company and discourse by the company itself. The 2004 version of the company's mission statement claimed that due to their years of distributing gay and lesbian films, the staff at Wolfe Video are "experts in mainstreaming gay entertainment nationwide," as well as being experienced in "provid[ing]

¹⁰² Levin, "Wolfe Video."

¹⁰³ Razzano, "Wolfe Video Celebrates 25 Years"; Dennis Hunt, "Wolfe's Niche: Female-Oriented Videos," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1994.

special outreach and marketing to assist mainstream companies in accessing the gay market.”¹⁰⁴ This language lasted until at least 2014, when Wolfe Video declared itself “the leader in mainstreaming films with gay content....Servicing our longstanding mainstream relationships as well as the LGBT marketplace makes us truly unique.”¹⁰⁵ This “leader in mainstreaming films with gay content” descriptor was important enough to appear twice on the 2014 iteration of the site, once in the “About Us” and once in the description of the work of Maria Lynn, then president of Wolfe Video. This idea also recurs in articles and interviews. In some cases it is clear the authors are simply pulling or paraphrasing this language from Wolfe Video’s own copy. Other cases demonstrate more generally the cultural presence of this idea about Wolfe Video’s work, as in a *San Jose Mercury News* article that quotes Helen Grieco of the California chapter of the National Organization for Women stating that Kathy Wolfe “single-handedly” mainstreamed LGBT media.¹⁰⁶

Part of this mainstreaming work was getting LGBT content into more visible venues. By summer of 1994, Wolfe Video’s catalog consisted of hundreds of titles and reached over 100,000 customers annually.¹⁰⁷ While Wolfe Video had originally been using gay and lesbian bookstores as one of its main ways to get product to consumers, by 1994 mainstream stores like Tower Records and Blockbuster began carrying its videos as well. In the following years, Wolfe Video collaborated directly with chains like Virgin Megastore and Hollywood Video to set up gay and

¹⁰⁴ “About Wolfe,” *WolfeVideo.com*, April 22, 2004 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040422181007/http://www.wolfevideo.com/about.asp>.

¹⁰⁵ “About Wolfe,” *WolfeVideo.com*, December 4, 2014 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20141204045909/www.wolfevideo.com/about-wolfe/>.

¹⁰⁶ Mark De La Vina, “Video Pioneer: Gay, Lesbian Buyers Benefit from Distributor’s Venture,” *San Jose Mercury News*, May 27, 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Levin, “Wolfe Video.”

lesbian sections in-store.¹⁰⁸ But this “mainstreaming” process was not without its obstacles – according to Wolfe, some store owners claimed to not have gay and lesbian customers, were unable to comprehend the very idea of gay and lesbian film, or simply assumed she was distributing pornography, forcing her to repeatedly explain the films and their market in the company’s earlier days.¹⁰⁹

Lynn frames Wolfe Video’s ability to have these kinds of conversations and to manage LGBT titles in wider mainstream markets as a result of the company’s history of interacting with its customers via mail-order catalogs; she says it was a place to “market-test every title that comes out.”¹¹⁰ For example, during the first season of the US version of *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) Wolfe Video approached Showtime with a proposal to distribute the show on DVD. “We get tons of feedback and letters everyday,” Lynne explained to Showtime, “Let us help you do it.”¹¹¹ This expertise has helped Wolfe Video with video stores considering setting up a gay and lesbian section: Wolfe Video could both sell the *idea* of having the section by explaining the profit potential in tapping into this demographic, and then recommend how to actually curate and advertise the section based on its experience with consumers.

Placing DVDs (and previously video cassettes) into stores was one of the ways Wolfe Video worked to mainstream LGBT media. Of course this placement makes kind of product easier for LGBT viewers to find, but there is also the chance that if these movies are on the

¹⁰⁸ Hunt, “Wolfe’s Niche”; Richard Scheinin, “Wolfe Video of San Jose, North America’s Largest Exclusive Distributor of Lesbian and Gay Films, Celebrates 25th Year,” *San Jose Mercury News*, June 12, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ De La Vina, “Video Pioneer.”

¹¹⁰ Maria Lynn, quoted in Diane Anderson-Minshall, “Wolfe Video: Ahead of the Pack,” *Curve*, 2005, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.curvemag.com/Curve-Magazine/Web-Articles-2008/Wolfe-Video-Ahead-of-the-Pack>. Due to website changes the original publication date is unclear, but in an email to me the author recalled the publication year as 2005.

¹¹¹ Lynn, quoted in Stuart Levine, “Wolfe Keeps Market at Bay,” *Daily Variety*, March 26, 2004.

shelves of a video store, straight consumers might pick one up and watch an LGBT-themed story they might otherwise not see. Kathy Wolfe sees this kind of distribution as a form of advocacy her films are performing. For example, in her acceptance speech when receiving the Frameline Award on behalf of Wolfe Video in 2010, she expressed her pride in “the way that we’ve made images of our lives visible and accessible to the world at large.”¹¹² Here she suggests that besides the positive effects of identification and validation for LGBT viewers that her company’s media can provide, these films can also work to change mainstream perceptions of LGBT people. As an example she offers the PG-rated *Big Eden*, an unusual rating for gay-themed movies. Wolfe says “you could show this movie to a friend or your family or your mother, and they’d get it....It’s the kind of movie that really helped a lot of people.”¹¹³ In a 2010 interview on the San Francisco ABC affiliate, she proposed that Wolfe Video’s films can have significant impact on people with anti-gay beliefs: “it could make a huge difference” in how those resistant to gay politics understand and evaluate LGBT people.¹¹⁴

Establishing “LGBT” as a concrete, discrete category of media is also a way of “mainstreaming” by setting up a reliable and repeatable circuit for the distribution and exhibition

¹¹² Wolfe, “Frameline Award presentation to Wolfe Video.”

¹¹³ Scheinin, “Wolfe Video of San Jose.”

¹¹⁴ Wolfe, “Profiles of Excellence” (ABC7 News video), July 2010, accessed June 4, 2014, originally at http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=resources/lifestyle_community/community&id=7541810. Now unavailable but transcribed by the author. Communications research has demonstrated how media representations of LGBT people affect (straight) viewers, such as Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke et al., “Remembering Gay/Lesbian Media Characters,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 19–34; Marina Levina, Craig R. Waldo, and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “We’re Here, We’re Queer, We’re on TV: The Effects of Visual Media on Heterosexuals’ Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 30, no. 4 (April 1, 2000): 738–58; and Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? Will & Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 4 (2006): 15–37. These studies focus specifically on television rather than film (partly because parasocial contact is based on repeated “interaction” with a character over a period of time), but their lessons are also applicable to film. Additionally, of note is the gay community’s reaction to films like *Cruising* (1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which were accused of presenting gay men as dangerous and pathological. This demonstrates, at least, the *perceived* effects of LGBT film representation on society.

of these texts. The existence of a category of LGBT media informs the industrial logic of financing and producing LGBT films. Having a built-in point of engagement with customers, such as the LGBT section of a video store or website, justifies the production of these texts with the expectation that they can be funneled directly to an eager market through well-established venues. Citing a niche LGBT audience is one thing; being able to invoke the existence of guaranteed shelving space or search returns based on a film being categorized as LGBT is an additionally valuable selling point when filmmakers are attempting to gather support for the production of their films.

LGBT as a media category or identity can also activate a promotional circuit. A text being “marked” as LGBT draws attention in a variety of venues. LGBT blogs like *Queerty*, *NewNowNext*, *Autostraddle*, *Towleroad*, and *Huffington Post Gay Voices* are likely to cover media with any potential interest to LGBT consumers, and are sometimes even directly connected to the media producers: for example, *NewNowNext* (previously *The Backlot*, and *AfterElton* before that) is owned by Viacom, the parent company of Logo, and *Queerty* offers integrated advertising for LGBT products, such as when HBO paid the blog to overtly and covertly promote its gay-focused show *Looking* (2014-2015). Here Media also owns *The Advocate*, *Out*, and *Pride* (a sort of millennial-focused, queer *Buzzfeed*), which gives Here Media ample opportunity to cross-promote its product. Whether directly sponsored by or connected to the media’s producers or not, LGBT media has a disproportionately high chance of securing coverage in venues with highly-interested audiences who are actively pursuing certain kinds of information. According to consumer research in 2017, 71% of LGBT consumers (especially

millennials) reported recently visiting LGBT-specific websites and blogs.¹¹⁵ Essentially, because of the relatively small amount of LGBT media and its “over-coverage” in niche venues, promotion for LGBT product is more likely to get in front of the eyes of its intended audience. This form of coverage also encourages LGBTs to directly fund content - Kickstarter campaigns for this kind of media are often publicized in these LGBT press venues and seen by those the Kickstarter is most eager to court.

April 2012 saw a particularly significant success of Wolfe Video’s mainstreaming strategy when digital media platform Hulu introduced “Gay and Lesbian” as a new “genre category” alongside its existing labels like “Action & Adventure” and “Horror & Suspense.”¹¹⁶ This development resulted from a project spearheaded by Wolfe Video over several months to convince digital distribution platforms to employ “LGBT” (or a variation on the term) as a media categorization. In fact, according to Lynn and Wolfe in an interview with me, Hulu had requested the Wolfe Video catalog for streaming, and the distributor made a deal that Hulu needed to first create an LGBT section, which Wolfe Video then ended up curating for them due to the company expertise.

In a Huffington Post article and in her interview with me, Wolfe explicitly connects the Hulu deal to her work convincing and helping brick-and-mortar video retailers to include gay and lesbian sections on their shelves in the 1990s.¹¹⁷ In a GLAAD blog post, Wolfe Video’s

¹¹⁵ CMI’s *11th Annual LGBT Community Survey, USA Report* (San Francisco: Community Marketing, Inc, July 2017), 42, accessed December 7, 2017, http://www.communitymarketinginc.com/documents/temp/CMI-11th_LGBT_Community_Survey_US_Profile.pdf.

¹¹⁶ Griffin Gmelich, “Hulu Introduces Gay and Lesbian Genre,” *Hulu Blog*, April 25, 2012, April 28, 2012 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20120428181148/http://blog.hulu.com/2012/04/25/hulu-introduces-gay-and-lesbian-genre-category/>.

¹¹⁷ Kathy Wolfe, “The New New Queer Cinema,” *Huffington Post*, April 25, 2012, accessed June 4, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathy-wolfe/lgbt-films_b_1452337.html.

Executive Vice President Linda Voutour appeals to this same history: “Wolfe has been working with content providers and retailers for more than twenty years on this simple but important distinction” of categorizing media as LGBT.¹¹⁸ These articles and posts about Hulu’s announcement also consistently discuss the political importance of this category. Wolfe focuses on its benefits for newly-out LGBT youth and LGBT people living in an area where they do not have local access to LGBT media, which she refers to as a “sociocultural lifeline” for these people. The Human Rights Campaign blog emphasizes the importance of LGBT media characters to LGBT youth, borrowing lines from Wolfe’s *Huffington Post* article. In the GLAAD post Voutour describes Hulu’s move as “a vitally important reflection of LGBT equality in our culture,” and then-president of GLAAD Herndon Graddick states that “making such groundbreaking and popular LGBT films available and accessible to a wider audience can have a tremendous impact on LGBT people longing to see relatable stories onscreen.”¹¹⁹

To more fully understand the political symbolism inherent in this category, it is worth a slight detour to categorization practice beyond Wolfe’s work. Apple’s use of categories on the iTunes Store has invited similar discourse as the Wolfe/Hulu announcement above. In June 2014 when Apple first introduced its specially-curated LGBT section, one tech blogger for *RazorianFly* described it as a response to “the LGBT community [expressing] the need for their beliefs, and points-of views, to be better translated through the content offered on iTunes.” Specifically, he sees this new *category* as more significant than the mere addition of LGBT *content* to the iTunes Store when he describes this as Apple’s “biggest yet” response to this

¹¹⁸ Linda Voutour, quoted in Seth Adam, “Hulu announces new LGBT genre category,” *GLAAD*, April 25, 2012, accessed June 4, 2014, <https://www.glaad.org/blog/hulu-announces-new-lgbt-genre-category>.

¹¹⁹ Wolfe, “The New New Queer Cinema”; Maureen McCarty, “Hulu, YouTube Add LGBT Categories,” HRC Blog, April 26, 2012, January 16, 2013 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130116125429/http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/hulu-youtube-add-lgbt-categories.>; Adam, “Hulu Announces.”

need.¹²⁰ In 2015, *CNET* reported on the new iTunes category and related it both to nationwide marriage equality (ruled on by the Supreme Court on June 26, the same day the iTunes section was released) and to Apple's recent spate of publicity around LGBT issues, from Tim Cook's coming out to Apple employees' participation in the San Francisco Pride parade.¹²¹ Apple also makes these connections in its own copy, describing the yearly Pride celebration as a commemoration of "the struggle for public visibility, cultural acceptance, and legal equality," which Apple wants to celebrate by curating "a selection of movies, music, TV shows, apps and more - all reflecting the broad and diverse spectrum of LGBT pride."¹²²

LGBT press on the *lack* of a dedicated category is as instructive as the celebrations of political progress cited above. In a 2008 article, gay media blog *AfterElton* had reviewed Hulu in the week following the platform's official launch, specifically asking "What's Gay on Hulu?" Written long before Wolfe's creation of the Gay & Lesbian category, the article praises Hulu's video quality and variety of content but questions whether gay viewers will find the site especially useful - not because of a lack of gay-interest content necessarily, but rather a poor infrastructure for making such content accessible and findable. Remarking on the lack of "Gay and Lesbian" as a genre and the poor results from a search for "gay," *AfterElton* concludes that "the site isn't exactly organized in a way to effectively present gay or gay-interest material."¹²³ Thus, the lack of a category here is an issue for this gay blog.

¹²⁰ Arron Hirst, "Apple Launches LGBT Movies/TV Section on iTunes," *RAZMAG* (blog), June 10, 2014, accessed December 7, 2014, <http://razorianfly.com/2014/06/10/apple-launches-lgbt-moviestv-section-on-itunes/>

¹²¹ Anthony Domanico, "As Pride Soars, Apple Adds LGBT Featured Section to the App Store," *CNET* (blog), June 26, 2015, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.cnet.com/news/apple-adds-lgbt-featured-section-to-the-app-store/>

¹²² Apple promotional copy, quoted in Karissa Bell, "Apple Showcases LGBT Pride in Special Section of iTunes," *Mashable*, June 26, 2015, accessed December 10, 2017, <http://mashable.com/2015/06/26/apple-ituned-lgbt-pride/>.

¹²³ "What's Gay on Hulu?," *AfterElton* (blog), March 21, 2008, no longer available but transcribed by the author.

In 2010, a *Queerty* article titled “Why Are Apple + Netflix Hiding Gay Movies from Users?” reported on the Netflix app’s failure to list a “Gay/Lesbian” category on Apple devices.¹²⁴ The *Queerty* article addresses a Fox News report that deemed these claims inaccurate and included as proof a screenshot of the film *Newcastle* on the Apple TV interface, where its description included the category “Gay & Lesbian.” The Fox photo caption admits that “the Gay and Lesbian film category doesn’t show up on Apple TV’s main screen,” but “this doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”¹²⁵ *Queerty* concedes the point, but emphasizes that the Fox reporter most likely searched for that specific film - which was specifically named in the Apple forum post that incited the controversy - and then from there navigated backwards to the Gay & Lesbian category, a distinction that this *Queerty* reporter finds crucial enough to write about. What matters to this writer is that the *category* is not there. It bears mentioning that among search terms like “Apple” and “movies,” this *Queerty* article is also tagged with “censorship,” leveling a particularly damning critique at the situation.

Similarly, upon the 2012 launch of Netflix on the Xbox and Apple devices in the UK, Britain-based gay news site *PinkNews* reported that the Gay & Lesbian category that is present on the Netflix website was missing from the front page of the apps, “making it harder to find gay content.”¹²⁶ The article also points out that searching a term like “gay” does not return the “films with clear gay themes” that are available on the app. Apparently this was also true with other

¹²⁴ Ryan Tedder, “Why Are Apple + Netflix Hiding Gay Movies From Users?” *Queerty* (blog), October 5, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.queerty.com/why-are-apple-netflix-hiding-gay-movies-from-users-20101005>.

¹²⁵ Clayton Morris, “No Gay and Lesbian Category on Apple TV’s Netflix? Not So Fast,” *Fox News*, October 4, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2010/10/04/gay-lesbian-category-apple-tvs-netflix-fast/>

¹²⁶ “Netflix Gay Category Missing from UK iPad and Xbox Versions’ Frontpages,” *PinkNews* (blog), January 10, 2010, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/01/10/netflix-gay-category-removed-from-ipad-and-xbox-versions-at-uk-launch/>.

genre labels like “thriller,” and may have reflected general problems or oversights in early versions of the apps, but like *Queerty*, *PinkNews* reported this issue with a focus on the obstacles to finding gay and lesbian content.

These two articles demonstrate a telling central concern with categorization and curation. In both of these cases the media is available, but either the content is not explicitly categorized as Gay & Lesbian, or this category is not readily visible or searchable. Similarly, the *RazorianFly* post above emphasizes the significance of iTunes not just including media with LGBT content but rather explicitly categorizing and marketing it *as* LGBT. The category does enable viewers to more easily find content, and in an interview with me, Kathy Wolfe pointed out that people are constantly coming out as LGBT for the first time, and that a dedicated section makes it easier for them to find media that speaks to their experience.¹²⁷ But as important for this discussion is the symbolic effect of this kind of business practice that openly and visibly includes LGBTs. This kind of validation will be discussed further in chapter two.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, an important part of establishing a category is also clarifying what falls *outside* its boundaries.¹²⁸ In Wolfe Video’s case this includes pornography, the specter of which appears throughout the company’s history. In a 1994 interview Lynn lamented the tendency for viewers or retailers to assume that “female-oriented videos” refers to “Triple X-rated movies, featuring lesbians.” She assures readers that Wolfe Video is concerned with “positive images about the gay culture and women in general,” and that if Wolfe Video were to carry erotic videos for women that “they would be tasteful, not pornographic.”¹²⁹ Kathy Wolfe

¹²⁷ Kathy Wolfe, interview by author, New Almaden, California, July 22, 2014.

¹²⁸ Hall, “Who Needs Identity?”

¹²⁹ Hunt, “Wolfe’s Niche.” For a period in Wolfe Video’s history the company DID carry lesbian erotica, but apparently had not yet begun in 1994.

echoes this sentiment when reporting the confusion retailers had about the very idea of a gay or lesbian film. Unfamiliar with the concept of LGBT film, store owners would assume Wolfe was offering porn instead of films showing “just life,” a phrase Wolfe uses to separate the non-titillating portrayals of lesbian life in her company’s films from the content in porn. Even as late as 2013 Wolfe recalls this confusion as a recurring obstacle to the functioning of her company, calling it a “constant battle [of] educating everyone we work with.”¹³⁰

Lynn describes porn as something “that we could do that would make a lot more money, but that we would just hate doing.”¹³¹ Wolfe is more specific, describing her no-porn logic as at least partly a business decision. Even though, as Lynn suggests, porn might make Wolfe Video more money, Wolfe points out that the company “distribute[s] lots of titles to libraries. We couldn't do that if we were a porn company.”¹³² Image-management through distancing the company from porn is part of Wolfe Video’s mainstreaming strategy. Porn is anything but mainstream - even aside from questions about gendered consumption of pornography, porn is seen as audience-specific, inappropriate for many contexts, and potentially offensive to any consumer who is not explicitly seeking it out. And as Wolfe explains it, carrying any porn runs the risk of polluting the image of the entire catalog and potentially blocking the company’s access to some retailers, and by extension some audiences. A venue interested in Wolfe Video’s films may demur if the company is understood as a porn company, even if this classification is based on only one element of its product. The relationship between LGBT distributors and porn/sexuality will be discussed further in chapter three.

¹³⁰ Kathy Wolfe, quoted in “Wolfe Video: An Interview With Kathy Wolfe,” *Revolutionary Gay Magazine* (blog), February 4, 2013, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://revolutionarygaymagazine.tumblr.com/post/42258298418/wolfe-video-an-interview-with-kathy-wolfe>, now unavailable but transcribed by author.

¹³¹ Anderson-Minshall, “Wolfe Video: Ahead of the Pack.”

¹³² Wolfe, quoted in Scheinin, “Wolfe Video of San Jose.”

To summarize, as a strategy mainstreaming works in two main ways for Wolfe Video: by establishing and reinforcing “LGBT film” as a discrete and functional category for use in distribution, promotion, and online search, and by getting the product into more libraries and retail venues. The second is predicated upon the first - by consolidating the idea of LGBT film and creating that conceptual space that differs from pornography, Wolfe Video opens access to wider markets and in turn enables additional kinds of LGBT filmmaking by establishing a way for films to find their way to viewers and turn a profit.

If (physical or virtual) shelf-space is important, as so much of Wolfe Video’s work indicates, then it is also important to consider what we see when we browse these shelves. No one was as eager to talk to me about cover art as Michael Shoel of Ariztical Entertainment, and this aspect of distribution is closely related to a film’s LGBT “identity.” I will turn now to Ariztical in order to consider how cover art and other paratexts relate to how the company’s films are categorized and discussed.

Company History: Ariztical Entertainment

Michael Shoel got his start in the film industry when he took a job as a telemarketer for the early home video distributor Video Gems in Los Angeles in 1984. His interest in distribution was particularly attached to the packaging and promotional aspects: “box covers really excited me,”¹³³ he told me. He would call video stores to try to sell Video Gems holdings, and video store owners would occasionally mention that a title, like Andy Warhol’s *Frankenstein*, would work for their gay audience. He soon identified several video stores that indicated continuing interest in product that would interest gay audiences. Shoel notes that the titles he would find

¹³³ Michael Shoel, interview by author, Los Angeles, March 17, 2014.

were not “really really gay-gay,” but that at the time, there was enough of a desire for content that video stores would take whatever they could get.¹³⁴

In 1985, Shoel started his own company, Phoenix Distributors, as a small distributor of mostly low-budget horror to indie video stores, notably *Cannibal Campout* and *The Assault of the Killer Bimbos*. However, from his time at Video Gems he knew the stores interested in gay product, which Phoenix also carried, and he soon expanded that network by contacting every gay bar he could find via the Bob Damron guide, a sort of pre-internet atlas of gay spots in cities nationwide. He would call these bars and get recommendations for video stores in that area that would be interested in gay product.

After the 1994 Northridge earthquake, which inflicted major damage on Shoel’s home, he and his partner Donald Zelkowski moved to Tucson, drastically downsized the company, and in 1995 reincorporated as Ariztical Entertainment. With Ariztical they began focusing almost exclusively on LGBT films, such as *Kizuna* (1994), *I’ll Always Be Anthony* (1996), *Leather Jacket Love Story* (1997), and *Different Strokes* (1998). In 2004, Ariztical produced and released its own teen sex comedy film, *Eating Out*, on which Shoel was the producer (and an actor in a brief appearance). The film played well in LGBT film festivals, screenings in cities with large gay audiences, and on home video (distributed by Ariztical itself), which led to four additional titles in the franchise: *Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds*; *Eating Out: All You Can Eat*; *Eating Out: Drama Camp*; and *Eating Out: The Open Weekend*. Ariztical has also produced a handful of other films not as part of the *Eating Out* franchise.

Shoel’s partner died unexpectedly in 2001, and after a few more years in Tucson Shoel moved Ariztical back to Los Angeles in 2006, partly for a fresh start in a bigger town and partly

¹³⁴ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

to be closer to this center of film production. There he expanded his staff and continued distributing, as well as producing and distributing Ariztical originals. Now in 2014, the company is in a state of transition. Shoel no longer thinks of Ariztical as a DVD company, but rather largely as a licensing company to sell titles LOGO, to overseas markets, or to streaming services. He is also working on Ariztical on Demand, the company's own streaming service, as a way to directly connect to their audience. He is even considering giving up some of the grassroots independence of Ariztical, which he often proudly makes reference to, and instead partnering with investors. Shoel says "we know our audience is out there," but now "reaching our audience is a very different thing."¹³⁵

As a company, Ariztical pays particular attention to communicating with its audience through promotion, like cover art. This next section will examine how paratextual components of the production, marketing, and categorization of Ariztical films, and how they ultimately create meaning around these texts.

Cover Art and Automatic Promotion

Even back in his days at Video Gems, Shoel was deeply interested in cover art. Cover art was in fact at the core of what he described to me as one of his significant successes as an LGBT distributor. When Ariztical acquired *Different Strokes: The Story of Jack and Jill and Jill* (1998), box art became a site of conflict between the company and the Motion Picture Association of America. The movie itself had received an R rating, but the MPAA denied Ariztical's box art, which featured two women holding the same picnic basket. According to Shoel, the MPAA said such an image would be confusing to children. In a moment Shoel describes as one of his

¹³⁵ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

proudest with the company, he contacted GLAAD who convinced the MPAA to reverse its decision and grant Ariztical permission to use the imagery.

Cover art also closely relates to how Ariztical conceives of and sells gay film. Lesbian imagery on the cover of an Ariztical film is a rare occurrence; one of the company's most reliable features on its packaging is fit, shirtless men. "We learned that if we made a sexy box cover we would have good sales," Shoel says. "If you don't have a shirtless guy on a gay movie, unless it wins at Sundance or won some big festivals, it's not going to do as well. That was and may still be the reality." He estimates that without a sexualized or at least suggestive cover that niche gay films will sell 25% to 50% less. He even compares these kinds of images to the iconography of genre, or what Altman might term its "semantics," saying that "if you look at classic genre films, in westerns, you've got a gun and you've got a horse, and I would say a gay indie film has got to have the shirtless guy unless it's an art film."¹³⁶ This approach is not exclusive to Ariztical; it is not uncommon for packaging to imply that gay niche films are more sexually graphic than they really are.

This packaging strategy took an interesting twist with Ariztical's move to production. While he admits that he had always had a desire to produce films, according to Shoel the *Eating Out* series was specifically born of a certain frustration about not finding the exact kind of title that he wanted to acquire. Having established the strategy of sexualized, bare-chested imagery on DVD packaging, Shoel wanted a title where the film's *content* would more accurately match its *packaging*. As a form of reverse engineering, he identified the kind of packaging that would get a title attention and then made the film that would match this packaging while still being

¹³⁶ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

“compelling and insightful.” In his words, underneath the packaging was “exactly what people were hoping they were going to get.”¹³⁷

These covers, however, can be altered to frame and promote films in a very different way. An April 2005 iteration of the site offers *Eating Out* on DVD, but with two choices of box art. One has a backdrop of the Caleb and Marc characters shirtless and about to kiss, with the Gwen character sitting at the front on the phone (referencing a scene in which she talks Caleb, who is *pretending* to be gay, through an intimate encounter with Marc, who *is* gay). The tagline reads, “The fastest way to a girl’s heart is through her gay best friend,” and the cover also includes a line from a review in *The Advocate* that describes *Eating Out* as “...one of the funniest, sexiest gay films I’ve seen....” In contrast, the other box art has Caleb and Marc dressed (though actor Scott Lundsford wears a sleeveless shirt showing his burly arms). Gwen remains sitting in the foreground, but is joined this time by a small box showing the Kyle character. The tagline here reads “Some guys will do anything to get the girl,” and the box art includes a quote from *The New York Times* describing the film as “a modern-day variant on a Shakespearian comedy.” In this box art, the positioning of Caleb and Marc combined with the tagline could suggest these two men are competing for Gwen instead of embroiled in a complicated sexual identity farce.¹³⁸ These two different covers are even explicitly identified as appealing to different audiences: in a different section of the website they are identified as the “kiss”/“gay” cover and the “red”/“mainstream” cover. Shoel described the latter as a “retail-

¹³⁷ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

¹³⁸ Interestingly, the DVD cover art in the UK, where the film is distributed by TLA, keeps Caleb and Marc dressed but tweaks the tagline to be “Some guys will do anyone to get the girl” (emphasis mine).

friendly cover” that was more likely to get the film stocked in a wider variety of retail venues, and also explained that the latter version omitted a shot of frontal male nudity.¹³⁹

While a large part of my project is complicating the notion of “gay film,” it is probably fair to allow myself to say that the *Eating Out* films are quite gay movies indeed. Besides at least half of the characters in the series being gay men, there are plotlines about struggling with sexual identity, navigating open (gay) relationships, trying ex-gay therapy, and going to Palm Springs to have lots of sex with other equally hot men. But to fully understand how framing, promotional discourses operate to define LGBTness, it is useful to examine a more complex example that tests the limits of how a film can be understood as LGBT. Here paratextuality is especially helpful. What Gray calls the “contextualizing powers of paratextuality” relate closely to the discussion of genre at the beginning of this chapter, where I drew from Altman and Wittgenstein to think about what aspects of an item are most heavily signified in its classification. If paratexts act as an entryway to “prepare” viewers for a text, then they can provide a context for what viewers will prioritize in their reading of the text.

So how do paratexts affect the reading of a film without as much explicit content as the *Eating Out* series has? Consider Ariztical’s *Hit Parade* (James Casey, 2010), which follows Archer, a retired hitman who now works in a bookstore. He is forcefully, and improbably, recruited by the covert operations arm of the Census Bureau to take down Speed Razor, a dangerous, unpredictable hitman. However, Archer ends up developing sympathy for the younger hitman and ends up tutoring him in how to refine his methods. While Speed Razor is a highly idiosyncratic character and resembles a raver from the 1990s, it’s not until halfway through the film we learn that he may actually be gay when he recounts a brief story of having an

¹³⁹ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

affair with a married man. The trailer makes no mention of this – more than anything, Speed Razor is simply shown as being erratic and unbalanced – but the trailer does make a lesbian joke about Agent Fresno, the female Census Bureau agent, where her fellow agent remarks that she’s “playing for the other team.”

Fresno’s lesbian identity is winked at throughout the entire film. Early in the film she’s seen talking on the phone to a significant other, whom she refers to as “Jesse,” a gender neutral name. At one point her fellow agent comments on her somewhat masculine attire, a hat and a tie, and we even see Fresno having a tense phone conversation with her mom about the fact that she and Jesse are living together. The cover art for the film includes the tagline, “Hitmen, census takers & porn stars! Get in line...” However, on Ariztical’s own promotional venues, the tagline is adjusted. On their Facebook page, the tagline is amended with two extra words: “Gay hitmen, lesbian census takers and porn stars...get in line...”¹⁴⁰ And in the *Blogspot* post announcing the DVD release of the film, the tagline reads “A contract killer, a gay hitman and a lesbian census agent...Let the parade begin!”¹⁴¹ This latter tagline is attached to the Amazon page for the film.

Reviews of *Hit Parade* vary in how they present the film. In some venues like a zine and a personal movie review website, Speed Razor is called “flamboyant,” while elsewhere he is simply described as “spazzy” or “hyperactive.”¹⁴² An IMDB user review omits mention of Speed

¹⁴⁰ Post on Ariztical Entertainment’s Facebook page, June 20, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Ariztical/videos/1488551739595/>

¹⁴¹ “HIT PARADE Now on DVD!”, *Ariztical Entertainment* (blog), July 21, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://ariztical.blogspot.com/2010/07/hit-parade-now-on-dvd.html>

¹⁴² Jason Coffman, “Hit Parade,” *FilmMonthly* (blog), July 5, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.filmmonthly.com/film/video-and-dvd/hit-parade>; CriticNic, “Hit Parade (2010),” *Critic Nic* (blog), July 19, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.criticnic.net/2010/07/hit-parade-2010/>; Billy Gil, “Hit Parade (DVD Review),” *Home Media Magazine*, May 30, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.homemediamagazine.com/ariztical/hit-parade-dvd-review>; Lantana, “Low budget but some quirky fun...” (IMDB review), August 8, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1334455/reviews?ref_=tt_urv.

Razor's sexuality but does describe Fresno as an "angry lesbian agent."¹⁴³ *Erie Gay News*, a website and occasional print publication targeting parts of Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio, held a contest to win a copy of *Hit Parade* a month after the film's DVD release. The synopsis doesn't mention anything gay about the film (unless one cares to read their description of the hitman as "out-of-the-box" as a sort of dog whistle for gay readers). The only potential connection here is that the contest posting mentions the film's origins with Ariztical and includes a link to the company website.¹⁴⁴ Viewers might be familiar with Ariztical's corporate identity, or may click on the link and learn. Similarly, *OutSmart Magazine*, a Houston-based LGBT magazine and website, includes a review of *Hit Parade* without any mention of LGBT content – only a mention of Ariztical and a link to their site connects the movie to any sort of gayness.¹⁴⁵

The most interesting example of the intersection between this film's content and its framing occurred in the explicit uncertainty about how to categorize this film on the now defunct website *OutFilms*. This site was managed by Ken Sain, a former news editor at *The Washington Blade*. His review of *Hit Parade* started with this caveat: "I debated not including this film because the gay content is minimal, but since it is being distributed by Ariztical, a company known for its gay films, I figure I should include it." After a rundown of the film plot, the review ended with "The gay content is that one of the agents from the Census office is a lesbian and Speed Razor appears to have been in love with his former boss. There's also an adult film session with two women making out."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Lantana, "Low budget."

¹⁴⁴ "Win *Hit Parade* DVD," July 13, 2010, *Erie Gay News*. No longer available but transcribed by the author.

¹⁴⁵ "Hit Parade," *OutSmart* (blog), July 1, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.outsmartmagazine.com/2010/07/hit-parade/>.

¹⁴⁶ Ken Sain, "Hit Parade," *OutFilms* (blog), December 6, 2010 version, *Internet Archive*, http://web.archive.org/web/20101206042023/http://kensain.com/details.aspx?film_id=1725

I asked Shoel about his acquisition of *Hit Parade*, and he claimed it was partly due to a personal relationship with the filmmaker, but also partly because the film just wasn't likely to find distribution anywhere else and it was a story Shoel thought should be told. When I pressed him on whether he would have acquired it without those two gay characters, he said "No. I couldn't have sold it. It was gay enough to be able to sell as a gay film, as a film that would be of interest to gay audiences, yet not gay enough to be a big hit as a gay film."¹⁴⁷ But through its association with Ariztical, the film was able to access these promotional venues that a film without any connection to gayness would not have been able to.

As a case study, *Hit Parade* also brings us back to Catherine Johnson and her idea of channel branding. Because of its place under the umbrella of Ariztical's gay identity, assumptions are made, or at least questions are asked, about *Hit Parade*'s own categorical identity. While Ken Sain of *OutFilms* explicitly describes this uncertainty about the film's appropriate categorization, it still has the effect of promoting awareness of the film. And in the case of *OutSmart* and *Erie Gay News*, the film is simply promoted alongside other films that we might more easily identify as categorically "gay" of their own accord. Two sets of assumptions are at play here: Ariztical distributes this title, so gay magazines should cover it; and this gay magazine covered it, so a gay viewer consuming gay media should watch it.

Both Wolfe Video and Ariztical Entertainment have organized their corporate identities around LGBT, which helps them navigate the marketplace and the media landscape. LGBTness has been constitutive for these companies from day one, and everything about their practices and self-description effectively, and profitably, connects back to that. But as we saw in the examples at the beginning of this chapter, there exists a contrary strategy to escape LGBT categorization

¹⁴⁷ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

for the purpose of not limiting the potential uses and reach of a text. The next section will consider two companies' use of this approach.

“You Don’t Have to Ghettoize Everything”: Rejecting and Negotiating LGBT as a Category

Strand Releasing, a “Gay-Friendly” Distributor

Above we saw examples of Wolfe and Ariztical cultivating and benefitting from their titles' LGBT “identity,” but equally instructive is when a company takes the opposite tack. Of this project's five distribution companies, Strand Releasing has the most ambivalent relationship to the category of “LGBT,” even in the years just following its formation in 1989. In a 1994 interview, co-founder Marcus Hu stated that “a lot of filmmakers come to us thinking that we'll be an automatic outlet for their films. But the thing is, we look for quality films, and just because it's gay doesn't mean we're going to handle it. It has to be a good movie before we'll take care of it.”¹⁴⁸ Strand's relationship to “goodness” and “badness” (as well as the company's history) will be explored in more depth in chapter three, but here I want to use Strand as an example of a company *decentering* LGBT content in their films, and LGBT “identity” in their company image. In combination with the examples above of Wolfe and Ariztical working to mark their texts as LGBT, my aim is to denaturalize LGBT media categorization practice by revealing the various strategic moves companies employ to align themselves with or distance themselves from the label.

While most of Strand's early distribution (and occasional production) practices entailed films with LGBT content, and the company was closely associated with the New Queer Cinema movement of the early 90s, by the end of the 90s press coverage of Strand tended to position the

¹⁴⁸ Hu, quoted in Kevin Lally, “Strand Thriving With Alternative Fare,” *The Film Journal*, December 1, 1994.

company as gay-inclusive, but not categorically gay. A 1998 *Hollywood Reporter* profile of the company described Strand's strategy as releasing "12 pictures a year, many of them gay-themed."¹⁴⁹ A 1999 *Advocate* article called Strand a "gay-friendly independent company."¹⁵⁰ A 1999 *Hollywood Reporter* write-up of Strand's MOMA retrospective described Strand's LGBT product as only one of the company's foci, praising its "American indies, foreign-language films and gay-themed cinema."¹⁵¹ *Screen International* deemed the company a "distributor of risky pictures, be they gay, foreign-language, or just daringly independent."¹⁵² And when Strand co-founder Mike Thomas left the company, *Daily Variety* mentioned that he was founding LGBT-specific distributor Jour de Fete in order "to focus solely on gay-themed pics," implicitly emphasizing that this was not the core mission of Strand (although the same article did point out that "Hu and [co-founder Jon] Gerrans have continued to score with titles with homosexual themes").¹⁵³ When interviewed about his co-creation of Jour de Fete, Thomas himself identified a transition in Strand's strategies, saying that in the 90s Strand focused less specifically on queer film and "drifted into a broad market including prestige art films and foreign releases."¹⁵⁴

Strand's description of its own product has shifted over the years. In 2000, the company website described Strand's product as "independent cinema" and "titles that have generated tremendous national and local critical attention in theatrical release, yet are not considered

¹⁴⁹ Beverly Gray, "Strand Releasing," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 1, 1998.

¹⁵⁰ John Griffiths, "Strand and Deliver," *The Advocate*, no. 787 (June 8, 1999): 52–57.

¹⁵¹ "A Decade of Strand on View at N.Y. Museum," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 14, 1999.

¹⁵² Mike Goodridge, "Ten Years at the Living End," *Screen International*, June 25, 1999.

¹⁵³ Ramin Zahed, "Niche Champions: Strand Celebrates 10 Years of Special Handling," *Daily Variety*, July 30, 1999.

¹⁵⁴ Mike Thomas, quoted in Robert Koehler, "Distribs Launch Jour de Fete to Fill Gay Film Niche," *Daily Variety*, July 16, 1998.

‘commercial’ enough to be stocked at your local store.”¹⁵⁵ In 2002, the site’s “About Us” adds queer movies to Strand’s list of merits, albeit in a telling order. First the page explains the company’s expertise in “handling foreign films,” then discusses the company’s re-release of art and classic films like *Contempt* and *The Graduate*, and only then mentions Strand’s “commitment to lesbian and gay cinema” alongside a list of their queer titles.¹⁵⁶ In the site’s 2003 About Us, the only explicit reference made to LGBT film is that the company won a lifetime achievement award from Outfest (which the site explains is an LGBT festival). Otherwise, the description emphasizes Strand’s association with art and cinephilia, with comments about Strand’s ability to “fuse quality art films with commercial product,” its ten-year retrospective at MOMA, and the company’s “prestigious library” and “renowned international filmmakers.”¹⁵⁷ Queer titles and filmmakers like *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss*, *Frisk*, Terence Davies, and François Ozon are included in the self-description, but unlike in the 2002 version, they are not categorized *as* queer. The “About Us” section has taken this approach ever since, with an even more pared down version since 2015 listing Strand’s specialties in “foreign language, American independent, and documentary films,” and leaving it at that.¹⁵⁸ The current “About” section on Strand Releasing’s Facebook page keeps it simplest: the company’s mission is listed as “distributing the best in contemporary art house filmmaking,” and the company’s

¹⁵⁵ Home page, *StrandReleasing.com*, September 3, 2000 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000903083139/http://www.strandreleasing.com/video/index.html>

¹⁵⁶ “About Us,” *StrandReleasing.com*, June 6, 2002 version, *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20020606002016/http://strandreleasing.com/about_us/index.html. The films listed are “Gregg Araki’s *Totally F***ed Up*, Ferzan Ozpetek’s *Steam: The Turkish Bath*, the films of Bruce LaBruce including *Hustler White*, Nigel Finch’s *Stonewall*...Julia and Gretchen Dyer’s *Late Bloomers*...David Moreton’s *Edge of Seventeen*, Lukas Moodyson’s *Show Me Love*, and Ana Kokkinos, *Head On*.”

¹⁵⁷ “About Us,” *StrandReleasing.com*, June 25, 2003 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030625103706/http://www.strandreleasing.com/about.asp>

¹⁵⁸ “About Strand Releasing,” *StrandReleasing.com*, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://strandreleasing.com/about/>

“story” consists only of “distributing the best in independent, foreign and art house cinema since 1989.”¹⁵⁹

In a 2010 interview I asked Hu and David Bowlds, then Director of Theatrical Sales and Distribution, about the viability of a film defined only by its LGBTness. Hu brought up François Ozon’s *Hideaway* (2009), which the company had recently acquired. *Hideaway* follows Mousse, a recovering heroin addict whose boyfriend Louis got her pregnant before he died of an overdose, as she stays in a secluded beachside house and is eventually joined by Louis’ brother Paul, who we eventually learn is gay. Hu said the film “has gay plot elements, but I wouldn’t identify it as a gay film.” Bowlds responded, “Which isn’t to say that that angle won’t be exploited. But it’s a French film, from an established gay filmmaker,” François Ozon, two of whose previous films (each with gay content) Strand had distributed, *Criminal Lovers* (1999) and *Time to Leave* (2005).¹⁶⁰ Actual “exploitation” of this angle in *Hideaway* seems to have been minimal: the Strand blurb for the film does describe Paul as “Louis’ gay brother,” but there is little else in the promotion to emphasize any LGBT content. The U.S. trailer features one shot of Paul and his lover together in a club (although with Mousse between them), but overall more forcefully implies there might be romantic interest between Mousse and Paul; and indeed, she seems to exhibit mild jealousy throughout the film before Paul, inebriated, initiates sex with her during the last night he spends at the house.

Overall *Hideaway*’s gay plot elements, to use Hu’s term, are minimal and do more to color the edges of the character study of Mousse, the main drive of the film. But an earlier Strand

¹⁵⁹ “About,” Strand Releasing’s Facebook page, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/StrandReleasing/about/>

¹⁶⁰ David Bowlds and Marcus Hu, interview by author, Culver City, California, June 2, 2010.

film with more significant LGBT content provides another instance of the company's navigation of the "LGBT" label. Above I used Ariztical's *Hit Parade* as an example of a film with minimal LGBT content, but paratexts and a promotional infrastructure that emphasized and played off this aspect of the film. An inverse example is the Strand-distributed *Wild Reeds* (1994), directed by André Téchiné, a well-regarded French writer-director whose recent films have often found U.S. distribution with Strand including *The Girl on the Train* (2009), *Unforgivable* (2011), and *Being 17* (2016). *Wild Reeds*, set in the southwest of France during the Algerian War, follows four high schoolers navigating coming-of-age emotionally and sexually in a turbulent political climate. The film was met with critical acclaim and won four César Awards in France. In the article referenced above wherein Mike Thomas attributes his founding of Jour de Fete to Strand's shift from queer film to "a broad market including prestige art films and foreign releases," he specifically cites *Wild Reeds* as an example of this shift.¹⁶¹ This is a noteworthy choice due to the second-billed character's storyline revolving around his discovery, exploration, and navigation of his burgeoning gay identity. François fools around with a close friend, discusses his interest in men with several people, practices saying that he is a *pede* (a French slur for "homosexual") in the mirror, and seeks out an older gay man's advice. As one of his last actions in the film, he even asks for clarification from his friend with whom he was intimate, trying to understand whether it meant anything for a romantic future together. This storyline/conflict comprises a large chunk of the film, but for Thomas it's a "prestige" or "foreign" film *instead* of an LGBT film.

In another interview a year after his original comments about *Wild Reeds*, Thomas mentions the film as an example of European films that crossover to mainstream audiences while

¹⁶¹ Mike Thomas, quoted in Koehler, "Distribs launch Jour de Fete."

“includ[ing] gay relationships and express[ing] a gay sensibility.”¹⁶² But he also clarified that Strand “marketed *Wild Reeds* to a gay male audience first, with stills and naked boys,” and speculated that without this approach, the film’s theatrical run would have been too short to catch the attention of straight/mainstream audiences.¹⁶³ The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* picked up on this crossover strategy when a 1995 article about the marketing of LGBT films noted inconsistency in the framing of *Wild Reeds*. This article remarked that based on the venue for the ad, the film would be presented as “either an art-house flick or a steamy sex romp” by a focus “on either the good-looking cast or the movie’s high-brow pedigree.”¹⁶⁴ In this article Dennis O’Connor, Strand’s Vice-President of Distribution and Marketing at the time, called these differences deliberate:

It would be limiting to qualify [*Wild Reeds*] as a gay film. It has tremendous gay appeal, but to only target that audience would not be fair to the film. There’s a heterosexual love story there, and it has won awards, so there’s certainly a conventional art-film audience for this.¹⁶⁵

How might a different distributor choose to treat the film? In 2014 the TLA retail site, which sells and streams films from both TLA Releasing and other distributors, called *Wild Reeds* “one of the most affecting depictions of gay first love ever committed to screen,” tags it with “Coming of Age,” “Gay,” “High School,” and “TLA Favorites,” and categorizes it within the “Drama” and “Gay/Lesbian” genres.¹⁶⁶ Other venues have also centralized the LGBTness of the

¹⁶² Jonathan Foreman, “The Gay Glut,” *New York Post*, June 22, 1999, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://nypost.com/1999/06/22/the-gay-glut-indie-filmmakers-are-turning-out-a-stream-of-mediocre-movies-with-same-sex-themes-is-it-gaysploitation-or-just-bad-art/>.

¹⁶³ Mike Thomas, quoted in Foreman, “The Gay Glut.”

¹⁶⁴ Dennis O’Connor, quoted in Rene Rodriguez, “Marketing of Gay Films Slowly Comes out of Closet,” *The Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 18, 1995.

¹⁶⁵ O’Connor, quoted in Rodriguez, “Marketing of Gay Films.”

¹⁶⁶ “Wild Reeds,” *TLAvideo.com*, July 31, 2014 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140731221401/www.tlavidio.com/movies-wild-reeds/p-120812-1>

film: a 1999 *Advocate* profile on LGBT “movers and shakers” calls Hu a “producer and/or distributor of landmark gay films including...*Wild Reeds*,” and Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin include it in a list of “queer films from around the globe in their introduction to *Queer Film: A Reader*.”¹⁶⁷

To be clear, I’m not arguing that the film *is* an LGBT film, and that Strand is attempting to obscure this core truth about its nature, any more than I’m arguing that *Hit Parade* is *not* LGBT and that Ariztical and LGBT promotional venues are misguidedly attempting to cram the film in an ill-fitting category. In both cases, I’m using these films to demonstrate the important contribution distributors make to how a film is popularly understood, and the variability in how a film might be “identified” based on what any particular rubric chooses to prioritize.

Strand’s investments in categorization are closely connected with the company’s ideas about goodness and badness, ideas to which we will return in chapter three. But here I want to look at the same topic through the lens of another company, TLA Entertainment. TLA Entertainment’s history is filled with a variety of enterprises, which will be detailed in chapter three, and this next section will examine how the Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, a for-profit film festival formed by TLA in 1995, has navigated “LGBT” as a category. I will offer a brief account of the festival’s creation before demonstrating the highly malleable and ambivalent institutional approach to LGBTness put into practice here.

¹⁶⁷ Gregg Kilday and Bruce C. Steele, “75 Star Players,” *The Advocate*, March 30, 1999, 43; Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, “General Introduction,” in *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader*, ed. Benshoff and Griffin (Routledge, 2004), 12.

TLA Entertainment's "Gay-ish" Film Festival

In the early 1990s, TLA Entertainment founder Ray Murray was researching for his book *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video* (1994), a process that included learning about other cities' LGBT film festivals. TLA's home city of Philadelphia had no such festival, so he pitched filling this gap to the TLA staff as a way that more viewers could be drawn back into movie theaters, and the Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was born.¹⁶⁸ The first PIGLFF opened on July 6, 1995 with Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995), one of 35 features and 30 shorts screened at four venues in Philadelphia. Murray described PIGLFF as unique among other major cities' LGBT film festivals because his programmers "want you to go and have fun and be entertained....In some of the other big festivals the choosing is done by committee and they tend to be very politically correct in what they pick." In the same vein, he remarks on the festival's importance for "our sense of community. This isn't political or fund-raising. We want you to go and just have a great time."¹⁶⁹ While less than fifty people showed up for the *Safe* screening, other films during the eleven day festival were more successful, and the 1995 festival overall drew 7,800 attendees and sold out several screenings. An encouraged Murray expanded the second festival to include almost double the number of films, a move he later admitted was premature and left the long-term viability of the festival in question.¹⁷⁰ However, by the third year PIGLFF began to stabilize: while the number of films in the festival would fluctuate over the next two decades, attendance steadily grew until evening out to an average of between 25,000 and 26,000 filmgoers annually from 2000 onward.

¹⁶⁸ Molly Eichel, "Nobody's Perfect," *Philadelphia City Paper*, July 9, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Ray Murray, quoted in Desmond Ryan, "A Gay-Themed Film Festival Aims...for Summertime Entertainment," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 7, 1995.

¹⁷⁰ Eichel, "Nobody's Perfect."

Murray cited exposure as one of the festival's important tasks, because "there are many films that don't play here [in any other context] and don't come out on video."¹⁷¹ In the cases of films that did go directly to video, independent directors had often exhausted their resources in the filmmaking process and reserved little money for the expensive process of a proper distribution, causing the films to "end up losing money....It's a really tough world. I don't know how a lot of them do it."¹⁷² A festival like PIGLFF, which generates buzz around a film, could both increase a film's probability of being picked up by a distributor and improve its chances of commercial success in the home video market. Raymond's statements on this subject, made in the early years of the festivals, portend the creation of TLA Releasing a couple years later as a distribution arm to help more LGBT films achieve video release.

Murray also became artistic director of the eight-year-old Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema after its previous director Phyllis Kaufman resigned in 2000. This partnership between TLA and the PFWC's parent organization International House promised both expanded programming and, in Murray's words, "a little bit more pop sensibility, a little bit more Hollywood representation, without compromising the festival."¹⁷³ Out of this partnership was born the Philadelphia Film Society, a nonprofit formed to oversee both PFWC (soon renamed the Philadelphia Film Festival) and PIGLFF. However, after a 2009 split between TLA and Philadelphia Film Society leadership, Murray left with much of the Philadelphia Film Festival's

¹⁷¹ Murray, quoted in Ryan, "A Gay-Themed Film Festival Aims."

¹⁷² Murray, quoted in Gary Thompson, "Festival Shines on Gay Films Lost in Distribution Dark," *Philadelphia Daily News*, July 11, 1996.

¹⁷³ Murray, quoted in Desmond Ryan, "Philadelphia Film Festival Gets New Artistic Director," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 8, 2000.

leadership to form the competing “CineFest” underneath a new mirror nonprofit, the Philadelphia Cinema Alliance.

Murray took this opportunity to also rebrand PIGLFF as “QFest,” much to the relief of countless journalists who had mocked the festival’s unwieldy acronym over the years. In addition to making a more palatable acronym, this name change was also meant to reflect the intended diversity of representation in the festival (beyond gays and lesbians) while avoiding adding a collection of letters to the acronym, an alternative Murray described as too “PC”; using just *Q* “seemed to solve a lot of the problems.”¹⁷⁴ This rebranding also promised a more “pop” festival: fewer “difficult” films, an increase in lesbian films thanks to Murray’s hiring of LGBT film festival veteran Carol Coombes as Associate Artistic Director, and an “emphasis on edgier American independent films” with the goal of drawing younger viewers to the aging PIGLFF/QFest crowd.¹⁷⁵ Regardless, in 2009 Murray expressed uncertainty about the festival’s future, and whether it might instead end up subsumed as a section of CineFest. His concerns turned out to be misplaced, at least at the moment: after its 2009 premiere, the 2010 CineFest was canceled due to economic troubles; following an “edgier, younger” oriented 2011 festival, the last-minute cancellation of the 2012 CineFest sounded the final death knell for the festival.¹⁷⁶ QFest, on the other hand, would keep up its programming and attendance numbers until 2014, when the Philadelphia Cinema Alliance announced the postponement of that year’s festival.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Murray, quoted in Lauren F. Friedman, “Beyond Gay & Lesbian - Annual Philly Film Festival Evolves into QFest,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, July 8, 2009.

¹⁷⁵ Matt Prigge, “Best of the Fest,” *Philadelphia Weekly*, July 7, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Murray, quoted in Steven Rea, “Trendy Ticket,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 7, 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Murray, “The 2014 Philadelphia QFest Postponed,” press release, April 2014, available at *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20151018010108/http://www.qfest.com/downloads/PhiladelphiaQFestPostponed.doc>. No further information on the future of QFest has been released.

TLA's festival programming and the discourse surrounding it always pushed at the category of LGBT film, consistently exhibiting what a *Citypaper* reporter described as an "unusually generous working definition of queer film."¹⁷⁸ In 2002 Murray said in an interview how much he valued his near autonomy as the main festival programmer because it allowed him "wider rules of what is and isn't a gay film."¹⁷⁹ Press coverage has reflected these ideas all throughout the festival's history. A 1998 *Daily News* article identified the "festival's practice of booking films that, while not necessarily gay in content or theme, are written or directed by gay or lesbian artists."¹⁸⁰ Along the same lines, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter described some of the festival's 2006 programming as "films that may not be gay, *per se*, but have some gay themes or gay characters."¹⁸¹ By 2010 *Citypaper* was simply calling the festival "gay-ish."¹⁸²

The definitional slippage demonstrated by this press discourse is unsurprising. Even in the early years of the festival Murray described the "hip, straight crowd" as one of the festival's intended demographics.¹⁸³ "I always have in my mind the desire to interest heterosexuals in the festival," he said in a 1996 interview, explaining his programming choices that could hold relatively wide appeal such as the John Waters retrospective in that year's festival.¹⁸⁴ He framed

¹⁷⁸ Sam Adams, "The Guy Can't Help It," *Philadelphia City Paper*, July 18, 2000.

¹⁷⁹ Desmond Ryan, "Films More Upbeat for the Third Annual Gay Film Festival - Less Emphasis on Coming Out or Homophobia, More on the Story," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 11, 1997; Sam Adams, "Flex Appeal: This Year's PIGLFF Stretches the Boundaries of Queer Cinema," *Philadelphia City Paper*, July 18, 2002.

¹⁸⁰ Gary Thompson, "Gay Film Fest Kicks Off 4th Year of Varied Movie Fare," *Philadelphia Daily News*, July 16, 1998.

¹⁸¹ Tirdad Derakhshani, "Gay Festival Brings 145 Films," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 14, 2006.

¹⁸² A.D. Amorosi, "Ice Pack," *Philadelphia City Paper*, July 8, 2010.

¹⁸³ Murray, quoted in Thompson, "Festival Shines."

¹⁸⁴ Murray, quoted in Amy Longsdorf, "Spotlight on the Stonewall Legacy - Allentown Bar Helping to Sponsor Phila. International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival," *The Morning Call*, July 6, 1996. Murray describes Waters' films as not "really gay -- he's gay and he has a couple gay characters -- but I think his following is mostly straight."

the 1997 festival's Clive Barker films similarly, saying that "we expect to attract the horror fans and people who don't normally go to a film festival, let alone a gay film festival."¹⁸⁵ This programming was part of an ongoing trend of the festival's inclusion of films that were made by LGBT artists but were not necessarily LGBT-themed themselves. For Murray, this was another way to differentiate PIGLFF from other LGBT film festivals - he predicted that his festival probably drew more straight viewers than other major cities' festivals.¹⁸⁶ In the 1997 programmer's notes he imagines hearing (presumably straight) people on the streets of Philadelphia saying, "Hey dude, I saw Clive Barker at a gay film festival," and with a contented sigh describes this as "ah, progress."¹⁸⁷ Even later, in promotional interviews for the eleventh festival in 2005, Murray offered his predictions for the films most likely to appeal to straight viewers.¹⁸⁸ In general, he has long insisted that PIGLFF held equal appeal for queer and straight viewers (even while the 2006 festival's tagline proclaimed the event "The Gayest Summer in the City!").¹⁸⁹

Murray's assumption that artists like Waters and Barker would appeal to wider audiences should not be misunderstood as him viewing their work as completely "straight." While John Waters' body of work does not include what Murray calls "an exclusively gay-themed film," he sees "an admittedly demented gay sensibility" in Waters' work, especially *Desperate Living* and

This point could be debated but here it's relevant to note whom Murray at least hopes and assumes this programming will draw.

¹⁸⁵ Murray, quoted in Ryan, "Films More Upbeat."

¹⁸⁶ Ryan, "Films More Upbeat."

¹⁸⁷ Murray, "Programmer's Note," 1997 PIGLFF program.

¹⁸⁸ Carrie Rickey, "A Visual Feat - This Year's Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival Covers Just About Every Genre," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 8, 2005.

¹⁸⁹ Derakhshani, "Gay Festival Brings."

films starring Divine, whom he frames as a precursor to gender-bending characters in later films like *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *The Birdcage*.¹⁹⁰ In the case of Schumacher, the program description did identify at least gay subtext in his work. "...*Batman Forever* practically screamed [homoeroticism]. Tight-fitting leather outfits, meaningful eye exchanges, super villains in unrequited love - it was all there."¹⁹¹ According to Murray, Schumacher had requested to preview and edit copy about him in the program guide, and wrote "Gulp!" next to this reading of *Batman Forever*.¹⁹² Although not penned by Murray, the 1997 program's blurb about Clive Barker also makes reference to the "said and unsaid gay sensibility" in his work, and his success as "incorporating homoerotic or gay characters, without at all being pigeonholed as a 'gay artist.'"¹⁹³

This threat of being pigeonholed and the importance of evading it feature heavily in discourse around the festival. Murray describes Todd Hayne's *Safe*, which opened the first PIGLFF, as a "non-gay or lesbian themed movie...that reflects the advancement of gays and lesbians in the film business."¹⁹⁴ Clive Barker's blurb says it is "progress and historic to see openly gay men and women working in the arts without being limited to identifiable gay projects."¹⁹⁵ And in the 2000 PIGLFF program Murray summarizes the significance of these artists, saying that "Joel Schumacher seems to have done it all in the film business. And he has

¹⁹⁰ Murray, "John Waters Retrospective, 1996 PIGLFF program.

¹⁹¹ Murray, Joel Schumacher description, 2000 PIGLFF program.

¹⁹² Amy Longsdorf, "Philadelphia Gay Film Fest Is a Big Coming-Out Party," *The Morning Call*, July 8, 2000.

¹⁹³ Marc Walkow, Clive Barker description, 1997 PIGLFF program.

¹⁹⁴ Murray, "Programmer's Note," 1995 PIGLFF program. He also praises his own programming decision as "break[ing] cinematic ground."

¹⁹⁵ Walkow, Clive Barker description.

accomplished all this (like previous Festival Honorees John Waters and Clive Barker) as an openly gay man whose artistic output isn't necessarily gay identified."¹⁹⁶ The wording here implies the noteworthiness of these artists' success as openly gay men *without* producing gay-identified work, which both gestures to the existence of channels wherein gay artists who *do* produce gay work can expect success, and emphasizes the importance of gay artists "crossing over" to mainstream audiences.

Murray views this as preferable to the "ghettoization of gay films," defined by him in the late 90s and early 2000s as when films are "focusing strictly on gay and lesbian subjects," which he views as immature or short-sighted because "if you're gay or lesbian, the real world you live in is still going to be a straight world."¹⁹⁷ He sees a better alternative in festivals that mix LGBT stories in with other mainstream films. "Maybe that's the future: You don't have to ghettoize everything....I want it to be more than the gay film festival."¹⁹⁸ By 2012, he had seen this alternative gaining traction, since according to him gay and lesbian stories were being exposed to mainstream culture so effectively that the need to separately categorize these kinds of texts was lessening. He called this "the ideal of queer film," and predicted that soon QFest would "be known more as an independent film festival with a focus on gay and lesbian films rather than a gay festival."¹⁹⁹ In 2006 Murray did acknowledge the business challenges that this mainstreaming process can pose, saying that while it's "good for people in the movement...it's not so good for gay film festivals" because of the now-wider availability of LGBT images

¹⁹⁶ Murray, Joel Schumacher description.

¹⁹⁷ Rea, "Diversity, Inclusion Are Themes at Gay and Lesbian Film Festival," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 17, 1998.

¹⁹⁸ Adams, "The Guy Can't."

¹⁹⁹ Derakhshani, "Qfest 2012: Romance, Satire, Docs and More," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 12, 2012.

through a number of venues.²⁰⁰ But generally his comments frame these processes of category-blurring or mainstreaming as his goal.

As we will see in chapter three, this reported interest in de-ghettoizing LGBT film stands in an intriguing opposition to the business logic of so much of TLA Entertainment as a company. QFest, distribution arm TLA Releasing, and retail arm tlagay.com ultimately all depend on the niche categorization of certain media as LGBT. Murray did remark to me that as a distributor, TLA Releasing operated within more conventional boundaries of how LGBT media has been understood than the TLA-sponsored festivals did.²⁰¹ But here Murray's choices reflect a desire to rethink how LGBT media functions in wider society. Because LGBT people must still navigate mainstream culture, "ghettoization" may be inappropriate because it does not reflect how LGBT people really live. He also sees a less narrowly-defined festival identity as a way to attract straight viewers in to associate, if nothing else, with some form of queer culture, which also serves a wider cultural shift of integrating queerness and the mainstream. And of course, a film festival that also appeals to straight viewers broadens its pool of potential ticket buyers as well.

But what both Strand and TLA demonstrate here is a concern that these texts be misunderstood as "just" LGBT. This impulse is not unique; recall the review I included at the beginning of this chapter, which deemed Strand's *Wild Reeds* "far too complex for it to be labeled" as gay, or former Strand executive Dennis O'Connor's comment that "it would be limiting" to call it a "gay film."²⁰² Both O'Connor's and Putman's refusals to identify the film as "gay" also bring to mind Brenda Cooper and Edward C. Pease's article on *Brokeback Mountain*

²⁰⁰ Derakhshani, "Gay Festival Brings."

²⁰¹ Ray Murray, interview by author, Philadelphia, December 15, 2014.

²⁰² Putman, "Wild Reeds"; Dennis O'Connor, quoted in Rodriguez, "Marketing of Gay Films."

reviews discussed in the last chapter; O'Connor, Putman, and the review that Cooper and Pease analyze all attempt to "universalize" a film *potentially* understandable as LGBT, as a means to encourage straight viewers that this film is for them too.²⁰³ The concern seems two-fold: one, that a film understood to be "gay" might encourage immediate assumptions about the quality of the film based on a cultural understanding of LGBT media as "bad" based on limited resources (more on this in chapter three); two, that a film's LGBTness may "cut off" other potential interests in the film, like an interest in foreign or auteur film in the case of Strand, or horror or cult film in the case of TLA's festival. If LGBTness becomes attached to a text as first-order classification, the fear is that straight people will decide the film is probably not of interest to them, resulting in lowered profits for companies, limited reach for films who producers and distributors find significant and deserving of attention, and potentially fewer opportunities for straight viewers to recognize similarities with and empathize with LGBTs; thus the interest in careful framing of these films that *could* easily be understood as categorically "LGBT."

The last section of this chapter will add an additional wrinkle to this question by examining the intersection of a text's categorical "LGBT" identity and its generic identity, focusing particularly on Here Media's production and distribution of genre films. This section includes more textual analysis than usual because Here's production of slightly different versions of the same films further exemplifies the management of a film's LGBT identity and how this allows a title to circulate in different venues. While these examples involve actual differences in content, unlike the merely paratextual differences in the examples above, Here's practices around these films demonstrate a careful attention to what kinds of meaning becomes attached to a text.

²⁰³ Cooper and Pease, "Framing Brokeback Mountain."

“A Gay Movie, But Not Just a Gay Movie”: LGBT Genre Films at Here Media

It intrigued me as a heterosexual to add a genre cocktail to the B-movie shelf of Gay Cinema. Gay movies can be about more than just coming out. They can be as testosterone charged as *FAST 5*. Why shouldn't the gay audience have their own action heroes?

- Brian Trenchard-Smith, director of *Tides of War* and *In Her Line of Fire* (2011)²⁰⁴

Interviews with Paul Colichman, CEO of Here Media, have made explicit his concern that “gayness” not be central or political in nature in Here programming:

It's just that our leads or our storylines tend to have more of a gay bent....What we're saying is that being gay is only part of who these characters are. They're also corporals in the military, they're also lawyers, doctors, scientists.²⁰⁵

For him, the solution is “to take all of the established genres and put gay characters into them,” essentially creating an LGBT equivalent of conventional film and television.²⁰⁶ Similarly, Colichman’s business partner Stephen Jarchow notes the historical prevalence of AIDS-related subject matter in gay movies, and describes the post-epidemic era as a time for films “where gay is incidental to the storyline, where you have a fireman who happens to be gay.” For him, this change is a good thing: “The real future of gay cinema is treating gay as a very normal human condition and not something that the movie should be all about. That’s the change that we’ve seen recently....It normalizes gay a bit more and makes it more acceptable.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Brian Trenchard-Smith, quoted in Danny, “Brian Trenchard-Smith Swims the TIDES OF WAR,” *Trailers From Hell* (blog), May 31, 2011, June 29, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110629045631/http://trailersfromhell.com/blog/2011/05/31/brian-trenchard-smith-swims-the-tides-of-war/>

²⁰⁵ Paul Colichman, quoted in Anne Kelly-Saxenmeyer, “Out and Out: Paul Colichman Brings His New Pay-Programming Channel to the Masses,” *Back Stage West*, August 5, 2004.

²⁰⁶ Colichman, quoted in John Dempsey, “Two Gay Nets Throw Coming-Out Party,” *Variety*, July 24, 2007.

²⁰⁷ Stephen Jarchow, “An Evening with Here Media and Regent Entertainment Chairman Steve Jarchow” (video of presentation), May 7, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NtWafL1K60>.

This perspective on LGBT media is demonstrated by *Shelter* (2007), a film Here both financed and distributed. Writer-director Jonah Markowitz’s description of his approach to LGBT filmmaking closely aligns with statements by Colichman and Jarchow, and since Here was behind the development and production of *Shelter*, we can draw connections to see what kind of filmmaking this venue created space for. As inspiration for the film’s characters, Markowitz cites seeing two men playing frisbee and his realization that queer cinema rarely portrayed “guys identifying and connecting in the outdoors,” which is where, he suggests elsewhere, that American “male bonding tends to take place.”²⁰⁸ Markowitz had learned to surf when working as art director on *Blue Crush* (2002), so surf culture provided a handy environment for his characters to interact outdoors and accordingly be differentiated from “conventional gay characters.”²⁰⁹ He marks *Shelter* as different from other queer films because although the film *is* a coming out story, “the main character’s identity is not defined [only] by his being Gay.”²¹⁰

Complicating the characters’ identity also means complicating the film’s identity. Markowitz reports that he “didn’t set out specifically to make a gay film,” yet he pushes back against an interviewer’s suggestion that *Shelter* should *not* be labeled a “gay movie”:

Well, it is a gay movie, but it’s not just a gay movie. I think young queer viewers in particular are not interested in the standard gay coming out stories any more. So this film sort of breaks out of that mould, and maybe is something young people can relate to more easily.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Jonah Markowitz, quoted in Gary M. Kramer, “Finding Shelter with Director Jonah Markowitz,” *Seattle Gay News*, March 21, 2008.; Markowitz, quoted in Guy Coco, “TIL&GFF 2008: ‘Shelter’ Screening & Interview with Director Jonah Markowitz,” *TIL&GFF 2008* (blog), July 26, 2008, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://tilgff08.blogspot.com/2008/07/shelter-screening-interview-with.html>.

²⁰⁹ Markowitz, quoted in Coco, “TIL&GFF 2008.”

²¹⁰ Markowitz, quoted in Kramer, “Finding Shelter.”

²¹¹ Markowitz, quoted in Coco. “TIL&GFF 2008.”

His conclusion that young queer viewers do not want this kind of story appeals to authenticity, a term we'll return to below - what is true to young LGBTs' lives now, as opposed to the tired, stereotypical conceptions of what it is to be LGBT? He remarks that he wanted to make "a gay genre film...that wasn't centered around a bar or locker room but would shake up the genre."²¹²

In this case, Markowitz's use of "genre" seems to refer to the category of LGBT film as a whole. But Here's overall production and acquisition strategy is also apparent in the company's multiple films and shows that introduce gay themes and characters to more established, traditional genres. Here is certainly not the only company to distribute LGBT versions of genre films, but they do carry the highest number and produce the most explicit discourse about this strategy. Here Film's LGBT genre offering include: *Hellbent* (2004), a slasher film set during the Halloween Carnival in West Hollywood; *Third Man Out* (2005), the first of several gay detective films based on a series of novels by Richard Stevenson; *Deadly Skies* (2005), *Deadly Shift* (2008), and *Solar Flare* (2008), all disaster/sci-fi films portraying the earth threatened by various forms of worldwide apocalypse (and the gays and lesbians that help stop it); *In Her Line of Fire* (2006), a war film with a lesbian love story; and *Cthulhu* (2007), a supernatural horror film based on H. P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* and centered on a gay man's return to his hometown. This strategy here is to set up a discrete, parallel media circuit for LGBT viewers to have their own version of the sort of media they spent years extrapolating from.

When I interviewed Colichman, he talked quite a bit about the "authenticity" of Here's titles. Authenticity is a concept invoked quite often by LGBT media practitioners, so I asked him to explain his company's relationship to the term. At this point, he identified himself as a big fan

²¹² Colichman, quoted in Gregg Kilday, "Here! Provides 'Shelter' for Gay-Themed Movies," The Hollywood Reporter, March 28, 2008.

of genre movies and expressed a very particular connection between genre and LGBT film. According to him, “genre movies really influence how younger people view themselves,” and he cites beach movies from the 1950s and 1960s as important to American teenagers’ understanding of themselves. He sees the LGBT films of the late 90s and early 2000s as performing a disservice for young LGBT viewers by being what he calls “struggle pictures,” films centrally about victimhood and struggling to come out. For him, a preponderance of “struggle pictures” denied these LGBTs the chance to understand themselves through genre films the way straight teenagers were able to.

Besides Colichman connecting genre to an overall idea of “authenticity” in LGBT media, he *disconnects* “struggle pictures” about the difficulties of being LGBT from what viewers currently need or want. In his configuration, a film that is a “struggle picture” is *just* about LGBT identity, and hence less authentic because contemporary LGBT audiences no longer want or need this. A horror/fantasy show like Here TV’s flagship *Dante’s Cove* (2004-2007) answers these concerns. On the surface, the characters struggle far less with their sexual orientations than they do with evil witches and warlocks (and there is no shortage of naked bodies and simulated sex). The show also places LGBT characters into a genre of supernatural horror - more than once the show has been described as the gay *Dark Shadows* (which perhaps downplays the queerness of the original). Similarly to Jarchow above, Colichman sees genre films as a way to normalize LGBT representation, a way to help people “get used to gay characters in non-stereotypical roles, like being the guy who saves the world.”²¹³ For him, genre moves LGBT media past a focus on sexual identity issues, and instead inserts LGBT characters into perhaps-familiar narratives with

²¹³ Paul Colichman, interview by author, Los Angeles, September 24, 2015.

more generic foci, like an evil force to be defeated, a serial killer to evade, a natural disaster to avert, or a crime to solve.

This idea finds its purest expression in what Here branded as its “Everyday Gay Heroes” line, a handful of low-budget made-for-TV films that place LGBT characters into natural disaster plots. Information on this collection is sparse, but it seems to have included at least two of the movies I listed above, *Solar Flare* and *Polar Opposites*, and possibly also *Deadly Skies* and *Tides of War* (a 2005 film about a gay submarine commander).²¹⁴ The goal with these, according to Colichman, was to take “films that straight people would have had and just put gay people in the roles.”²¹⁵ And indeed, these are standard made-for-TV disaster B-movies where main characters just “happen to be gay” - I repeat Jarchow’s use of this cultural cliché because the films so exactly reflect the idea behind this phrase. A reference to a person who “happens to be gay” (or insert any other identity label) emphasizes that while it is important to note this person’s sexual identity at that moment, it is certainly not the most important thing about them. As I alluded to above, genre films provide a perfect venue for this presentation of LGBT identity: a couple scenes note the character’s sexuality to provide background information, but the film is much more focused on the character’s ability to achieve a generic goal - in these cases, to save the world.

What is most interesting about these films, however, is that some were released in two versions - an LGBT and non-LGBT version. According to Tracy Nelson, an actor in *Solar Flare*, during production the three protagonists would shoot important scenes once with the two male

²¹⁴ “Everyday Gay Heroes” is a label sometimes included in marketing / packaging for certain films. *Solar Flare*’s packaging, for example, sometimes includes the label and sometimes does not.

²¹⁵ Colichman, interview by author.

leads as a couple, and once with the female lead and one male lead as a couple.²¹⁶ Different versions of the film would play on television in different international markets; according to Colichman, when he would offer both versions Canada and the UK would take the LGBT version, while many other markets would take the straight version. He describes this strategy as “a way to finance bigger gay movies, basically. I could get straight dollars so they weren't stuck in a gay ghetto.”²¹⁷

The differences between the films are limited yet fascinating. One such film is *Deadly Skies*, which tells the story of astronomer Madison Taylor (Rae Dawn Chong) whose discovery of a planet-threatening asteroid goes unheard amongst the politics and bureaucracy of the U.S. military. For help she turns to Richard Donovan (Antonio Sabato, Jr.), a former Air Force colonel discharged, in the gay version, for outing himself as gay. However his partner Mark Lewis (Michael Boisvert) is still an active lieutenant, so they have to keep their relationship a secret. The group breaks into an Air Force facility to activate a secret laser device to destroy the asteroid before it hits Earth.

Some of the differences between *Deadly Skies*, the gay version, and *Force of Impact*, the straight version, required actual double-shooting of certain scenes, while others required only a bit of editing. The gay version of the film opens with small meteoroids hitting three places on Earth: a mountain in Switzerland, the Serengeti, and the Southern California city of Palm Springs, known for its high population of LGBT couples. This last impact takes place after a prolonged scene of two topless women (listed as “Swim Beauty 1” and “Swim Beauty 2” in the credits) being intimate in a pool. The straight version, however, shows the Switzerland and

²¹⁶ Tracy Nelson, commenting on “Polar Opposites - Non-Gay Version?!!??” (fan-made comparison video), September 9, 2009, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQMuGzZh3kI>

²¹⁷ Colichman, interview by author.

Serengeti scenes but replaces Palm Springs with the Mojave Desert, omitting any people from this impact site. Later, in the gay version, the Donovan and Mark characters are first seen when their sex is interrupted by Madison's arrival at Donovan's house, and the scene closes with the two men discussing Donovan's dismissal from the military based on Don't Ask Don't Tell. In the straight version, we only see Donovan in relation to Madison - Donovan appears to live alone, and Madison's arrival and departure from his house mark the beginning and end of the scene. Mark appears later once the heist begins, but as Donovan's friend.

Later in the film during the group's infiltration of the military facility, when Donovan and Madison are caught they pretend to be a couple kissing in a jeep. The guard recognizes Donovan, remembers he was discharged for being gay, and begins to call him a faggot before Madison shoots him with a tranquilizer dart (and shortly after, another guard also making a gay joke is "punished" by another tranquilizer dart). In the straight version, the guard merely gets aggressive because the couple are on restricted property, causing Madison to shoot him. The gay version takes this opportunity for Donovan to out himself to Madison, but the straight version suggests there is a spark between the two. The rest of the film proceeds without much difference besides gay-Donovan calling Mark "babe" a few times in private, but the gay ending scene has Madison bringing a thank-you bottle of champagne to Donovan's house, once again interrupting the couple's sex (intercut with shots of a muscular male torso statue and a photo of the couple) and discovering that Mark is Donovan's boyfriend. In the straight version, Donovan accepts her invitation to kiss again because he likes "a woman of action," and brings her and the champagne inside to "pop this cork." "So naughty," she giggles as they disappear into the house.

The two-version production process was matched by the marketing of the films. In the case of *Deadly Skies*, the gay-version trailer foregrounds Donovan's discharge from the military

as a result of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy and includes brief imagery of him and Mark having sex alongside the spoken dialogue "I was done living lies." The straight-version *Force of Impact* trailer skips any dialogue about DADT or imagery of gay sex since, after all, this footage does not exist in this version of the film. The box art for the two versions also differ, with the gay version featuring Donovan and Mark's faces (even while Chong actually gets billing) and the straight version featuring Donovan and Madison.

The covers of gay *Tides of War* / straight *U.S.S. Poseidon: Phantom Below* (2005) employ a similar distinction, with Mike Doyle's character (Tom), who is downgraded from partner to best friend in the straight version, being replaced on the cover by Catherine Dent's character (Claire). The actual textual changes between the two versions of this film are even less numerous than in the case of *Deadly Skies* / *Force of Impact*, but some differences do appear. The opening scene of the gay version shows Adrian Paul's character (Frank) and Tom during a naked morning swim-and-canoodle in their pool, while the straight version shows Frank swimming alone and wearing trunks. Frank's reaction to his *partner* Tom's death is slightly more prolonged and extreme - he sobs on his knees next to the pool where the couple swam - than is his reaction to his *best friend* Tom's death. The only other differences entail Frank's interactions with Claire, Tom's sister, who in the gay version finds Frank's love letters, and who at the end discusses with Frank Tom's struggle to come out and her gratitude that her brother had someone to love. Unlike in *Deadly Skies* / *Force of Impact*, however, no heterosexual love interest is introduced for Frank - the only two women in the film already have husbands.

Interestingly, both of these films include LGBT characters in the armed forces (and were produced during DADT) a narrative element that is highly effective for films that need to have a gay and straight version. Within the diegesis the characters cannot be open about their

homosexuality because of the U.S. military's anti-LGBT policies, so comments about and representations of their sexuality are few and far between, which is pragmatically necessary for films meant to be easily edited into straight versions - it'd be much more difficult to edit something like *Edge of Seventeen* in this way. One result, though, is that characters' motivations are not always as clear in the straight versions of these genre movies. Brian Trenchard-Smith, the director of *Tides of War*, said he preferred the LGBT version because this iteration of the film "is better drama. The hero has a secret."²¹⁸ Frank's vehement insistence on avenging Tom's death makes more sense when we understand the two were partners, as opposed to seeing them briefly together on the submarine before his death in the straight version; and in *Deadly Skies*, Donovan's exit of the armed forces under DADT clarifies his backstory and leaves fewer questions unanswered (and the character's being gay also avoids a very clumsy heterosexual coupling in the straight version).

Deadly Skies and *Tides of War* are examples of, as Jarchow phrased it above, films in which "gay is incidental to the storyline." The meat of the plot is not about characters coming to terms with their sexuality, or seeking acceptance from loved ones, or fighting political oppression, but rather a generic concern like natural disaster or military action. This serves both a culturally discursive purpose, in that it "normalizes" LGBTs, to again use Jarchow's phrasing, and a commercial purpose, in that these films can be altered slightly and sold into markets that would not welcome a TV genre movie with an LGBT storyline. This commercial purpose also informs the characterization of LGBT people. The men in the film need to present as what might be called "straight-acting": if they exhibited characteristics or mannerisms typically associated with gay men, their gayness could not be so easily textually-excised in the straight versions of

²¹⁸ Trenchard-Smith, quoted in Danny, "Brian Trenchard-Smith Swims."

the film. And whether this is the intent or not, this presentation of gay men occurs alongside Here's interest in "normal" LGBT representation and showing characters for whom "being gay is only part of who these characters are," implying that, for example, gay men with more effeminate or legibly gay mannerisms are in some way not as normal or are overly consumed by their gayness, rather than it just being *part* of who they are. I do not assume that these films were designed with malicious gay-shaming intent; rather, I see these films as a sort of overdetermined result of commercial strategy, assimilationist politics, and the producer's earnest love of genre films.

These films are also helpful to a consideration of what, for Here Media, defines a film as "gay" or "LGBT." According to Colichman, a Here Media film is "something that's a little sexy" and "generally something that is genre." When I asked him how he decides if a film is "gay enough," he emphasized the "sexy" aspect, saying that "Since I like stuff with sexuality, it's pretty clear when they're gay enough for me."²¹⁹ *Deadly Skies* and *Tides of War* do bear this idea out, as much of the films' excisable LGBT content consists of sex and nudity: lesbian pool make-outs and two gay sex scenes (of varying length/exposure) in *Deadly Skies*, and naked gay intimacy in the pool in *Tides of War*. What is *not* here, of course, are storylines deeply involved with the experience of being LGBT or characters for whom this is a central identity trait. This feature of the films marries Here Media's business and political concerns: these films are rendered sellable in a greater variety of venues, *and* these films present LGBT characters for whom, to use Jarchow's term once more, their sexuality is "incidental" to their lives as represented on screen.

²¹⁹ Colichman, interview by author.

The idea that LGBT-versions of genre media mark an important step in LGBT media representation is not unique to Here Media discourse. For example, an article in *Broadcasting & Cable* cites Here TV and Logo's launch of soap operas in 2005 as "how we know gay TV is starting to arrive."²²⁰ The 2005 Outfest festival program celebrated LGBT genre films with this message from the programmers: "2005 may be remembered as the year the genre film became defiantly queer....Romantic comedies, sports films, thrillers, crime stories, sci-fi – each of these genres has been sprinkled with fairy dust resulting in exhilarating movies that boldly tell our unique stories."²²¹ This same year, *The Advocate* expressed similar hope in its reporting on the "new new queer cinema," its name for a number of gay genre films including *Eating Out* (2004), *D.E.B.S.* (2004), *Hellbent* (2004), *Adam & Steve* (2005), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). While this description of "genre film" is in some cases arguable - for example, is *Brokeback* recognizable as a generic Western as the article suggests? - it is telling that the *Advocate* editors excitedly frame this surge in genre films as predictive of even more LGBT films in the future.²²²

Conclusion

These excited accounts about the progress signified by LGBT genre films circle this chapter back to its early section on "mainstreaming," the process so important to Wolfe Video. The company defines mainstreaming as LGBT media becoming understood as a discrete "genre" with its own labels, shelves, or categories on digital media platforms. LGBT genre films like those produced and distributed by Here Media seem like, if not a next step, then at least another form or realization of this mainstreaming impulse. Not only have LGBT films become more

²²⁰ Paige Albiniak, "Just Barely Out," *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 17, 2005.

²²¹ Kirsten Schaffer and David Courier, "From the Programmers," in Outfest 2005 program, 31.

²²² Adam B. Vary, "Here Comes the New New Queer Cinema," *The Advocate*, April 26, 2005.

visible in retail/streaming venues, and more *real* through the codification of the category itself, but in this case the films have come to actually resemble recognizable forms of “straight” film. For Here Media, this is progress - it moves LGBT filmmaking away from “struggle pictures” and makes an LGBT film more than “just” an LGBT film, and makes a character’s LGBT identity secondary to other traits, like their profession or dedication or heroism. LGBT characters can do more than just struggle with gayness; they can achieve the generic goals that straight characters have been pursuing for decades of film. Here’s impulse to transcend “just” LGBTness in their genre films also echoes Strand and TLA’s ambivalence about the label of “LGBT” film. In Here’s “Everyday Gay Heroes” films, a heroic character just “happens to be gay; in the Strand and TLA examples above, a film “happens” to have LGBT content, but that doesn’t mean the film *is* LGBT itself, a position Strand would take because “LGBT film” is connected to misprioritized, low-quality film, and a position TLA’s festival would take because the label may repel potential straight viewers and ultimately continue divisions between LGBT and straight people.

Chapter Three will engage further with the question of what LGBT viewers are imagined to “need,” especially in comparison to what has historically been available to straight viewers, but here I hope to have demonstrated some of the complications of categorizing a text as “LGBT.” As the examples above illustrate, besides being a product of deliberate and strategic discursive work, this label does not correlate to a neat, clearly-defined category into which films clearly do or do not fit. A text’s identity is highly contingent, able to be marshalled around a particular “center of gravity,” and different venues (like festivals, video stores, or streaming platforms) and practitioners (like distributors and curators) can choose to centralize LGBT content/appeal, or not. To repeat an argument I made in the last chapter, even though it’s easy

and even often helpful to imagine a text having some form of an LGBT “identity,” this is as fictional as queer theory suggests that contemporary personal LGBT identity is: important, meaningful, and not to be discounted, but also highly subject to historicizing and contextualizing analysis of the investments, methods, and effects of such a categorizing choice.

When I teach students about this idea, I use a visual example: I show a collection of objects with varying shapes and colors, and then ask someone how we might group them. A student usually volunteers “by color” first, and I show an image of such a grouping: reds on one side, yellows on the other, and then two greens left in the middle (with the individual shapes becoming subsumed as a less-defining aspect of the objects). When they offer an alternative “by shape” rubric, I show an image of all squares on one side and all circles on the other, leaving the two diamonds sitting in the middle (the colors now relegated to relative unimportance). And sometimes, of course, the students surprise me with an alternative rubric I hadn’t considered. I use this when asking students to think more rigorously about genre and categorization because I want to help them see that although a certain organizational strategy seems logical and natural, it is often but one of several similarly-logical choices. This example also demonstrates Hall’s notion about the excess that is almost always a by-product of a categorizing choice, the “too much” or “too little” that can never quite be tidily accounted for in any particular organizational rubric.²²³

This is one reason why attention to industrial/production analysis is so vital for queer / LGBT media studies. Meaning is not produced only by creators’ choices, or LGBT content in a text, or viewers’ personal interactions with the representations on screen; meaning also results from the industrial work of packaging, promoting, framing, and naming a text. Paratexts like

²²³ Hall, 3.

these don't just prepare us for certain interpretations of or relationships with a text - in the case of the companies described above, they tell us what the text *is*. It's gay, it's queer, it's LGBT; and this framing of the text activates a range of very real economic effects as exhibition and advertising venues open that might not otherwise be available. As scholars, it is at our peril that we take for granted the idea of an "LGBT film" and forget the important contributions that industrial and production cultures make to what soon becomes understood as the core identity of a text.

Chapter 2

Capital and Conscience: Politics and Business in Niche LGBT Media

I return to the trope of “business, not politics” to argue that, despite this disclaimer, tracing a history of gay- and lesbian-themed marketing reveals a complicated and contradictory relationship between these apparently discrete imperatives.

- Katherine Sender, in *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*²²⁴

After the cancellation of HBO’s *Looking*, show creator Michael Lannan gave a 2016 interview to *Queerty* where, in response to a question about the rarity of a show with a majority of queer main characters, he insisted that “people have to support gay shows. Because frankly, it is a fairly small audience in the grand scheme of things....So if gay audiences don’t get behind a show about gay characters fully, it probably won’t last.” A user comment on the article noted Lannan’s command that the community “support gay shows” and tossed back,

But we did, Blanche, we did....You had a built-in loyal audience ready to back you up. But the characters were not all that believable and almost none were likeable, so we degenerated into ‘hate-watching’ (if we stayed with you at all).²²⁵

While this commenter rejected the premise that gay viewers are required by their identity to support a show like *Looking*, Lannan’s position has historical precedent. Plenty has been written (and as often, challenged, retheorized, or disproven) about LGBT consumers, especially since the 1990s when marketers seemed to “rediscover” gay men as an untapped consumer base.²²⁶ While much of the mythologizing around LGBT (or gay) consumers is easy in retrospect

²²⁴ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 23.

²²⁵ Michael Lannan, quoted in Jase Peeples, “Looking Creator Michael Lannan: ‘People Have To Support Gay Shows,’” *Queerty* (blog), November 15, 2016, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.queerty.com/looking-creator-michael-lannan-people-support-gay-shows-20161115>. Comment by “Heywood Jablowme,” November 15, 2016.

²²⁶ For history on the very deliberate, politically-strategic construction of an idealized gay male market in the 1990s, and rigorous critique of the underlying assumptions and ongoing impact, see Sender, *Business, Not Politics*; Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); M. V. Lee Badgett, *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago:

to discard based on inflated statistics about disposable income and faulty methodology centralizing mostly white, educated, middle-to-upper class gay cismen as representative samples, what has long been a core tenet of LGBT marketing logic and still deserves consideration, is that these consumers are *loyal*. In the 1990s, the assumption was that after a historical dearth of acknowledgment outside of condemnation, mocking, or at least pity, LGBT would be especially responsive to being courted by companies. Alexandra Chasin identifies the *Bay Area Reporter's* claims about the loyalty of the gay market as early as 1977, and tracks similar claims in the 1990s when magazines like *American Demographics* proposed that “because [gay] consumers are disenfranchised from mainstream society, they are open to overtures from marketers.”²²⁷ Chasin notes that according to marketers’ logic, “consumer culture offers redress for the disenfranchisement of those who have traditionally been cast as ‘others’ on the basis of their identities”; thus, if a corporation acknowledges LGBTs and appears to publicly ask for their business, this “corrective for past social alienation” will win LGBT consumers’ loyalty due to their gratitude at being recognized and “supported” by these companies.²²⁸

In 2000, Chasin hadn’t seen statistical evidence proving this point, but more recent social science research has suggested that LGBTs *do* exhibit consumer loyalty to brands perceived as “gay-friendly” and even prioritize a company’s LGBT-friendliness over financial concerns. That is, they are more willing to support a company that is more expensive but has an LGBT-friendly

University of Chicago Press, 2001); Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, “The Gay Marketing Moment,” in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3-9; Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss, “Queer Precarity and the Myth of Gay Affluence,” *New Labor Forum* 24, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 18–27.

²²⁷ Hazel Kahan and David Mulryan, “Out of the Closet,” *American Demographics*, May 1995: 40. Quoted in Chasin, 38.

²²⁸ Chasin, 39.

image than a similar, less-expensive company without that image.²²⁹ A 2014 consumer research survey also found that LGBT consumers deliberately chose to support companies like Target, Starbucks, Apple, Nabisco, and JCPenney based on their pro-LGBT policies or practices; the latter two companies had particularly visible pro-LGBT ad campaigns that year.²³⁰

These consumer choices relate to the politicization of LGBT content. Because of a history of invisibility or misrepresentation, media with images of LGBTs and especially media *for* LGBTs is often perceived as corrective and inherently political, and thus LGBT advocacy organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) often call on LGBTs to consume and support this media or the involved companies. For example, the ACLU crafted a 2013 petition to have Cam and Mitch, the gay couple on the popular ABC show *Modern Family*, get married onscreen, with petition-signers promising to (live) watch an episode where this happened, and GLAAD was eager to attach Americans' growing comfort with same-sex marriage to the relationship and marriage of these characters.²³¹

The association between LGBT identity and consumption (of media or otherwise) has prompted plenty of theorization and critique. Appeals to consumption-based support depend on a kind of affect that Hollis Griffin has called “gay consumer citizenship,” which he defines as “sentiments of belonging that are, in essence, manufactured for sale and made available to the

²²⁹ Tuten, Tracy L. “The Effect of Gay-Friendly and Non-Gay-Friendly Cues on Brand Attitudes: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Gay/Lesbian Reactions.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 21, no. 3–4 (April 1, 2005): 441–61.

²³⁰ *CMI's 8th Annual LGBT Community Survey* (San Francisco, Community Marketing, Inc, September 2014), 38–39, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.gayadnetwork.com/files/CMI2014Survey.pdf>.

²³¹ ACLU, “ACLU Action Launches Campaign to Get Cam and Mitch Hitched on ‘Modern Family,’” (press release), May 15, 2013 accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/news/aclu-action-launches-campaign-get-cam-and-mitch-hitched-modern-family>; Jeremy Hooper, “Why the #ModernWedding Matters,” *GLAAD* blog, May 14, 2014, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.glaad.org/blog/why-modernwedding-matters>

queer publics who can - or want to - spend the money to buy them.”²³² Griffin is talking about the ways in which a neoliberal economy offers specific ways to demonstrate membership and participation in the LGBT community. This context tends to “frame political issues on personal terms, articulating things like dating and going out to gay and lesbian bars as civic matters,” and we could add “consuming media” to that list.²³³

We saw this above in Michael Lannan’s appeal to gay viewers to support a show with gay characters, and many niche LGBT webseries are the product of successful Kickstarter campaigns: Season 2 of *Eastsiders*, season 2 of *Hunting Season*, and season 4 of *Where the Bears Are* each raised over \$150K of production funds through Kickstarter. Independent productions like these often tacitly use the idea of LGBTs engaging in political participation through media consumption to marshal support for funding campaigns. For example, the first season of *Eastsiders* made this explicit appeal: “There isn’t a lot of funding out there for GLBT content from traditional sources - especially on the web. It’s only through the support of people like you that these stories can be told.”²³⁴ Here, responsible citizenship as a member of the LGBT community requires financial support and social promotion of independent LGBT media. Viewership and consumption becomes attached to a core aspect of these viewers’ identity, and supporting this media becomes not only service to their community but also an act of self-interest. Using Viacom’s Nickelodeon network as a case study, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that “brand loyalty...functions as a particular kind of citizen practice,” and for my purposes this idea

²³² F. Hollis Griffin, “Manufactured Feelings: Media Convergence and Gay Consumer Citizenship” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2010), 20.

²³³ Griffin, “Manufactured Feelings,” 21.

²³⁴ “About,” “*EastSiders* the Series” Kickstarter, January 2013, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1503081443/eastsiders-the-series/description>

can extend to LGBT media - in this formulation, intra-community loyalty to LGBT media production is a way to *be* a citizen of the LGBT community.²³⁵ Griffin also notes the combination of these actions, saying that “the processes of commerce always court minorities as citizens AND consumers,” which can obscure and naturalize the conflation of these positions.²³⁶

Taking a long view, Chasin employs economic history and theory to emphasize the likelihood that market-based rights (i.e. LGBTs achieving representation and franchisement based on their ability to participate in American capitalism) will further enable those in power and disadvantage those with already limited access. Overall, Chasin takes a (properly) cynical approach to corporate recognition of LGBTs (and their buying power) and questions whether increasing visibility in the market is progress at all. It’s worth noting that Chasin is talking mostly about mainstream (i.e. not LGBT-specific) companies pursuing LGBT consumers, a dynamic that invites special scrutiny. She quotes from her 1998 interview with Julie Dorf, Executive Director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, who believes that corporate sponsorship of LGBT concerns is “not primarily a philanthropic activity - it’s a marketing tool” and that “all the internalized homophobia makes it feel good to have the big corporate names, how excited we are to see Seagram’s ads in *Out* magazine.”²³⁷ Mainstream corporations may care less about LGBT politics themselves than how said politics can affect their brand image and ultimately their bottom line. This debate continues in a variety of venues, and marketers continue to explore how they can curry the favor of LGBT consumers without appearing to pander.

²³⁵ Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. Console-Ing Passions. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007, 20.

²³⁶ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 12.

²³⁷ Julie Dorf, quoted in Chasin, 198, 205.

This problem becomes particularly interesting in the context of LGBT-identified companies. How do assumptions about a company's "true" intentions and their effects become complicated when its industrial logic is grounded in LGBT identity? Of course it is important not to reduce companies or corporations to singularly-motivated entities. Companies that don't identify themselves *as* LGBT can still be staffed by LGBT employees who attempt to exert intra-company influence to effect their personal visions of political progress. Still, an LGBT-identified company offers a particular set of discourses to examine. Explaining the logic for his own approach, Griffin states that if LGBT media companies are critiqued for their "tendency to conflate consumption (economic value) and citizenship (political value), I want to raise the possibility that this conflating requires a unique mode of criticism when cinema, television, and online media are produced by and for sexual minorities."²³⁸ Any discussion of the relationship between community identity and commerce must acknowledge the complexity of the practical relationship between economics and LGBT affect. After all, a central tenet of this dissertation concerns the economic and cultural significance of these companies regardless of (valuable) queer critiques of the media that they distribute. Still, critical analysis of LGBT media companies' invocation of community membership is vital because at its most basic, gay consumer citizenship is "a process that takes place wherever the signs of sexual difference are deployed in search of profit" and the images that viewers are convinced to financially support become representative of LGBT life and influence how both LGBT and straight viewers think about sexual identity and politics.²³⁹

²³⁸ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 14

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

These questions are relevant to all the distributors this dissertation considers, but two companies are particularly valuable as objects of analysis. This chapter will first analyze Wolfe Video and its invocation of political and community obligations (particularly for lesbians) to encourage certain kinds of consumption of its product. This example demonstrates the precarious discursive relationship between LGBT politics and business. I will then explore this relationship in the context of Here Media, the biggest and most conglomerated company this dissertation considers. I give significant space to this company, laying out the pre-history of the company as a context for understanding the later vertical integration and conglomeration constitutive to its current structure and operations. Together these distributors demonstrate how companies sustain their politics through their business, signify their business with politics, and marshal LGBT identity as a logic of labor and consumption for their employees and customers.

“Play Your Part!”: Community, Politics, and Business at Wolfe Video

I know that illegally downloading lesbian films is just a bad habit that really hurts the entire filmmaking community....Every time somebody doesn't pay to watch a gay or lesbian film...it's really stealing from the community and the indie filmmakers who worked so hard to tell our stories.

- Actress Michelle Wolff in a Wolfe Video anti-piracy PSA²⁴⁰

When I began researching Wolfe Video's internet presence, I was surprised and ultimately charmed to find a series of posts on the company Facebook page that were ostensibly unrelated to the business itself. A November 2010 post includes a photo of the staff sitting around a large table with dishes of food, captioned with “We had a special pre-Thanksgiving staff lunch at the Wolfe office this past week. :) A Happy Thanksgiving to all - from all of us at

²⁴⁰ Michelle Wolff, “Ashleigh Sumner & Michelle Wolff Want YOU to Pay To Play!” (Wolfe Video anti-piracy PSA), November 17, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jeeEvOqGGo>

Wolfe.” An August 2010 post includes an album of the staff enjoying a “wonderful Wolfe day boating” and inner tubing at Anderson River Park. And an August 2013 post even included a wedding announcement of Kathy Wolfe’s marriage to her longtime partner Barbara Verhage (also a Wolfe employee) with a photo of the newlyweds leaving San Francisco City Hall two months after the repeal of Proposition 8 in California. In this third example, the photo caption asks site users to “Please LIKE this post and share your comments below to congratulate the happy couple!”²⁴¹

It is not uncommon for a company’s social media to acknowledge holidays or publish other vaguely-personalizing posts, but I was struck by just *how* personal Wolfe Video’s posts seemed. Slightly blurry photography of Thanksgiving, drenched people almost flopping off their inner tubes during a summer day trip, and wedding photos - these looked more like posts on a family member’s Facebook than what a company would publish as, ultimately, a PR move. Posts like these present a strong image of family, camaraderie, and appreciation within Wolfe Video as a company, while the wedding post also makes the personal life of the company founder accessible to the wider Wolfe Video community (i.e. people invested enough to follow the company’s Facebook page), explicitly inviting them to remotely take part in the festivities and wish the couple well.

This casual tone and family/community focus has long been part of the company’s corporate image as well. In the 2001 iteration of their site, Wolfe Video’s “About Wolfe” section includes the sentence “We are proud to be a ‘Family’ run company,” the scare quotes perhaps

²⁴¹ Thanksgiving photo, Wolfe Video’s Facebook page, November 19 2001, <https://www.facebook.com/WolfeVideo/photos/a.141166788074.111510.40270403074/10150383827618075>; “Wolfe fun on Anderson ...AArrrooooo!” (photo album), Wolfe Video’s Facebook page, August 27, 2010, https://www.facebook.com/pg/WolfeVideo/photos/?tab=album&album_id=426843613074; Wedding announcement, Wolfe Video’s Facebook page, August 27, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/WolfeVideo/photos/a.141166788074.111510.40270403074/10151694597103075>. All accessed December 8, 2017.

suggesting a playful double use of the term “family” as both an indicator of the community-focused ethos of the company and as an historical code word for gay and lesbian.²⁴² The 2004 iteration of the website states that

Wolfe has grown and developed in a manner that reflects the skills, values and sensibilities of the people who work here. We maintain a family culture, which enhances productivity, profitability and a keen understanding of the marketplace.²⁴³

This iteration of the website uses language much closer to what might be called “business speak,” retaining the family idea while also couching it in a corporate logic of increased profit. In interviews, Wolfe also often makes reference to the staff resembling an extended family and Wolfe Video operating like a family business, as well as to her deliberate choices to maintain this environment.²⁴⁴ The Wolfe Video staff is even referred to as the “Wolfe Pack” throughout the company website, which not only reiterates the idea of family and friendship between the staff, but also presents company management in language that is relaxed and fun.

Besides the chunk of corporate-oriented family-as-business-productivity copy in Wolfe Video’s mission statement, the ways in which the Wolfe community is presented and discussed as detailed above makes the company seem accessible and relaxed, with the staff eager to welcome fans not only into engagement with the company, but also with their personal lives. This approach minimizes how “corporate” Wolfe Video appears, making the company seem less like a top-down structure and more like a collection of women who are simply co-members of

²⁴² “About Wolfe,” *WolfeVideo.com*, April 14, 2001 version, *Internet Archive*, http://web.archive.org/web/20010414232841/http://www.wolfevideo.com/about_wolfe.asp.

²⁴³ “Our Vision,” *WolfeVideo.com*, April 22, 2004 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040422181007/http://www.wolfevideo.com/about.asp>.

²⁴⁴ Bowen, “Wolfe @ 25”; Kathy Wolfe, “Wolfe Video Founder Tells Her Own Story,” *dot429* (blog), October 15, 2011, October 18, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20111018040650/http://dot429.com/articles/2011/10/15/wolfe-video-founder>.

the lesbian community alongside those who watch and purchase videos. In examples like these and throughout the discourse the company produces, Wolfe Video portrays itself, filmmakers, and viewers as members of a niche community or family with the responsibility to support each other. This kind of camaraderie and its concurrent hailing of viewers as fellow LGBT or lesbian citizens (depending on the context) can then be employed to request support from those Wolfe Video has hailed. How does Wolfe extend these ideas to encourage certain kinds of participation and consumption by viewers?

LGBT Consumer Responsibility

In a 2005 *Curve* article, Lynn and Wolfe insist on the importance of theatrical release to LGBT film, and explicitly appeal to readers to attend lesbian films in theaters. “In terms of growth [of lesbian films] in the future, one of the biggest things consumers can do is to go out to the movies,” Lynn remarks. “We get a lot of, ‘Why aren’t there more lesbian films?’ - a big part of it would change if women knew that it made a difference if they went to theaters.”²⁴⁵ Wolfe gravely calls viewers skipping the theater and waiting until a film is on video a “fatal decision....We are trying to put out the word about how the public at large can make a difference. Without that level of support, it falls to the shoulders of filmmakers and investors to try to make it happen.”²⁴⁶ A 2008 *Advocate* article by Regina Marler corroborates the Wolfe team’s concern about lesbian theater attendance, borrowing its thesis from *D.E.B.S.* (2004) director Angela Robinson disappointed concession that “now I just agree: Lesbians don’t go to the movies.”²⁴⁷ Marler suggests both economic reasons, in that lesbian filmmakers and their

²⁴⁵ Maria Lynn, quoted in Anderson-Minshall, “Wolfe Video.”

²⁴⁶ Kathy Wolfe, quoted in *ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Angela Robinson, quoted in Regina Marler, “Girl Trouble,” *The Advocate*, November 4, 2008.

distributors don't have the resources to promote the films as extensively as gay male filmmakers, and social factors about how gay men and lesbians tend to respond to marketing differently. Low theater attendance for lesbian films then discourages potential investors from financing lesbian features, and in doing so contributes to a lower number of well-known lesbian figures in popular filmmaking (Marler compares gay male directors Gus Van Sant and Todd Haynes to lesbian directors Robinson, Jamie Babbit, Donna Deitch, and Rose Troche).

Reflecting changes in media technology, Wolfe Video has also framed *legal* viewing of their films as a form of participation in and support for the LGBT community in recent years. In November 2010 Wolfe Video released a series of four videos as part of its "Pay to Play: Support Community Filmmaking" campaign. These PSA-style videos feature actors (and the occasional writer or director) involved with Wolfe titles explaining the importance of paying for LGBT film. The most prominent theme is the responsibility of (presumed LGBT) viewers to support those involved in creating LGBT films and making them accessible, an idea expressed through lines like:

- "You play an important part in our queer filmmaking community."
- "Let the filmmakers of your favorite films know that you support them."
- "Together we can make sure that our stories continue to get told."
- "It takes a team to tell the stories of our lives. So join our team! And play your part."
- "Of all the things that you can support, support your community."

In the months following the launch of this campaign, Kathy Wolfe penned anti-piracy pieces for *SheWired* and *Huffington Post* (in the latter calling online movie piracy a "scourge"), and a Wolfe Video press release announced Logo's decision to air the Pay to Play videos on TV.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Wolfe, "The New New Queer Cinema."

These articles echo the ideas in the PSAs: piracy “quite literally rob[s] filmmakers of their rightful earnings, and threaten[s] to silence our unique voices,” and viewers are asked to “show [their] support by making a commitment today....to purchase, rent or legally download LGBT films.”²⁴⁹ The company’s press release even asks viewers to “support *community filmmaking* by not participating in online movie piracy and illegally downloading” [emphasis added].²⁵⁰ The Pay to Play logo also employs this language, using the slogan “support community filmmaking” without any textual or visual reference to LGBT identity. With this phrasing the campaign extends its reach even further; it’s not just the LGBT community that media pirates are hurting, but rather independent filmmakers in general, expanding viewers’ responsibility to pay for media.

Wolfe and others paint a grim picture of the future of independent filmmaking if viewers ignoring the gravity of film piracy. According to Wolfe, such a “perspective foretells a dark future for all creative people and those who support them. It’s not free to make a movie, nor is it free to promote it.”²⁵¹ Nicole Conn, director of Wolfe favorites *Claire of the Moon* (1992) and *Elena Undone* (2010), is even more specific in her warnings about the future of LGBT filmmaking if independent filmmakers are not compensated for their work:

It’s going to be swallowed up into mainstream filmmaking...Straight men will make our stories because they have a budget and they can get A-list actors....If we want gay and lesbian products we are going to have to support gay and lesbian filmmakers, otherwise it is not going to be there anymore.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Kathy Wolfe, “A Call to Action for Lesbian Movie Lovers!,” *SheWired* (blog), December 7, 2010, now available at *Pride.com* (blog), accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.pride.com/box-office/call-action-lesbian-movie-lovers>.

²⁵⁰ Wolfe Video, “Logo Joins Wolfe’s Anti-Piracy Fight” (press release), February 1, 2011, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://wolferelasing.com/pressrelease/press-release-logo-joins-wolfes-anti-piracy-fight/>.

²⁵¹ *Revolutionary Gay Magazine*, “Wolfe Video.”

²⁵² Nicole Conn, quoted in Edie Stull, “Wolfe Video Asks You to Help Make Film Pirates Walk the Plank,” *Examiner.com*, December 19, 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/article/wolfe-video-asks-you-to-help-make-film-pirates-walk-the-plank>. No longer available but transcribed by the author.

This warning evokes the intersectionality of lesbian identity (women and homosexual) discussed above - these potential tellers of lesbian stories are both STRAIGHT and MEN, doubling their inability to create authentic representations of lesbian life.

Wolfe Video even uses social media to engage with viewers on the topic of piracy. In the comment section of one of Wolfe's Pay to Play videos, YouTube user "dadevi" wrote that

LGBT filmmakers need to step up their game and offer online downloads and streams of their movies. And BTW, charging thirty bucks or twenty-five bucks for a DVD is freaking ridiculous in this day and age, especially when the storyline and the acting sucks, which it does in a lot of the LGBT movies....And you have to take into consideration the many people who are closeted and simply can't buy a hard copy of a movie.

Wolfe Video responded directly (and measuredly) to this comment:

Hey there @dadevi — You can watch Wolfe LGBT movies legally at any one of these fine, legal online sources: iTunes, Amazon VOD, Netflix Watch Instantly, Vudu, CinemaNow, Blockbuster Online and PlayStation Store. Please support LGBT community filmmaking. Thanks.²⁵³

While it might be surprising for most companies to respond to a snarky comment like this, especially with its criticism of LGBT filmmaking as a whole, instigating a dialogue to engage directly with (some of) this person's concerns is in line with the relatable, non-hierarchical image that Wolfe Video tends to present of itself. A few months later an Australian Facebook user posed what he called "two genuine questions" on Wolfe Video's Facebook separate page dedicated to the Pay to Play campaign: "are you able to provide a list of sites where I can watch/stream/download LGBT movies legally in AUSTRALIA?" and "are the release dates comparable with US dates, or are they 1-2 years behind US release dates?" He comments that "so little content is negotiated for legal streaming/download release outside the US and/or in a

²⁵³ dadevi, comment on "Thea Gill, Drea Weber and Nicole Conn Want YOU to Pay-to-Play" (Wolfe Video anti-piracy PSA), November 17, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBTeMeJg3ks>. Both comments marked as "7 years ago" as of December 8, 2017.

timely manner,” which leads to “a huge European/Oceanic pirate network.” Wolfe Video responded by explaining the complexities of international distribution and their lack of control over distribution outside North America.²⁵⁴

But the conversation didn’t end there. A month later Wolfe Video wrote a second response:

Hi Chris — Very excited to let you know that we just launched <http://WolfeOnDemand.com> — a new worldwide LGBT movie-watching platform where people across the globe (including Australia) can access great LGBT films from the Wolfe library. We have about 40 titles up right now and are posting new films every few days. Right now we've got a ton of great films up like *Private Romeo*, *Judas Kiss*, *Undertow*, *Were The World Mine* and many many more. Please go take a look!²⁵⁵

The launch of WolfeOnDemand was consistently framed as a part of the anti-piracy process Wolfe Video had started with its Pay to Play campaign. The company press release described the new site as being “designed to fight online piracy and maximize the commercial sharing of legal authorized films online,” while Kathy Wolfe framed the site as a way to meet the needs of international audiences who want a way to legally access these films.²⁵⁶

Beyond simply providing wider and more immediate accessibility, WolfeOnDemand also implemented a reward system for viewers who themselves encourage acquaintances to legally consume Wolfe titles. This affiliate program allows users to create personalized links to WolfeOnDemand.com or WolfeVideo.com, and pays users commission on resulting sales. An *Indiewire* article on this program described Wolfe Video’s strategy as “monetizing the

²⁵⁴ Chris Peak, post on Pay to Play Support Community Filmmaking’s Facebook page, April 18, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/PayToPlay/posts/334078486657285>. Comment by page moderator, May 2.

²⁵⁵ Comment by page moderator, June 9.

²⁵⁶ Wolfe Video, “Wolfe Launches WolfeOnDemand.com: Movie File Sharing Goes Legit,” press release, June 11, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20120611005750/en/Wolfe-Launches-WolfeOnDemand.com-Movie-File-Sharing-Legit>.

increasingly effective social networking aspects of promotion and distribution” in order to “cut down on illegal file-sharing and give audiences an incentive to play clean with its films.”²⁵⁷ This same article quotes Daniel T. Pereira, former managing director of the MIT Convergence Culture Project, who praises WolfeOnDemand.com for being “designed to leverage this kind of passion and community” that forms around media, predicting that “community and sharing [will] manifest into a monetized business model for Wolfe in the months and years ahead.”²⁵⁸

Unsurprisingly, Wolfe Video’s page for this program invokes this same community language employed in the Pay to Play campaign when telling affiliates, “Thanks for being part of our team!”²⁵⁹ Wolfe Video combined this strategy - increasing the accessibility and incentives of legal digital viewership of Wolfe titles - with aggressive policing of the appearance of copies online, and the company claims “nearly 100% success” in stopping online piracy of its product, adding that “our most highly pirated film of 2010 is now impossible to find illegally on the internet and, as a result, has become our most profitable VOD property.”²⁶⁰

The launch of WolfeOnDemand was quickly followed by Wolfe Video’s purchase of lesbian.com in June 2012, an acquisition that Wolfe Video framed as a service to the global lesbian community. Lesbian.com had been owned by Sue Beckwith since 1995, when she had purchased the URL (along with dyke.com) in order to keep antigay organizations or individuals

²⁵⁷ Jay A. Fernandez, “LGBT Distributor Wolfe Video Launches New VOD Platform With Innovative Commission Structure for Fans,” *Indiewire*, June 8, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.indiewire.com/article/lgbt-distributor-wolfe-launches-new-vod-platform-with-innovative-commission-structure-for-fans>.

²⁵⁸ Daniel T. Pereira, quoted in Fernandez.

²⁵⁹ Wolfe Video Affiliate Portal, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://affiliates.wolfevideo.com/about/>

²⁶⁰ “About Wolfe”, Wolfe Video, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.wolfevideo.com/pages/about-wolfe>. It’s extremely unlikely that Wolfe Video is actually able to keep all illegal copies of their popular films off of torrenting and streaming sites, but the point here is how the company chooses to frame this fight and appeal to viewers.

from getting it. Advocacy organizations like the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League employed similar strategies in the 90s, buying and “cybersquatting” on domain names consisting of racial or ethnic slurs. However, after several years of simply keeping her domain names parked, Beckwith began to feel like she “was doing the lesbian community a disservice by just sitting on” lesbian.com.²⁶¹ In October 1999 she launched a directory at this address that provided links to information on various aspects of life that lesbians might be interested in such as health, sex, travel, and art. Shortly after Beckwith purchased lesbian.com, a pornography company offered her \$250,000 for the domain name but she refused to sell. Even when Kathy Wolfe approached Beckwith in 2005 with a proposal to purchase lesbian.com as part of her goal to expand Wolfe Video globally, she still would not part with it - apparently Beckwith wanted to retain a degree of control that Wolfe wasn’t willing to grant.²⁶² However in 2006 Beckwith decided to put the domain name up for sale, requesting \$2 million (a price based largely on the name’s high searchability) and new owners that would “continue to provide resources to the lesbian community and...expand the service offerings in support of lesbians everywhere.”²⁶³

In 2012, a partnership of Kathy Wolfe, Maria Lynn, and Shannon Wentworth (CEO of Sweet, a lesbian travel company) finalized the acquisition of lesbian.com for an undisclosed six-figure amount.²⁶⁴ Marking what Wolfe called “a new era of access and empowerment” for lesbians, this acquisition was framed as serving some very specific functions for lesbian

²⁶¹ Sue Beckwith, quoted in Michael Mechanic, “Squatting on Hate,” *Mother Jones*, December 14, 1999, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1999/12/squatting-hate>.

²⁶² Victoria A. Brownworth, “Exclusive: Big News for Lesbians Only,” *Curve*, June 4, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.curvemag.com/Curve-Magazine/Web-Articles-2012/EXCLUSIVE-Big-News-for-Lesbians-Only/>.

²⁶³ “In the News,” *Press Pass Q: A Newsletter for the Gay and Lesbian Press Professional*, April 2006, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.presspassq.com/detail.cfm?id=61>.

²⁶⁴ Brownworth, “Exclusive.”

consumers and companies run by or targeting lesbians.²⁶⁵ Wolfe describes lesbian.com as a point of convergence for many different lesbian venues and businesses, framing the site's over 200K visitors per month (as of summer 2012) as a resource that smaller lesbian organizations can tap into by connecting to the global hub of the site. Wolfe is careful to point out that the goal of this relaunch is to "empower lesbians by bringing them together," not to "take anything away from anyone - we want to build it."²⁶⁶ Perhaps as proof of her intentions here, Wolfe paired the site relaunch with a survey all site users were encouraged to fill out to "tell us more about what they would like to see" so that the site might better "represent the global lesbian community and bring together the best that we have to offer."²⁶⁷ Here again Wolfe invites site users to be part of the team, hailing them as members of a global lesbian community and requesting participation based on that identity.

At the same time, Wolfe does explain the acquisition as a decision that "coincides with the Wolfe global streaming service" of WolfeOnDemand.com, launched that same month. "Lesbian.com will be a natural conduit for viewers all over the world to watch lesbian movies."²⁶⁸ True to her promise, the current version of lesbian.com features "Movies" as one of the four main menu options on the site (alongside "Magazine," "Community," and "Love"). Following this link leads to pages with cover art for several dozen movies where users can click to watch trailers, stream films, or buy digital downloads. Ads on these pages also link to

²⁶⁵ Kathy Wolfe, quoted in Wolfe Video, "Entrepreneurs Relaunch Lesbian.com as Hub for Lesbians Worldwide" (press release), June 4, 2012, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.lesbian.com/about/media/>.

²⁶⁶ Wolfe, quoted in Brownworth, "Exclusive."

²⁶⁷ Wolfe Video, "Entrepreneurs Relaunch Lesbian.com."

²⁶⁸ Wolfe, quoted in Kathy Belge, "Kathy Wolfe of Lesbian.com," *About.com Lesbian Life*, June 5, 2012, April 4, 2013 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130404040541/http://lesbianlife.about.com/od/lesbianbookspublishers/a/Kathy-Wolfe-Of-Lesbian-Com.htm>

WolfeVideo.com, and a section titled “More from WolfeOnDemand.com” at the bottom of each film’s page suggests other movies that viewers may enjoy. All the films featured are from the company’s own label, essentially presenting lesbian film as synonymous with Wolfe Video. The site also provides ample branding of Wolfe Video to make lesbian.com visitors aware of the company and link them to the Wolfe sites.

Lesbian Consumer Citizenship: A Niche Within a Niche

The examples throughout the preceding pages demonstrate how Wolfe Video uses ideas like family, team, and community in order to forge an affective bond with viewers and encourage loyal consumption habits through appeals to viewers’ sense of personal civic duty. When companies present media representation of LGBT characters and themes as a crucial aspect of progress towards equality, then certain media consumption habits become equivalent to activism and a required ritual for responsible, do-your-part membership in the LGBT community. The imagined results are twofold: positive representation, which generates not only LGBT identification and self-validation but also mainstream understanding of LGBT people; and sustained economic independence. Viewer support for companies like Wolfe Video allow LGBT media creators to produce on their own terms, not having to entrust this crucial role of LGBT representation to, in Nicole Conn’s words above, straight men.

This idea of economic independence is central to the current version of lesbian.com, which Wolfe describes as an umbrella organization for lesbian businesses and consumers to find each other.²⁶⁹ Although Griffin’s concept of “gay consumer citizenship” is not explicitly gendered, it’s constructive to think here of a narrower idea of *lesbian* consumer citizenship,

²⁶⁹ “David Perry Speaks with Kathy Wolfe and Barbara Verhage, Owners of Wolfe Video and Lesbian.com,” October 19, 2013, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOh0px64ktA>.

which exists at that intersection of sexuality and gender in relation to the identity category of lesbian. This added layer of specificity locates consumers in resistance to *two* dominant social forces - heterosexuality *and* patriarchy - and imagines a (business) environment in which lesbians produce for and support each other. In this context, the kind of commercial convergence we see in lesbian.com provides a means to lesbian empowerment. By consolidating their efforts, scattered lesbian organizations can survive in an environment that devalues their subject positions in two separate ways. Accordingly, lesbian consumers who participate financially or socially at this site of convergence support themselves and their community, and responsibly live out the politics of their identity.

This analysis of the strategy involved with the production of a community-focused image is not meant to discount Wolfe Video's commitment to supporting the lesbian / LGBT community; the company does put its money where its mouth is through involvement with over thirty LGBT or woman-focused organizations, as reported on the "Giving Back" page of its website.²⁷⁰ But a company that bases its existence and business logic on an underrepresented identity provides an excellent opportunity to understand how ideas about community and identity become corporate logics of labor and consumption. While LGBT organizations regularly employ this kind of strategy, Wolfe Video is unique among the distributors this project follows for its instrumentalization of "womanness" as part of its business strategy amidst the predominant maleness of LGBT niche media. Wolfe Video's strategy also implicitly invokes feminist politics in its business practice. The idea of lesbian.com and its function as a convergent portal that offers

²⁷⁰ "Giving Back," Wolfe Video, accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.wolfevideo.com/pages/giving-back/>. However, Matthew P. McAllister would encourage caution when interpreting this sort of activity, as he sees sponsorship and charity as often surreptitious business practices to both subtly advertise the company and create positive associations in consumers' minds (the "halo effect"). See Matthew P. McAllister, *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control, and Democracy* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 177-223.

lesbians access to a variety of lesbian-provided resources is reminiscent of a separatist ethos wherein women are fully self-sufficient and able to avoid reliance on (or, in some cases, even interaction with) men - women can meet all of their fellow women's needs. Wolfe Video does employ, work with, and market to men, so the company cannot be understood as separatist in the literal sense of the term. However, Kathy Wolfe's vision for lesbian.com does echo a utopian idea of an intra-community ecosystem where lesbians converge and sustain each other.

Wolfe Video can employ a form of feminist politics by ostensibly being more community-focused than profit-driven in a context where capital and consumerism are understood as bound up with patriarchy and oppressive political structures. Katherine Sender argues that lesbians, as consumers, cannot be imagined simply as female versions of gay men (which is what the "LGBT market" often means in practice). Rather, their "womanness" must be taken into account when theorizing lesbians as a community of potential consumers, due to so much lesbian political thought emerging from feminist theory. In Sender's words:

in the 1970s, lesbians' responses to consumer culture were shaped as much by the women's movement as by the burgeoning gay rights movement. The feminist critique of consumer culture meant that... "for political reasons, lesbian feminists did not pursue the kind of commodified sexual world of gay men." Although commercial establishments flourished as part of the early gay rights movement, lesbians tended to be suspicious of the capitalist underpinnings of these, preferring to explore sexual freedom outside the commercial realm.²⁷¹

By talking about viewers as part of the filmmaking "team" and by presenting staff and the company as a whole in very friendly and relatable ways, Wolfe Video nuances its identity as a commercial business. It frames the company, filmmakers, and viewers as part of a community or collective where each group does its part for the greater goal of lesbian / LGBT representation. Kathy Wolfe has even commented that she is not "any kind of a movie freak"; rather, she

²⁷¹ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 187. Here Sender is quoting from Badgett, 111.

understands movies as “a way to an end.”²⁷² Elsewhere she has called cinema “an invaluable tool in this promotion of understanding and dialogue.”²⁷³ These comments further distance Wolfe Video from the film business and instead emphasize the company’s connection to social progress, which both Wolfe Video and other LGBT film distributors further connect to the generation of positive affect for LGBTs in regards to their self-understanding and feelings of acceptance.

LGBT media companies house complex intersections of capital and affect. Griffin argues that “media labor is informed, however partially, by questions of emotion” because queer media labor is “often rooted in affect; gay and lesbian media workers’ professional decisions are informed by their personal experiences and feelings.”²⁷⁴ Thinking about the collectivity that Wolfe Video’s discourse claims explicitly and implicitly, it is helpful to include viewers in this affective circuit. While the nature of their labor differs from that of producers and distributors, the same desires for expression, validation, belonging, and political change are understood to unite all members of this circuit. Such a framework renders lesbians’ personal viewership and consumption as praxis by its association with the community responsibility and social impact that Wolfe Video emphasizes. For viewers, the consequent affect generated by consuming these films converts to politics, while for Wolfe, viewer affect converts to capital.

On its face, Here Media and Wolfe Video could scarcely be more different: Here’s output generally favors male viewers over female viewers; mini-conglomerate Here Media is housed in a Wilshire Corridor high-rise penthouse suite while Wolfe Video resides in an old mining town

²⁷² Scheinin, “Wolfe Video of San Jose.”

²⁷³ Bowen, “Wolfe @ 25.”

²⁷⁴ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 46.

outside San Jose with a garage as a DVD warehouse; Here CEO Paul Colichman has an MBA and a background in executive producing while Kathy Wolfe has graduate degree in art and a background of feminist camps and political activism videography. But Here Media provides another example of the intersection and conflict resulting from a company's corporate and political image, albeit on a much larger scale. Let's turn now to Regent Releasing, its eventual spin-off of Here Media, and this company's drive for the vertical integration of LGBT Media.

“An Empire of Gay Media”: Conglomeration and Authenticity at Here Media

The homosexual has a range of gay periodicals that is a kind of distorted mirror image of the straight publishing world....In fact, a New York homosexual, if he chooses an occupation in which his clique is predominant, can shape for himself a life lived almost exclusively in an inverted world from which the rough, unsympathetic edges of straight society can be almost totally excluded.

- Robert C. Doty, *The New York Times* (1963)²⁷⁵

Gay spy, gay detective, gay doctor, gay lawyer....Everything straight people have, we're gonna have.

- Paul Colichman, CEO of Here Media (2008)²⁷⁶

Company History: Regent Releasing / Here Media

The company now called Here Media is the result of many incorporations and mergers under the control of two men: producer Paul Colichman and lawyer Stephen Jarchow. The LGBT media giant's origins are based in the pair's first company, Regent Entertainment, and many of their strategies for the success of this company predict the specifics of Here Media's

²⁷⁵ Robert C. Doty, "Growth of Overt Homosexuality In City Provokes Wide Concern," *New York Times*, December 17, 1963.

²⁷⁶ Paul Colichman, quoted in Rob Owen, "Cable On-Demand Services Channel Subscribers' Niches," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 4, 2008.

later formation and development. Accordingly, I will summarize the early history of Regent Entertainment and its eventual introduction of Here Films, the predecessor of Here Media.

During his teen years, Paul Colichman worked in movie theaters around Los Angeles, and as a UCLA undergrad he ran film events on campus.²⁷⁷ After earning his MBA at UCLA's business school, he worked as head of late-night programming at Fox (where he helped get Joan Rivers' show on the air) and as an executive producer at MTV. At age 25, Colichman co-founded IRS Media in 1987 with Miles Copeland III, the band manager of The Police and an overall veteran of the music industry who was expanding his record label IRS Records to include film production and distribution branches.²⁷⁸ Colichman was president of the company until he stepped down in late 1995 when IRS Media filed for bankruptcy.²⁷⁹ His last film with the company was *Venus Rising* (1995).

Stephen Jarchow was raised in Wisconsin but practiced real estate law in Dallas for ten years before his interest in real estate connected to the film industry in the 1990s. In the late 1980s, he'd been known for managing distressed property purchases in Dallas during an economic downturn. After starting his own investment firm, he and a business partner acquired the Studios at Las Colinas, a set of production facilities, for a tenth of their value in 1992. While Jarchow soon sold his interest in the studio to Ross Perot's son, by this time he had also begun buying film and television libraries from struggling or bankrupt media companies. The *Dallas Observer* reports that a local distribution company, Media Home Entertainment, sold Jarchow its

²⁷⁷ Colichman and Patricia R. Olsen, "Office Space: The Boss; Growing Up With Movies." *New York Times*, July 30, 2006.

²⁷⁸ Kelly-Saxenmeyer, "Out and Out"; Carl DiOrio, "IRS Media, Distributor Set Plan for Liquidation." *Hollywood Reporter*, November 27, 1995.

²⁷⁹ DiOrio, "IRS Media."

\$25 million catalog for \$150K.²⁸⁰ Jarchow then sought distribution for his holdings, and met Colichman during a 1995 visit to Los Angeles in search of investment opportunities. Having just stepped down from IRS Media, Colichman was looking for a partner with whom to start a full-service production company.²⁸¹

By contributing \$1 million each in equity, Jarchow, Colichman, and producer Mark R. Harris formed Regent Entertainment in 1996, a company for the financing, production, and distribution of independent film. Peter Dekom, an entertainment attorney who had introduced Jarchow and Colichman and helped broker the deal, held a minority interest in the company.²⁸² As the *Dallas Observer* explains it, Jarchow and Colichman were a natural pairing: with his long history working in film and TV, Colichman “offered the company legitimacy where before Jarchow had only a back catalog of artistically bankrupt films,” and Jarchow had the “solid financial history” needed to secure Regent a line of credit.²⁸³ Regent’s first major production, *Twilight of the Gods* (1996), was a TV movie made for Showtime that later secured theatrical distribution by Lionsgate. This adaptation of a 1993 play is about a pregnant woman who through genetic analysis discovers that if carried to term her child will be born gay. According to Colichman, this kind of controversial fare would come to define Regent. A few years after the company’s formation, he described Regent as “a little edgier” than other distributors, allowing it to produce or pick up films deemed too risky by other studios.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Robert Wilonsky, “Reel Power,” *Dallas Observer*, August 5, 1999.

²⁸¹ Wilonsky, “Reel Power”; Glenna Whitley, “Movie Man.” *D Magazine*, September 2001.

²⁸² Claudia Eller, “It Was a Tough Sell, but Fate Smiled on ‘Gods.’” *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1999.

²⁸³ Wilonsky, “Reel Power.”

²⁸⁴ Alex Simon, “Coming Soon from Regent Entertainment,” *Venice Magazine*, April 1, 2001, reproduced on *RegentEntertainment.com*, October 29, 2002 version, *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20021029221249/http://regententertainment.com/NewsDetails.CFM?Documents.IDNumber__IDNumber=64.

A risky text that acted as the company's breakout success was *Gods and Monsters* (1998), a biopic of gay director James Whale co-produced by Regent Entertainment (with Colichman and Harris as producers, and Jarchow as an executive producer). The film was a struggle to make, requiring refinancing three different times. Regent felt the film deserved a bigger release than the company could provide. Colichman describes Regent as a "50 screen company" at the time, so distribution by a larger company was the goal.²⁸⁵ At first seemed doomed when it attracted no buyers regardless of a popular Sundance screening. According to Jarchow, distributors found it "too gay, too serious, or not serious enough."²⁸⁶ Colichman reports that one distributor turned down the film because they already had "one of those kind of movies."²⁸⁷ But when the film began winning awards, it found theatrical distribution with Lions Gate and later television exhibition on Showtime. Eventually the film received wide critical acclaim and won an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and several Independent Spirit Awards, as well as earning nearly twice its budget. *Gods and Monsters* "really built our reputation," according to Colichman, but he also attributes its success to LGBT viewers:

If it weren't for the gay audience, *Gods and Monsters* wouldn't have gotten a release at all...Once that happened, everyone else discovered it and it became more acceptable. Then came the Oscars and the Golden Globes and it was OK to see the movie, It wasn't just a fag film anymore.²⁸⁸

Many years later, he also retroactively identifies the film's success as the progenitor of the idea for Here TV.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Colichman, interview by author.

²⁸⁶ Stephen Jarchow, quoted in Whitley, "Movie Man."

²⁸⁷ Colichman, quoted in Luke Ford, *The Producers: Profiles in Frustration* (iUniverse, 2004), 46.

²⁸⁸ Colichman, quoted in Claudia Eller, "Building an Empire of Gay Media." *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 2008; Colichman, quoted in David Ehrenstein, "Gay Pix Remain a Tricky Sale." *Daily Variety*, July 31, 2000.

²⁸⁹ Colichman, quoted in Eller, "Building an Empire."

As Stephen Jarchow wryly puts it, “now we were experts on doing gay movies as a result of that one movie.”²⁹⁰ While most of its early catalog did not fall into this category, as early as 2000 Regent was gaining a reputation for its gay product. Colichman was included in a *Variety* piece about the specific challenges of distributing such content (as well as a later article identifying “several gay-tinted products” in Regent’s library by early 2002).²⁹¹ This same 2000 article listed *Speedway Junky* (1999), *Sordid Lives* (2000), and *A Woman’s a Helluva Thing* (2001) as Regent’s upcoming gay/lesbian content while editorializing that the company “isn’t planning to make things any easier for itself” because of the difficulty *Variety* assumes that selling gay product entails.²⁹² In 2001, a recurring *Variety* piece intended to help filmmakers find companies for their projects listed “specialty theatricals” as a kind of product Regent Entertainment supports, which may connote (and at any rate certainly includes) gay content. Moreover, two of the three “recent releases” listed were *Speedway Junky* and *Sordid Lives*, films with gay characters.²⁹³

However, it wasn’t long before the company took steps to focus on LGBT film much more seriously. Colichman has framed the company’s LGBT-specificity as a vital business strategy, saying that “we realized that if you're self-financed, we had to pick a niche if we were going to truly be successful....We knew that going head-to-head with the studios, we'd get our head handed to us sooner or later.”²⁹⁴ At the 2002 American Film Market, Regent Entertainment

²⁹⁰ Stephen Jarchow, “An Evening with Here Media.”

²⁹¹ Ehrenstein, “Gay Pix”; Chris Gardner, “Here is Regent’s Gay Niche Label.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 15, 2002.

²⁹² Ehrenstein, “Gay Pix.”

²⁹³ Eileen Kowalski, “Finding Companies with Coin.” *Daily Variety*, July 30, 2001.

²⁹⁴ Colichman, quoted in Eller, “Building an Empire.”

unveiled its plans for Here Films, described as “a fully integrated marketing and distribution arm focused exclusively on gay-themed fare.”²⁹⁵ The project was funded by profits from Regent as well as Colichman and Jarchow’s own money (Regent Entertainment’s Mark Harris and Peter Dekom were not part of this new endeavor). Here Films consisted of three components: Here Releasing, which handled domestic film distribution; Here International, which handled foreign film sales and distribution; and Here Networks, a pay-per-view programming service, intended partly as a venue for exhibition of the films in Regent Entertainment’s library.²⁹⁶ According to Colichman, the creation of Here Films responded to the difficulty that LGBT film has “accessing ancillary markets and international distribution.... We have created a fully integrated approach, using our mainstream clout as one of the largest suppliers of independent film.”²⁹⁷

The phrasing “a fully integrated approach” is representative of Jarchow and Colichman’s approach to running a business. Both come from business backgrounds, and in 2001 Jarchow described himself as particularly capable of working in film because of his business law background. He claimed that “there probably aren’t six people who understand independent film production and financing better than I do. You must know international law, copyright law, who to sell to, and who is credit-worthy.”²⁹⁸ All of the LGBT distributors this dissertation discusses engage in some degree of cross-ownership or integration, whether simply by building a native video player or by running a film festival that feeds into their catalog. However, Here Media is the company most rooted in a corporate logic, which informs their operations and how they

²⁹⁵ Gardner, “Here is Regent’s Gay Niche Label.”

²⁹⁶ Wayne Karrfalt, “Coming Out in America.” *Multichannel News*, April 25, 2005.

²⁹⁷ Gardner, “Here is Regent’s Gay Niche Label.”

²⁹⁸ Jarchow, quoted in Whitley, “Movie Man.”

theorize themselves. The following section will discuss Jarchow and Colichman's cross-ownership business strategies, how these are framed in industry discourse, and how the press reacts to these practices.

Building the Business

People say, "Why would you buy a print publication when you're really in the television business?"....But our point of view is that everything is cross-platformed now - we are in the content business, and to generate profit you need to be everywhere.

- Paul Colichman, CEO of Here Media²⁹⁹

This statement from a 2009 interview with Colichman references Here Media's most recent phase of cross-ownership, but the company's drive towards this kind of conglomeration is rooted in Regent Entertainment's early days. In order to understand Here's conglomeration, we must first make note of major corporations like Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom that have established vast influence over US and global mass media. David Hesmondhalgh situates this cultural industry centralization within the United States' deregulatory policies of the 1980s, which encouraged two important corporate trends in the 1990s: vertical integration and conglomeration. Vertical integration was of course essential to the classical Hollywood studio system, and Hesmondhalgh describes its return in the US in the 1990s with the deregulated integration of studios, networks, and technology companies. Equally important is synergy-based media conglomeration which, as Hesmondhalgh explains, "entails an increase in the scope and power of individual cultural industry corporations, in that the same corporation can have stakes in many different forms of communication." The advantages of this power include lobbying power, a "general influence on the ways in which cultural production is carried out," the

²⁹⁹ Colichman, quoted in Eller, "Building an Empire."

suppression of intra-industry dissent, and cross-promotion opportunities.³⁰⁰ The potential impact of the cross-selling enabled by synergistic conglomeration is the promotion of “commercial imperatives at the expense of artistic values (in fiction and entertainment) and objectivity and professionalism (in journalism).”³⁰¹ Jennifer Holt also tracks the effects of Reagan-era deregulatory philosophies on the American media industries, demonstrating how this political shift resulted in heavy centralization and conglomeration in the media industries. She uses the term “structural convergence” to capture the “mixture of vertical and horizontal integration *and* conglomeration” that intensified in this period and continues to expand in the current media landscape.³⁰² As a result, new technologies and convergences have outpaced regulatory policy, resulting in “commercial demands and the mythology of the ‘free market’ [being] privileged over responsibility to the public interest, localism, and diversity, or the ‘marketplace of ideas.’”³⁰³

These trends in mainstream media have been cause for concern for queer media commentators. In a collection of “Queer Media Manifestos” published by *GLQ* in 2013, scholar Matthew Tinkcom worries “that the larger corporatization of media — from the homogenized culture industry product to the consolidated ownership of media enterprises to the echo chambers of social media — has grave implications for how queers continue to participate in the sphere of cultural production, consumption, and its political dimensions.”³⁰⁴ A company like Here Media

³⁰⁰ David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications Ltd, 2007), 167.

³⁰¹ Hesmondhalgh, 167-168.

³⁰² Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 3.

³⁰³ Holt, 177.

³⁰⁴ Matthew Tinkcom, “It’s Called Dominant Culture for a Reason,” in “Queer Media Manifestos,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 563.

would seem to be the answer to his concern, which centers on how much agency queers have to influence the increasingly subtlety of “deeply entrenched antagonisms towards queers” in mainstream culture. Here Media proposes a parallel circuit of media that provides viewers all the elements of mainstream media in an exclusively LGBT context - by us, for us, about us. In the same collection filmmaker Pratibha Parmar celebrates “that near-extinct tribe of queer media makers” instead of “those mainstreaming us, assimilating us, creating homonormative pulp for Western corporate media outlets owned by aging pale hetero males with ‘oriental’ trophy wives.”³⁰⁵ Filmmaker Jean Carlomusto wants “more than LOGO TV; I want a queer media practice that seeks to be more than a marketable ‘crossover’ entertainment. With so many channels on — the only one that has any relevance to my life is the weather.”³⁰⁶ Notably, this comment comes from 2013 when Logo was in the midst of its mainstreaming process, a moment that Here Media used to emphasize its commitment to LGBT specificity.

Although I doubt these manifesto-writers would actually have many positive things to say about Here Media *per se*, I’m including them to demonstrate the potential promise of the company as a concept. Unlike mainstream media companies mostly owned by straight people, and unlike Logo, ultimately owned by Viacom and transitioning out of LGBT-specificity anyway, Here Media is a self-contained, mostly LGBT-owned company whose *raison d’être* is the production of LGBT media for LGBT people, not media with cross-over potential for straight audiences.³⁰⁷ However, as the following section will explain in detail, Here Media actually models itself (albeit on a miniature scale) after major corporations that integrate and

³⁰⁵ Pratibha Parmar, “Stomp for the Shadows, in “Queer Media Manifestos”: 567-568.

³⁰⁶ Jean Carlomusto, “Archival Praxis,” in “Queer Media Manifestos”: 570.

³⁰⁷ Here Media discourse occasionally suggests that its genre offerings will crossover to straight audiences; however, I always find these claims by niche distributors to be specious.

conglomerate in pursuit of control and profit. We see this point made in other accounts in this *GLQ* collection, like a 2001 statement by experimental filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia who “disclaim[s] gay cinema” in a screed against the “apolitical assimilationism” and “corporate sponsorships” of “Queer Hollywood,” an industry that produces “boring, stupid, irrelevant, gutless, artless ‘gay and lesbian movies!’” He identifies the “gay media culture industry” as one now based in consumerism and “ensconced in management,” which he attributes to a shift in LGBT cultural politics after the AIDS epidemic.³⁰⁸ In a more tempered passage, experimental filmmaker Richard Fung points out that the corporatization of queer media discourages experimentation and favors “the narrative feature film - often one whose value is limited to pretty faces and good production values.”³⁰⁹

At the same time, Lisa Henderson and Griffin refuse to allow quick, simplistic refusal of media practices just because they are steeped in capitalist market structures. Henderson suggests that scholars attempt to “escape the commerce-versus-liberation logic that entraps queer cultural politics, and thus to slow down the queer-class taste hierarchy that such a politics can deliver.”³¹⁰ She acknowledges “the histories of exclusion and aggression that make queer political and cultural distrust sensible” when capital and mainstream culture come into contact with queer representation, but asks, “what would a different critique look like? One whose primary move is not to rush in with self-preserving refusal at the first or last sign of queer encounter with nonqueer market culture?”³¹¹ In a similar move, Griffin remarks that LGBT media “often

³⁰⁸ Jerry Tartaglia, “A Statement of Outrage against American Assimilationists Who Practice Appeasement of Hetero Terror in the Wake of A.I.D.S. Genocide in the United States,” in “Queer Media Manifestos”: 559-560.

³⁰⁹ Richard Fung, “Beyond Domestication,” in “Queer Media Manifestos”: 571-572.

³¹⁰ Henderson, 20.

³¹¹ Henderson, 102.

acquiesce[s] to the requirements of capital and structures of power that perpetuate inequalities between different queer audiences. But those media are not completely determined by such requirements and structures.” He points out that media practitioners, often LGBT themselves, working in this sector are invested in this work and view it as politically important, and that “those investments warrant more careful scrutiny than an evaluation in which they are deemed unproblematically ‘normative’ as a result of being ‘commercial.’”³¹²

The question of what contexts and investments inform an LGBT film being understood as good or worthwhile will be addressed further in Chapter Three. This section assumes that a conglomerated LGBT media company like Here Media deserves examination, even if only to understand how a major player in contemporary niche LGBT media operates and what it can tell us about conglomeration within a niche context. Accordingly, I’ll discuss three important parts of Regent/Here’s history of conglomeration: Regent Entertainment’s theater ownership in 1997, the formation of Here TV and various connected properties in 2003, and Here Media’s acquisition of Planet Out and Liberation Publications in 2009. These three examples span over a decade of the companies’ developments and demonstrate the logic of cross-ownership and centralization that defines Here Media’s business practices. The third phase also provides a site to note criticisms of Here Media and interrogate and move to considering how practitioners and consumers signify the work of an LGBT media company that endeavors to resemble the structurally convergent companies, to use Holt’s term, of the mainstream media landscape.

³¹² Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 15.

Theater Ownership

When Regent Entertainment incorporated as a production and distribution company, it also employed an unusual strategy to secure exhibition, one that *Variety* called “a surefire way to guarantee theatrical releases of its indie films.”³¹³ In 1997, Regent announced its plans to build its own “upscale shopping complexes” containing multiplexes in the top 20 U.S. markets.³¹⁴ This strategy, which combined the resources and expertises of real estate developer Jarchow and producer Colichman, was intended to eliminate the need for external distribution. As Colichman explained to *Variety*, “there's a large overhead for distribution, and....we felt it would be better to finance the P&A and that the best access to theaters would be to own them. We can afford to spend more on theaters than most companies, because our real profit is from the real estate.”³¹⁵ Jarchow described theater ownership as “a tangible asset value to the company” as its own investment, but also as a way to increase the value of the films themselves, since even ten guaranteed screens nationwide as part of what he described as Regent’s “automatic network of distribution for its own theatrical releases” provides a large advantage for independent films.³¹⁶

In March 1997, Regent Entertainment opened its first theater, the newly-renovated Westlake Village Theater in Ventura County, northwest of Los Angeles. With two 275-seat screens, upgraded sound systems, and a high-end concession stand, this theater was framed as a sort of cultural oasis in the valley since “there’s really nothing between Encino and Ojai,” according to Colichman, which “seemed ridiculous for such an educated and affluent

³¹³ “Regent Entertainment: Buy a Theater, Get a Playdate,” *Daily Variety*, February 28, 1997.

³¹⁴ Michael Fleming, “Regent Revs Up Indie Plan,” *Daily Variety*, October 17, 1996.

³¹⁵ Colichman, quoted in Fleming, “Regent Revs Up.”

³¹⁶ Jarchow, quoted in “Regent Entertainment: Buy a Theater”; Jarchow, quoted in Andrew Hinds, “Regent Plans to Buy Showcase Theater,” *Variety*, May 7, 1999.

community” in Westlake Village.³¹⁷ He also described the Regent Westlake as a “test market” for the theaters the company planned to open elsewhere in the country.³¹⁸ In 1999 Regent announced its plan to buy the Showcase Theater in Hancock Park (a central Los Angeles neighborhood) upon the expiration of its lease in 2000.³¹⁹ After selling the theater in Westlake, the company would put several hundred thousand dollars into the Showcase Theater, as well as a four-screen AMC theater in Dallas purchased and rechristened the Regent Highland Park Village in 2001.³²⁰ According to Colichman, the Showcase tended to do “only breakeven business,” though *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) performed exceptionally well, bringing in \$100K during its first week there.³²¹ When asked at this time what he envisioned for the future of the company, Colichman hoped Regent would be, among other things, “the dominant art theater circuit in the country.”³²²

Regent would ultimately not fulfill this ambitious claim, as the three venues listed above comprised the totality of the company’s theater ownership. Colichman attributes this to a number of factors: theater ownership requiring more attention and resources than he expected, the opening of nearby competing theaters (such as The Grove’s multiplex in Los Angeles and the Angelica Film Center in Dallas), changing audience expectations for the theater experience, and

³¹⁷ Enrique Rivero, “New Art Film Cinema Poised to Raise Curtain,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, March 7, 1997; Robin Rauzi, “Closed Theater to Be Revived as a Site for Art Films,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1997.

³¹⁸ Colichman, quoted in “Regent Entertainment: Buy a Theater.”

³¹⁹ Hindes, “Regent Plans to Buy.”

³²⁰ Stephen Galloway, “Is It Curtains For Art-Film Producers?,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, February 5, 2001; Carl DiOrio, “Regent Leases Dallas Theater,” *Variety*, January 19, 2001.

³²¹ Galloway, “Is it Curtains?” Galloway describes the film’s first week box office as “unheard of.”

³²² Alex Simon, “Coming Soon.”

the decline of LGBT theatrical release profitability.³²³ But the company's pursuit of dedicated exhibition space was a strategy that would reappear a couple years later in the business practices of Here Films.

Here TV

One of the Here Films' three components announced in 2002 was Here Networks or Here TV, which, much like the brick-and-mortar theaters owned by Regent Entertainment, created a LGBT-specific exhibition venue controlled by the same people produced and distributing content.³²⁴ Finally launched in August of 2003 and headed by Colichman, Here TV originally offered very limited programming. Initially viewers were able to order from a limited selection (two to six per month) of "recent theatrical and video releases, direct to pay per view premieres and a wide range of programming targeting gay and lesbian viewers," purchased on a pay-per-view basis. Here's initial launch was on satellite provider DirecTV, with the possibility of later expansion into a stand-alone network.³²⁵

The service launched with the television premiere of *Sordid Lives* (2000), which had been distributed theatrically by Regent. Over the next year, Here TV increased its availability by launching on additional satellite and cable systems. In April 2004 it announced an ambitious expansion: the network was moving from its very limited selection pay-per-view model to "a full, 24/7 schedule of movies, new original series, classic films and television shows and other

³²³ Colichman, interview by author.

³²⁴ This network name has undergone many stylistic changes. In this dissertation I'm using "Here TV," the network's current nomenclature, except when quoting passages using different variations.

³²⁵ Regent Entertainment, "here! Pay Per View Launches on DIRECTV as Nation's First Television Destination Serving the Gay and Lesbian Market," press release, July 7, 2003, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20030707005495/en/here%21-Pay-View-Launches-DIRECTV-Nations-Television>; "DirecTV to Offer Gay-Themed PPV," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 8, 2003.

general entertainment content,” as well as more flexible programming formats for satellite and cable operators. Ultimately launched in October of that year, this wider-availability model required much more content, so besides licensing nearly 200 titles from distributors TLA, Wolfe, Strand, and Regent, Here TV also announced the production of over 200 hours of original programming per year, including fiction and documentary features, television series, and other specials.³²⁶ All of this reflected Colichman’s overall business strategy, which he stated in a 2003 Hollywood Reporter article: “By expanding the studio's original production and co production activities and forging associations with top creative talent, Here! is on track to serve as the industry's dominant force in quality gay- and lesbian-themed film entertainment.”³²⁷ One of the flagship television series making up this new slate of original programming was *Dante’s Cove*, which completed principal photography in May 2004.³²⁸ This show was foregrounded in announcements of Here TV’s expansion and has exhibited the most staying power of all the programming in this first round of original programming. It was the first Here TV original series to be picked up for a second and third season (and a continually-promised fourth), and remaining featured on the Here TV website even until mid-2013, six years after the third season aired. Colichman attributes this shift to original production to a general lack of “good stuff to acquire....I wanted more authentic images that would be relatable to young people.”³²⁹

³²⁶ Here TV, “here! TV Will Launch America's First 24/7 Premium Programming Service for Gays and Lesbians October 1st,” press release, April 14, 2004, accessed December 9, 2017 at <https://www.satelliteguys.us/xen/threads/here-tv-will-launch-americas-first-24-7-premium-programming-service-for-gays-and-le.6129/>.

³²⁷ Colichman, quoted in Chris Gardner, “Several Deals Happening Here!”, *Hollywood Reporter*, November 5, 2003.

³²⁸ Here TV, “For Gay and Lesbian Television, Here!TV Leads the Way,” press release, May 25, 2004, accessed December 9, 2017 at <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/For+Gay+and+Lesbian+Television%2c+here!TV+Leads+the+Way.-a0117125844>. It is unclear whether this refers to the original unaired pilot or the version most have seen.

³²⁹ Colichman, interview by author.

Here TV also attempted to expand into music with its 2005 launch of Here Tunes, “a full service music publishing company and virtual record label.” In early press statements, Here TV differentiated itself from other production companies by, instead of simply licensing single tracks from musicians for use in film and TV, fully committing to developing these artists via exposure on “the here! Web site, cell phones, soundtracks, videos and free VOD concerts.”³³⁰ Consistent with Here Media’s larger logic, here! Tunes was a way to move music licensing in-house. From the label’s early days, the website invited any band to submit its music for the chance to “become part of the here! Tunes family.”³³¹ The label only produced three albums: the soundtracks for *Dante’s Cove* and *Shelter* (both Here productions) and *In Formation* by Stewart Lewis, the only artist to be signed to the label. By the end of 2010, Here Tunes disappeared from the Here TV website. Colichman states that Here Media may revive this arm in the future.³³²

In September 2006, Here announced their plans to launch Here Video, a “fully-branded Internet TV channel” created in partnership with Maven Networks, a broadband video platform.³³³ The following year Here’s website underwent a relaunch in order to offer what Here executive Eric Feldman described as “the ultimate multi-media experience.”³³⁴ The press release

³³⁰ Here Networks, “here! Networks To Launch here! Tunes: Gay and Lesbian Television Network to Launch Music Publishing Company,” press release, August 3, 2005, November 22, 2005 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20051122002057/http://heretv.com:80/ANewsArticlePage.php?newsKey=38>

³³¹ Here Networks, “Here! Set to Debut Recording Artist Stewart Lewis,” press release, May 15, 2008, January 7, 2009 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20ere!0107065632/http://heretv.com/APressArticle.php?type=release&id=259>. “here! tunes” page, *heretv.com*, October 25, 2005 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051025013047/http://www.heretv.com/AHereTunesPage.php>

³³² Colichman, interview by author.

³³³ Here Networks, “here! Networks Selects Maven Networks to Launch Broadband Video Channel for Gays and Lesbians,” press release, September 27, 2006, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20060927005199/en/here%21-Networks-Selects-Maven-Networks-launch-Broadband>. Maven Networks was acquired by Yahoo in 2008 and then closed down shortly thereafter.

³³⁴ Eric Feldman, quoted in Here Networks, “Premium Gay Network here! Re-Launches Its Flagship Website Heretv.Com,” press release, June 4, 2007, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20070604006173/en/Premium-Gay-Network-here!-Re-Launches-Flagship-Website>.

announcing the relaunch seems to focus largely on the website's ability to complement the TV network by "providing up-to-the-minute information and behind-the-scenes glimpses of here!'s premium LGBT content," as well as a "weekly Top 5 section, which lists the top five most buzzed about offerings of the week, [which] allows audiences to see what is popular with other here! customers."³³⁵ Only later in the press release is Here Video mentioned as a venue to access the network's programming.

Here TV had been producing original content as television shows and made-for-TV movies since 2004. By 2007 the network was spending over 75% of its programming budget on original shows and movies, comprising one third of its overall programming content.³³⁶ In 2007 Here also financed *Shelter*, a fiction feature about a gay surfer and artist who takes care of his five-year-old nephew, for around \$500K. *The Hollywood Reporter* attributed the film to Here Films' "new independent film initiative to fund projects by and for the gay and lesbian community," although in retrospect Colichman says this wasn't a particularly new approach but *Shelter* was just a particularly successful case.³³⁷ In 2008, when the *HWR* article came out, it is possible Here/Regent were deliberately presenting *Shelter* in a specific way. In 2007 the film won a host of awards from LGBT film festivals in the US, Canada, and Australia, so the company knew it had a hit on its hands. This is also supported by Here beginning to mention *Shelter* in their company information boilerplate for press releases that year. Having a better infrastructure than Here Films, Regent gave the film a (limited) theatrical release, and Here distributed *Shelter* on DVD and of course premiered and reran the film on Here TV.

³³⁵ Here Networks, "Premium Gay Network here! Re-launches."

³³⁶ Kimberly Nordyke, "Here! Comes a Lot of Originality," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 28, 2007.

³³⁷ Kilday, "Here! Provides 'Shelter.'"; Colichman, interview by author.

As evidenced by its ownership of a network, a music label, production facilities, an independent financing initiative, and a streaming video platform, Here Films was heavily invested in integrating as many media components as possible, or as Here executive Josh Rosenzweig later phrased it, becoming “a one-stop shop.” for LGBT media.³³⁸ One advantage of this kind of structure is the simplicity of ownership it offers. Rosenzweig has said that especially as they pursue foreign markets, it is vital to maintain the rights to their content so they “don’t have any issues and can just show it where we want and when we want and how we want.”³³⁹ Music licensing, for example, is region and location specific; if a film includes a song licensed only for US theatrical distribution, then in order to migrate the film to video or outside the country, music rights would need to be renegotiated. Having Here Tunes as *part* of their in-house production, however, allows Here more control over this process and simplifies what could otherwise become complicated (and expensive) ownership questions.

In the following years Here would move beyond production, music licensing, distribution, and digital exhibition to also include print and online press and marketing properties and finally incorporate as Here Media.

PlanetOut Acquisition

An important part of the most recent phase of Here Media’s conglomeration process is the rise and fall of online LGBT media portal, PlanetOut, whose history has been chronicled by Ben Aslinger. Tom Reilly and his twenty-employee team developed PlanetOut on the Microsoft

³³⁸ Josh Rosenzweig, quoted in “Charlene Weisler Interviews Josh Rosenzweig - Mainstreaming and Competition,” February 28, 2013, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGDbLq-ebYL>. Josh Rosenzweig was Senior Vice President of Original Programming and Development at Here Media until August 2014.

³³⁹ Rosenzweig, quoted in “Charlene Weisler Interviews Josh Rosenzweig - Background and Here TV,” February 28, 2013, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CliF4IdF5Ik>.

network with AOL-provided seed money, and in 1996 launched as an AOL portal. In the late 1990s, PlanetOut received tens of millions of venture capital dollars, and the following years saw much growth and expansion of the company. In 2000 PlanetOut merged with former competitor Gay.com and harvested its 3.5 million gay and lesbian users. This same year, the company acquired Liberation Publications (the owners of *The Advocate*, *Out*, and Alyson Books) for around \$30 million. After the collapse of the dotcom bubble, and the subsequent shift in how online audiences are measured, PlanetOut began concentrating on securing individual subscribers and their money - for instance, it introduced a personal ad service for \$5 per month, which became a focus of the site after 2003. In 2004, PlanetOut became the first gay-focused IPO, and in the following year partnered with m-Qube “to provide wireless applications and content to gay mobile users.”³⁴⁰ In 2006, PlanetOut continued to diversify by purchasing RSVP Productions, a gay travel company.

However, by 2007, PlanetOut was struggling. RSVP had turned out to be an unwise purchase (within a year it was sold off to Atlantis Events), and more generally the company’s subscription numbers were falling. By this time, with the advent of “Web 2.0,” an internet portal service simply did not make sense for web users, and dedicated dating sites made PlanetOut’s personals section less relevant. In April 2008, the portal agreed to sell its print media holdings to Regent for \$6.5 million dollars, a sum Ben Aslinger describes as “paltry” based on the properties the latter received in the deal.³⁴¹ According to the *San Francisco Business Times*, the letter of intent for the sale stipulated that \$6 million of the sale “would be treated as prepaid advertising,

³⁴⁰ Aslinger, “PlanetOut.”

³⁴¹ Steven E. F. Brown, “PlanetOut Agrees to Sell Magazine Business for \$6 Million,” *San Francisco Business Times*, April 9, 2008, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/stories/2008/04/07/daily29.html?page=all>; Aslinger, “PlanetOut.”

to be applied as the marketing occurs, meaning that the sale was at its core a large ad buy.”³⁴²

This arrangement led Gawker to marvel at Colichman’s business acumen, noting that “Regent bought a year’s worth of advertising on PlanetOut’s gay.com and got an entire book and magazine publishing business for free, then?”³⁴³ (This is only the beginning of a Gawker’s cynical commentary on Regent/Here over the next few years.) For Colichman, PlanetOut simply had not realized the full potential of these properties. Thinking of them as simply print venues instead of *brands* had kept Planet Out from developing these pieces of Liberation Publications and building their online presence.³⁴⁴

After this sale, PlanetOut refocused on its online properties, but by the following January the company, now \$100 million in debt, announced its imminent merger with Here Networks and Regent Entertainment.³⁴⁵ At its peak, the company’s shares had sold for over \$100 each, but by the time of its ultimate assimilation into Here, PlanetOut traded at only 38 cents.³⁴⁶ Once the companies fully assimilated this former media rival in June 2009, the newly-named Here Media, with Paul Colichman as its CEO, had become a LGBT media empire with its varied holdings: print magazines Out, The Advocate, and HIV Plus; gay travel company OutTraveler.com; Here TV and Here Films; gay book publisher Alyson Books; news and media sites GayWired.com and SheWired.com; and finally Gay.com, a gay male lifestyle and dating site. According to Josh

³⁴² Brown, “PlanetOut Agrees.” In an interview with me, Colichman said he purchased the print properties for \$500,000, which matches the numbers reported above.

³⁴³ Alex Pareene, “Were Gay Mags Just Given Away?,” *Gawker*, April 10, 2008, <http://gawker.com/378521/were-gay-mags-just-given-away>.”

³⁴⁴ Colichman, interview by author.

³⁴⁵ Brown, “Sun Sets on PlanetOut,” *San Francisco Business Times*, January 9, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/stories/2009/01/05/daily78.html?ana=yfcpc>.

³⁴⁶ Paul Bond, “PlanetOut, Here Networks Merge,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 17, 2009; JD Uy, “Gay.Com / PlanetOut Financial Meltdown, Facing de-Listing from NASDAQ,” *Metro Weekly* (blog), August 12, 2008, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.metroweekly.com/2008/08/gaycom-planetout-financial-me/>.

Rosenzweig, this cross-ownership serves the company in its exploration of new markets internationally. Multiple holdings across formats provides “a really good way to gauge the engagement of people outside the United States” and allows Here to investigate the possibility of expanding into other countries.³⁴⁷

More importantly, this network of media outlets gave Here Media the means for extensive cross-platform self-promotion. As an example, I’ll describe a 2010 visit (less than a year after the completion of the merger in June 2009) to this family of websites. Advocate.com had a video section where viewers could watch (among other things) clips from selected Here TV programs such as *Here! with Josh and Sara* or *Here! Focus*, a talk show marketed towards the LGBT community and a short documentary show about LGBT-friendly organizations, respectively. Gay.com, besides offering online dating services for gay men, also acted as a sort of gay Hulu for Here Media’s original or acquired content (where some videos are free to watch, and some require premium site membership). Available embedded streaming content included full features films from Here Films and episodes of Here TV original series, news packages from *The Advocate* (produced through its partnership with NBC News Channel³⁴⁸), and “Model Citizen” videos from Out.com.³⁴⁹ In summary, Gay.com linked viewers to video content from no fewer than four of Here Media’s other subsidiaries: Here Films, Here TV, *The Advocate*, and *Out*. Each Gay.com page containing the embedded videos also included these subsidiaries’ logos

³⁴⁷ Rosenzweig, quoted in “Charlene Weisler Interviews Josh Rosenzweig - Background and Here TV.”

³⁴⁸ Michael Triplett, “LGBT News Returning to TV in Deal Between The Advocate And NBC,” *Mediaite* (blog), March 29, 2010, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.mediaite.com/online/lgbt-news-returning-to-tv-in-deal-between-the-advocate-and-nbc/>.

³⁴⁹ *Out* focuses more on popular fashion and lifestyle content for gay men, as compared to *The Advocate*’s focus on news for the LGBT community as a whole, and *Out*’s “Model Citizen” videos basically showed attractive *Out* readers, who submitted photos and were selected by the magazine’s editors to be (titillatingly) photographed by professional model photographers.

as links in case the viewer wished to follow the content to its source and thus explore the Here Media network more widely.

Here TV's use of Facebook offers a more recent example. The page for its original show *From Here On Out* (2014) includes a March 24, 2014 post that invites readers to see "the beefy boys of Here TV's new steamy sitcom, *From Here on OUT*, shar[ing] their favorite behind-the-scenes moments from the series" by attaching a link to an *Advocate* article titled "PHOTOS: The Hunks of 'From Here On Out.'"³⁵⁰ The name of the show in the Facebook post links to a separate Facebook page for *From Here On Out*. The synergy here is multi-layered: the Here TV Facebook page is linking to an article on *Advocate.com* (another of Here Media's holdings) written to promote the Here TV show *From Here On Out*. This show itself, which will be discussed in chapter three, is a highly synergistic text: in the style of *30 Rock* and its haranguing of NBC Universal's conglomerate structure, the show follows a writer getting his show onto Here TV and is full of in-references to Here Media's varied media ownership (as well as the peculiarities of niche LGBT media).

During this phase of conglomeration, LGBT and mainstream press were beginning to take note of Here Media's conglomerating activities. *Queerty* expressed concern that while this merger had the potential to be good for LGBT media, it could just as easily be "yet another media conglomerate gobbling everything up in some senseless stab at synergy while the people who suffer are the consumers" (and the site didn't squander the opportunity to call Colichman "the whiny queer version of Rupert Murdoch").³⁵¹ Gawker called the agreement as "a fire sale

³⁵⁰ Post on *From Here On Out*'s Facebook page, March 24, 2014, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/FromHereOnOutTV/posts/10152270781864871>; *Advocate.com* Editors, "PHOTOS: The Hunks of 'From Here On Out,'" *The Advocate*, March 24, 2014, accessed December 9, 2017. <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2014/03/24/photos-hunks-here-out>.

³⁵¹ *Queerty* Staff, "All of Gay Media Are Belong to Paul Colichman," *Queerty* (blog), January 9, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017. <http://www.queerty.com/all-of-gay-media-are-belong-to-paul-colichman-20090109>.

thinly disguised as a merger,” and suggested that “gay media moguls” like Colichman or Selvin were simply examples of “gay men seeking attention - who’d imagine?”³⁵² The *LA Times* published a less critical biography of Colichman and Here Media and quoted John Waters’ titling of Colichman as “the gay Citizen Hearst,” which Waters presumably intended affectionately based on his description later in the article of Colichman as “brave...driven and obsessive in the best sense of the word.”³⁵³ Notably, the title of this 2008 article was “Building an Empire of Gay Media.”

This empire was soon to become the object of much public criticism. In late 2009 sites like Queerty and Gawker began producing posts about Here’s failure to pay their freelancers and contractors.³⁵⁴ In February 2010, Queerty contacted a dozen or so Here contributors and estimated they were owed over \$22K. In March, Gawker posted about this story twice, gathering information from anonymous Here contributors and reporting some *Advocate* and *Out* writers had been waiting for six months to a year for payment. Gawker went so far as to call Here “colossal deadbeats” and quote an anonymous source that accused Here of being a ponzi scheme.³⁵⁵ *Indiewire* reported that many filmmakers also claimed Regent failed to pay them for

³⁵² Owen Thomas, “A Gay Media Empire to Shove in the Closet,” *Gawker*, January 12, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://gawker.com/5129853/a-gay-media-empire-to-shove-in-the-closet>.

³⁵³ Eller, “Building an Empire.”

³⁵⁴ Queerty Staff, “Massive Layoffs At a Bleeding Regent/Here Media. *Advocate* Folding Into An Insert?”, *Queerty* (blog), October 30, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.queerty.com/massive-layoffs-at-a-bleeding-regenthere-media-advocate-folding-into-insert-20091030>.; Queerty Staff, “*The Advocate* Says Air America Owes Rachel Maddow \$4k. But How Much Does *The Advocate* Owe Its Talent?”, *Queerty* (blog), February 6, 2010, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.queerty.com/the-advocate-says-air-america-owes-rachel-maddow-4k-but-how-much-does-the-advocate-owe-its-talent-20100206>.

³⁵⁵ Hamilton Nolan, “Freelancers Say Out, The Advocate Not Paying Writers,” *Gawker*, March 19, 2010, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://gawker.com/5497300/freelancers-say-out-the-advocate-not-paying-writers>; Nolan, “Regent / Here Media: Colossal Deadbeats,” *Gawker*, March 23, 2010, <http://gawker.com/5499957/regent-here-media-colossal-deadbeats>.

licensing rights and sold titles internationally without filmmakers' permission. Screenwriter Jody Wheeler (*Heat Wave*, 2009), one of the few filmmakers willing to speak on the record, had harsh criticisms of Regent: "They took every new crop of gay filmmakers, pulled them in, signed them up and either didn't pay them or paid them poorly and then let it go."³⁵⁶ Later that year Queerty also publicized a conflict between Here and Sean Carney, a former editor at Here-owned magazine *Unzipped*, who had publicly criticized the company on his personal Facebook profile and found himself with a cease-and-desist letter and the threat of a libel lawsuit.³⁵⁷

This public criticism of the company culminated in early February 2011 when several sources reported that Bank of America and Merrill Lynch had filed a \$90 million fraud lawsuit against Regent Releasing, alleging that Jarchow and company "schemed to funnel loan proceeds to themselves through a series of sham transfers and transactions with affiliated parties."³⁵⁸ According to Indiewire, Regent took out loans of about \$100 million from Merrill Lynch in 2005 before creating "shell companies" Family Media Home Entertainment and Liberation Productions International. Essentially, "Jarchow created companies that made deals with each other, leading many to speculate that he was sending the loan money directly into his own pocket," especially since many of the films whose distribution these loans were meant to fund were never released.³⁵⁹ The company's modest vertical integration was also brought to the fore,

³⁵⁶ Jody Wheeler, quoted in Eric Kohn, "EXCLUSIVE: The 100 Films Affected By the Regent Lawsuit - And What the Filmmakers Can Do About It," *IndieWire*, February 11, 2011, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/02/exclusive-the-100-films-affected-by-the-regent-lawsuit-and-what-the-filmmakers-can-do-about-it-243660/>.

³⁵⁷ Sean Carnage, "My Former Employer Here Media Is Threatening to Sue Me Because of a Facebook Post," *SEANCARNAGE.COM* (blog), July 29, 2010, <http://www.seancarnage.com/2010/07/29/the-day-my-former-supposedly-crusading-for-the-underdog-employer-here-media-threatened-to-sue-me-for-expressing-my-opinion-on-facebook/>.

³⁵⁸ Rachel Abrams and Tod Johnson, "Banks Claim Fraud over Films, TV Series," *Variety*, February 4, 2011.

³⁵⁹ Kohn, "Exclusive."

as the lawsuit claimed that Regent’s companies had licensed the rights of many of the involved films to Here TV, then “extended its payment obligations from 18 months to up to 20 years, without Merrill Lynch’s authorization and despite the fact that the company was in default on payments.”³⁶⁰ When Regent failed to repay its loans, Merrill Lynch foreclosed and auctioned off the company’s debt in October 2010, at which point Colichman and Jarchow showed up to bid a cheeky \$3 million to purchase their own debt. Merrill Lynch outbid the two to retain ownership of the debt and filed the lawsuit.

This lawsuit naturally incited a variety of reactions. Eric Kohn of Indiewire spoke to many of the filmmakers whose work (about 100 films in total) was connected to Regent Releasing at the time. Kohn reports that filmmakers had “signed ownership rights over to Regent ranging from 18 to 30 years” and were considering filing a class-action lawsuit.³⁶¹ Gawker of course reported on the story, mostly by aggregating links to other coverage of the case, but Queerty had an absolute field day. In the space of two weeks in February, Queerty posted at least three articles on the topic, two of which are especially lengthy when compared to the blog’s average posts, and one of which is a full exposé (a “Rogue’s Gallery,” in the article’s phrasing) of the Regent team. I specify “at least three” because by mid-April Queerty had removed these articles from the site.³⁶² The removal of these articles, with names like “Scandalous Details” and

³⁶⁰ Bridget Freeland, “Merrill Lynch and Bank of America Say They Were Rolled for \$90 Million in L.A.,” *Courthouse News Service* (blog), February 2, 2011, September 23, 2015 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://www.courthousenews.com/2011/02/02/33822.htm>.

³⁶¹ Kohn, “Exclusive.”

³⁶² I was able to read them by finding now-dead links to these stories and then accessing archived versions through the Internet Archive: Matt Debord, “SHOCK: Advocate Owner Regent Media Accused of Scamming Big Banks Out of \$90 Million,” *Queerty* (blog), February 2, 2011, February 4, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110204190707/http://www.queerty.com/shock-advocate-owner-regent-media-accused-of-scamming-big-banks-out-of-90-million-20110202/>; Sean Carnage, “The Scandalous Details Inside Regent Entertainment-Here Media’s \$90 Million Wall Street Fraud Lawsuit,” *Queerty* (blog), February 9, 2011, May 10, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110510042412/http://www.queerty.com/the-scandalous-details-inside-regent-entertainmenthere-medias-90-million-wall-street-fraud-lawsuit-20110209/>;

“Frauds and Monsters,” may relate to Here Media suing Queerty; according to *Press Pass Q*, an LGBT trade publication, Here filed suit against Queerty in February 2011 “for unfairly interfering with Here’s business...[through] unfair competition, intentional interference with contractual relations, and intentional interference with prospective advantage” before withdrawing the lawsuit a few weeks later.³⁶³ Here’s lawyers had only this to say on the rapid withdrawal: “We do not comment on pending litigation, but this is part of a larger legal strategy regarding these matters.”³⁶⁴

For the most part Jarchow and Colichman’s strategy in interviews has been to brush off the gravity of the lawsuit. At the time the lawsuit was first filed, Jarchow said that “basically, Merrill Lynch is unhappy with the deal they made five years ago, and this is their way of expressing it.”³⁶⁵ Colichman told me in 2015 that it was a frivolous lawsuit and argued that Bank of America had, at the time that it acquired Merrill Lynch, needed to find capital wherever possible and attempted to convert non-recourse loans into recourse loans.³⁶⁶ A non-recourse loan limits the borrower’s liability, only allowing the lender to pursue the loan’s collateral; in the case that the collateral’s value does not equal the debt, a recourse loan allows the lender to pursue the borrower’s other assets to fully recover the amount of the debt.

Carnage, “Frauds & Monsters: A Rogue’s Gallery of Regent Entertainment-Here Media Players,” *Queerty* (blog), February 17, 2011, February 19, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110219152518/http://www.queerty.com/frauds-monsters-a-rogues-gallery-of-regent-entertainment-here-media-players-20110217/>.

³⁶³ Chuck Colbert, “Regent Group in the Middle of a Legal Melee,” *Press Pass Q*, March 2011, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.presspassq.com/detail.cfm?id=115>.

³⁶⁴ Larry Stein, quoted in Colbert, “Regent Group.”

³⁶⁵ Stephen Jarchow, quoted in Abrams and Johnson, “Banks Claim Frauds.”

³⁶⁶ Colichman, interview by author.

Ultimately, it is difficult to know who did exactly what with what intentions, and at the time of this writing the case remains unresolved. In addition, much of the coverage of Here Media's questionable ethics have been reported by Queerty and Gawker, neither one known for its journalistic rigor and integrity, which complicates our ability to draw solid conclusions about the situation. Of course, one might point out that Here Media itself owns many of the venues that would normally report on this kind of LGBT media industry news. But journalists' and bloggers' eagerness to attack, and oft-appearing general distaste for, the conglomerate leads us to consider how the public reacts to the interaction of corporate business and LGBT politics, and how practitioners understand their own work and role in these sites.

“A Different Kind of Commitment”: Signifying Professional Work in LGBT Media Industries

Having relayed these histories of Regent and Here's cross-ownership strategies, I now want to consider how Colichman and others frame the business decisions of their companies from all three phases of conglomeration. For instance, Colichman rejected the premise of my questions about Regent's strategic theater ownership, describing this move more as a fulfillment of his own childhood love for theaters and insisting that the endeavor was thoroughly unprofitable until it came time to actually sell the properties. Similarly, when I asked him about Here Tunes and the strategic position it offered the company, he explicitly denied it was a business move and instead described Here Tunes as a community-focused strategy to “give LGBT artists a leg-up and be able to promote them heavily” in an industry environment difficult for new musicians.³⁶⁷ And more generally, as do other LGBT media executives, he locates much of his company's operations within political need and service to the community.

³⁶⁷ Colichman, interview by author.

His comments about theater ownership contradict statements he made in trade press (cited above), which invites us to think about discursive contexts and strategies. When speaking to venues like *Variety* and the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, he outlined the business advantages that owning exhibition spaces offered Regent. Yet when speaking over fifteen years later to me, an academic including him and his company in a history of contemporary LGBT media, he frames his theater ownership as a not-particularly-lucrative pet project. I note this not as some kind of “gotcha” scholarship, but rather to consider his investments in different situations. When speaking to industry trade press at the actual moment Regent was buying these theaters (and presumably trying to portray itself as attractive to filmmakers considering production or distribution with Regent), it is logical that Colichman would situate this move within a profitable business strategy, even if theater ownership were truly a wholly-indulgent satisfaction of a personal dream. And when speaking years later to a media scholar who is positioning these companies alongside other smaller, much less conglomerated LGBT distributors, it is logical that Colichman would describe theater ownership as a pure expression of his love for film even if his motive at the time was in actuality a cold, single-minded pursuit of profit. I doubt either extreme scenario is true, but this example demonstrates the complexity of how companies represent themselves and its impact on our understanding of a company’s “personality.”

Colichman’s current interest in tempering my business-driven image of Here Media may relate especially to its most recent phase of conglomeration and the public response (and criticism). Here Media is probably the largest, most centralized LGBT media company in the US, and it is absolutely more corporate than the other distributors this dissertation discusses. LGBT media has often been associated with scrappy independents fighting the power, so what happens when a company becomes a conglomerate? Karen Ocamb, a former contributor to

Here's Gaywired.com, wondered about the rapid expansion of gay media companies, remarking that "'media conglomerate' is not really an identity the LGBT community can get excited about."³⁶⁸ In some ways, I think she is right; reveling in a scrappy independent kind of identity is certainly more "fun" than considering whether LGBTs, and specifically gay white men, have become more assimilated into mainstream culture at the expense of an edgy, outsider status. And especially in an era of extreme cross-ownership and global conglomeration among the largest companies in the world, the "stain" of being overly-corporate is something that any CEO or executives would want to avoid, *in some contexts*. Again, I draw attention to Colichman speaking in a certain way to business publications and trade press, and in another way to a young academic.

But Ocamb's belief that "media conglomerate" is not an exciting prospect for the LGBT community is also partly wrong. LGBT culture coming to resemble mainstream media carries a certain symbolic weight; this move claims LGBT media a place at the table, which many LGBTs may find comforting as a reassurance of being perceived by corporations as equivalent to straight customers. Alexandra Chasin and Katherine Sender have both demonstrated the ways in which corporate recognition of LGBTs is often understood as social progress because of its implied inclusion of LGBTs into market-driven citizenship in the U.S.³⁶⁹ As Chasin phrases it, "full inclusion in the national community of Americans is available through personal consumption," and as such being hailed as consumers in the same way straight customers are is seen as a form of recognition that de-emphasizes difference and instead widens the category of American

³⁶⁸ Karen Ocamb, quoted in Seth Hemmelgarn, "Gay Web Site to Re-Launch," *Bay Area Reporter*, April 17, 2008.

³⁶⁹ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*; Alexandra Chasin, 101-144.

citizenship to include LGBTs in normative national roles.³⁷⁰ While Chasin and Sender are referring specifically to mainstream corporations marketing to LGBT consumers, the idea translates - in the political position often described as “assimilationist,” Here Media coming to resemble (to a point) the massive conglomerates that define mainstream media is actually a form of progress. If one is not inclined to question the economic structures that underlie contemporary entertainment and media in the US, then there is cause only for appreciation that LGBTs would have a similarly powerful and ultimately validating media system.

However, politics can complicate how media executives think about themselves and their work. Colichman’s correction of my assumption about Here Tunes does not actually contradict trade or press discourse by Colichman or Here Films, but based on the company’s business practice before and especially after the period of Here Tunes, I feel comfortable locating Here Tunes at least partly within a cross-ownership business strategy even while he claims that this was not his motivation.³⁷¹ This is not an uncommon way for LGBT media executives to situate their companies, as demonstrated by Kathleen P. Farrell’s research on how creators of LGBT TV programming navigate and frame their work. She reports that “all of my interviewees described their careers using both political and business terms—a strategy that constructs the television industry as culturally important and allows them to situate their work within the fight for LGBT equality,” while of course “their careers in Gay TV situate them in a business, not a community-service organization.”³⁷² Farrell observed that many of her interviewees, who worked for places like Here TV, Logo, and the now-defunct Q Network, “emphasized what they saw as a positive

³⁷⁰ Chasin, 101.

³⁷¹ Colichman, interview by author.

³⁷² Farrell, Kathleen P. “Backstage Politics: Gay TV Professionals and Their Work.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 11 (August 2011): 26.

effect of their labors - helping the LGBT community - and downplayed the profit-oriented nature of the business in order to construct their industry as culturally important in the struggle for sexual equality.”³⁷³

Katherine Sender found similar results as Farrell when she interviewed forty-five professionals working in LGBT marketing and media, including those at Here, most of whom identified as LGBT. She found that these professionals, including publishers, advertising directors, PR consultants, and journalists, often

dignified and politicized their roles by positioning themselves as experts, as members of a professional community, and as political progressives. As such, they did not situate themselves as *either* professionals *or* as political activists, but as both: their activism enhanced their professional expertise, and their work advanced the politicized project of GLBT visibility.³⁷⁴

According to Stephen Macias, Here Media’s press director, the fact that “most of us in the company are gay and lesbian...[means that] we have a different kind of commitment than other media companies’ employees have.”³⁷⁵ He gave this response to a question about the challenges of running a relatively-small company in the current media environment (Here employees’ identity-based commitment makes him “exceptionally confident” about their likelihood of success), but this description of Here employees also implies the company’s work is inflected with individual political dedication.

Conclusion

For both of these companies, a business’s pursuit of capital is framed as a site for political progress. Wolfe Video invites LGBTs (and lesbians specifically) to consume their

³⁷³ Farrell, 28.

³⁷⁴ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 76.

³⁷⁵ Macias, quoted in Hemmelgarn, “Gay Web Site.”

product as a means of performing citizenship and supporting their community. Here Media's vertical integration, besides creating a structure of control and cross-promotion for the company, provides venues for up-and-coming LGBT artists and allows for the kinds of representations, particular sexual, that are impossible in venues beholden to mainstream advertisers. In the wider scope of the LGBT media distribution landscape, Wolfe Video's lesbian-targeting logic can also be understood as a sort of microcosm for the LGBT media discourse that most of these distributors produce and inhabit. Wolfe Video preserving lesbian-specific space within what for the most part could be called *gay* niche media mirrors the idea that LGBT niche media carves out a space for LGBT viewership within mainstream "straight" media. For example, as described above and in the first chapter, Here Media's goal is to give LGBT viewers their own version of the sort of media they have long viewed and extrapolated from. Colichman's pithy summation of Here TV's mission, "everything straight people have, we're gonna have," could be repurposed for Wolfe Video: everything gay men have, lesbian are gonna have.³⁷⁶ And with the dual threat of straight men making lesbian films, which according to Wolfe Video is the unfortunate and inevitable end result of LGBT films being illegally downloaded (because straight men already "have a budget and they can get A-list actors"), business practices like centralization and vertical integration are signified as politically good. It's a way for lesbians to take control of their representation within the continuing androcentrism that niche LGBT media retains as it breaks from the mainstream, and to create a self-sustaining cultural and economic circuit of media.³⁷⁷ Thus for both Here and Wolfe, a vertical integration model with centralized control is the only

³⁷⁶ Colichman, quoted in Rob Owen, "Cable On-Demand Services Channel Subscribers' Niches," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 4, 2008.

³⁷⁷ Nicole Conn, quoted in Stull, "Wolfe Video Asks You."

reliable way to guarantee authenticity. For Here it removes straight people, and for Wolfe it deprioritizes men, from the process of getting LGBT media funded and produced. This identity-based political justification of power-concentrating industrial practices, practices that the public has become increasingly attuned to and suspicious of in recent years, is good business for distributors, allowing them to enjoy both a good public image and some degree of structural convergence (although, as we saw above with Here Media, public response cannot always be predicted and controlled).

Here I'm taking a slightly cynical, or what Sedgwick would call "paranoid," tone as I attempt to infer the motives, or at least propose the ultimate economic effects, of Wolfe's and Here's business practices. But throughout this dissertation I ultimately want to resist falling back on un-nuanced dismissals of LGBT media based on their failure to meet academic or political standards of queer or radical enough. Even while I identify the industrial function of framing media consumption in terms of community responsibility, I'm not willing to fully discount the political claims these distributors make; like Sender and Farrell argue above, I buy that these practitioners have genuine personal commitments to their work, even though these commitments align neatly with discourses that produce good PR for the companies. They can work both ways at once. In this spirit I return to a passage I quoted above from Griffin, wherein he expresses his ambivalence to companies like those this chapter has described: he conveys his concern about LGBT media companies needing to operate within "the requirements of capital and structures of power," but also leaves room for such production contexts to create various kinds of media with many potential meanings for viewers.³⁷⁸ Similarly, Henderson uses the phrase "a constrained political universe" to refer to a broken two-party electoral model in the U.S. that can nonetheless

³⁷⁸ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 15.

still produce positive effects (and affects) and limited redistribution of “critical cultural resources.”³⁷⁹ This term applies equally well to popular media production within twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism in the U.S.; amidst the need for and work on media reform, we must continue to culturally survive within the exigencies of capital-driven media industries, and for Henderson, a critique founded in a “centuries-long standoff between art and commerce, a standoff reinvested with moral import” is going to flatten our analysis of how niche LGBT media functions.³⁸⁰

Griffin argues that media practitioners’ investments in LGBT media, and I would add those of viewers/consumers as well, “warrant more careful scrutiny than an evaluation in which they are deemed unproblematically ‘normative’ as a result of being ‘commercial.’”³⁸¹ “Unproblematically normative” is a phrase that catches my attention with its suggestion that claims of normativity, often directed towards politics deemed problematic, should themselves be problematized, particularly amidst the often-simplifying “familiar oppositions” of queer/nonqueer or art/commerce that Henderson sees as unhelpfully axiomatic in contemporary queer theory (a position Eve Sedgwick would probably echo).³⁸² A media landscape that, especially historically but also contemporarily, prioritizes heterosexuality, introduces complications to how we evaluate niche LGBT media and the companies that produce it, forcing us to consider in what contexts and in response to what kinds of obstacles this cottage industry of niche LGBT media has emerged, and the very real investments of the practitioners in this sector. Similar ideas will be addressed in the next chapter, wherein we’ll examine what LGBT viewers

³⁷⁹ Henderson, 10, 104.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁸¹ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 15.

³⁸² Henderson, 118.

are assumed to want and need, in what contexts such assumptions are formed, and how this informs the evaluation of LGBT media as good, bad, and gratuitous.

Chapter 3

The Good, the Bad, and the Sexy: Discourses of Quality, Progress, and Pleasure in Niche LGBT Media

I'm going up to the gay film festival in San Francisco this weekend, and I'm expecting as usual to be asking myself time and time again, 'Why are these being made?'

- Mike Thomas, co-founder of Strand Releasing, 1999³⁸³

In 2008, an *AfterElton* article titled "The Gay Movie Revolution" asked whether LGBT viewers might be in "the golden age of gay cinema at last." Author Brent Hartinger tied this largely to digital media technology, including the accessibility and relative inexpensiveness of distributing media through online platforms. But one section of the article, entitled "A Glut of Crappy Gay Movies," lamented the clutter of low-budget LGBT films appearing in the marketplace, partly due to the low barrier of entry introduced by cheaper filmmaking technology. Hartinger includes a line from Maureen Guthman, VP of Acquisitions and Co-Production at Logo: "When it comes to my dwindling amount of personal time, I'd rather see a well-acted film about straight people than a grainy, poorly-acted film that speaks to me as a gay person."³⁸⁴

Personally, I am no stranger to this perception of contemporary LGBT media. In the past couple years of working on this project, when I've met other queer people and told them about my research, they've often asked "Why are gay films so bad?" They propose their own answers, or offer examples of films they find particularly poor, or sheepishly admit what "bad" films they

³⁸³ Mike Thomas, quoted in Foreman, "The Gay Glut."

³⁸⁴ Brent Hartinger, "The Gay Movie Revolution," *AfterElton* (blog), April 9, 2008. *AfterElton* became *The Backlot* in 2013, and is now part of Logo's *NewNowNext*. This particular article is currently posted at *NewNowNext* and incorrectly attributed to Alexander Stevenson (accessed December 9, 2017), <http://www.newnownext.com/the-gay-movie-revolution/04/2008/>. Original post available through *Internet Archive*, April 13, 2008 version, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080413224330/http://www.afterelton.com/movies/2008/4/gaymovierevolution>.

actually like. But this is not limited to my anecdotal experiences. In the past two decades, plenty has been written in the popular press about the quality of LGBT media. For example, a 1999 *New York Post* article called “The Gay Glut” carries the subtitle, “Indie filmmakers are turning out a stream of mediocre movies with same-sex themes. Is it gaysploitation or just bad art?”. A 2006 *AfterElton* article asks “When Did Gay Movies Stop Sucking?” A 2009 *Autostraddle* article offers the “Top Ten Best Lesbian Movies: 10 Queer Movies That Don’t Suck.” A 2013 *xoJane* article wonders “Why Are Queer Movies So Frequently Terrible?” And a 2014 post on the “Gaybros” Reddit poses the question, “Why are there sooo many terrible gay themed movies?”³⁸⁵ These posts and articles, spanning fifteen years and many kinds of publications and formats, all wonder about the badness of LGBT media, or at least imply that the historical majority of it has not been good.

In the same year as Hartinger’s article discussing the “glut of crappy gay movies,” Gregg Goldstein of *The Hollywood Reporter* was calling much of contemporary gay media “schlocky genre films...similar to the kind of lowbrow fare generally aimed at straight audiences,” arising in response to an “awareness of a target audience of affluent young consumers seen as willing to support any film with a gay theme.” He notes progress in LGBT politics in the U.S. like the advent of same-sex marriage in California (although he was celebrating prematurely here, as Prop 8’s passage a few months later would demonstrate), celebrities coming out publicly, and the

³⁸⁵ Foreman, “The Gay Glut”; Brent Hartinger, “When Did Gay Movies Stop Sucking?”, *AfterElton* (blog), August 31, 2006, September 3, 2006 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060903100555/http://www.afterelton.com:80/columns/2006/8/lastgayword.html>; *Autostraddle* Team, “Top Ten Best Lesbian Movies: 10 Queer Movies That Don’t Suck,” *Autostraddle* (blog), August 19, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.autostraddle.com/top-ten-best-lesbian-movies-yes-thats-right-10-queer-girl-movies-that-dont-suck/>; Kate Conway, “Why Are Queer Movies So Frequently Terrible?,” *xoJane* (blog), November 15, 2013, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.xojane.com/entertainment/gay-romantic-comedies>; ejfitz, “Why are there sooo many terrible gay themed movies?”, *r/gaybros Reddit*, October 8, 2014, accessed December 9, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaybros/comments/2invs8/why_are_there_sooo_many_terrible_gay_themed_movies/.

increasing number of LGBT film festivals, and frames this as confusingly inconsistent with the LGBT media being produced: with all of these advances, he asks, “why are independent gay films doing worse than ever at the box office and among critics?” Or to borrow the article’s title, Goldstein finds it strange that “Gay Pride Abounds, But Indie Gay Films Tank.”³⁸⁶

Goldstein is not asking the right questions here. His comments obliquely introduce an important aspect of the conversation around LGBT media being good or bad. When he compares LGBT media to the “lowbrow fare generally aimed at straight audiences,” he reminds us of the prevalence of “badness” in all kinds of media, not just LGBT media. Mike Thomas, one of the founders of Strand Releasing, puts criticisms of this media’s quality in context; in a 1999 interview, he describes much of the gay film he was seeing as “pretty abysmal,” but he rejects that bad quality as specific to LGBT media because “if you go to Sundance, most movies there are tepid or give you a feeling of *deja vu*. It’s a problem endemic to the independent filmmaking movement. They tell the same story over and over again. Or they copy other successes and make a C or D version of them.”³⁸⁷ Film critic and Outfest programmer Alonso Duralde made similar comments in 2006: in a 2006 *AfterElton* interviewed about gay movies’ badness, Duralde countered that “eighty-five percent of all movies suck. In the last few years, there were more gay movies, so more of them sucked.”³⁸⁸ While the *AfterElton* writer has plenty to say about the films he perceives as bad, he does acknowledge Duralde’s point and discusses how funding structures have historically forced gay films into the “independent” category, with all the financial restrictions this category often entails.

³⁸⁶ Gregg Goldstein, “Gay Pride Abounds, but Indie Gay Films Tank,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 16, 2008.

³⁸⁷ Thomas, quoted in Foreman, “The Gay Glut.”

³⁸⁸ Alonso Duralde, quoted in Hartinger, “When Did Gay Movies.”

Both Thomas and Duralde specifically identify independent filmmaking as a site lacking in quality, but Duralde offers his ratio for filmmaking quality in general and uses this to think about how we perceive LGBT films: if 10 LGBT films were produced, 8 or 9 would suck, and if 100 LGBT films were produced, 85 would suck. In his formulation, we're seeing more *bad* LGBT movies just because we are seeing more LGBT movies, and most movies are bad. Duralde is probably being a little arch here, but his comments are productive. He is engaging with this question not through texts, by analyzing and evaluating individual films, but rather through context: what recent changes in the production of LGBT film might inform our reception of the texts? His approach aligns with this dissertation's methodology, and I want to continue this line of thinking.

Part of why niche LGBT media is popularly understood as "bad" is because of the industrial structures through which LGBT media circulates, and the existence of the media label "LGBT" itself. During the dissertation years, I was at the grocery store checkout line one day and glancing through a \$5 bargain DVD bin of movies I didn't recognize, largely disaster films. No titles or cast members were familiar to me, and I found myself wondering how many more bargain bins could be filled with low-budget films like these that I would never hear about. I suddenly realized the power of the promotion and distribution of niche LGBT media. Because of these structures, I am aware of media with LGBT content that, in any other situation, would escape my attention. Authorship of a research project on niche LGBT media encourages a particular sort of alertness on my part, but queer people not writing dissertations about this kind of media often read niche LGBT blogs or magazines, or browse the LGBT sections of online media platforms, or see trailers that their queer friends link to on Facebook, or hear about upcoming films from LGBT celebrities or personalities whose social media they follow.

So there are countless low-budget disaster films I'll never hear about unless my eyes wander at the checkout line, but I am *very* likely to hear about films with LGBT content based on the ways in which I am targeted and the ways in which I navigate the internet. If there were two films, comparable in their low budgets / production values and no-name casts and crews, but one had LGBT characters or themes while the other did not, the former is likely to receive certain kinds of promotion and attention that the latter does not.³⁸⁹ As I suggested in the introduction, LGBT content often imposes a centripetal force that gathers and organizes a text's meanings, so a film having LGBT content often "tags" it as LGBT and then activates a promotional circuit that grants the film more visibility than it might have otherwise. A text not spotlighted based on the quality of its writing, its production value, or its cinematic innovation might nevertheless be featured in these niche promotional venues based on its LGBT content. So while countless of "bad" films without LGBT content will go unnoticed, similarly "bad" films *with* LGBT content are likely to be on the radar of LGBT viewers, making LGBT media seem bad because of the general elevated visibility of almost *any* film with LGBT content.

Increased attention to media with LGBT content is not only a product of niche LGBT press venues - the distribution companies this dissertation explores also play a crucial role. Remember Ariztical's film *Hit Parade* discussed in Chapter One, a pretty forgettable, modestly-budgeted film that received coverage in LGBT press purely because of its association with Ariztical. As we saw in Ken Sain's review, that publication hesitated to cover the film "because the gay content is minimal," but the author ultimately decided to include it based on its

³⁸⁹ The latter may well activate its own meanings and promotional circuits outside the scope of this dissertation; perhaps another project will ask, why do disaster films (or any other kinds of film) seem so bad?

distribution with LGBT company Ariztical.³⁹⁰ It wasn't even the film's content *per se* that elevated its visibility to LGBT viewers, but rather its inclusion in an LGBT distributor's catalog.

Ariztical's acquisition strategy for this film is also instructive. As I described in chapter one, Shoel didn't think the film had many potential venues for distribution, but he found the film engaging, recognized that he was "in a position to give it an outlet" and decided it "was gay enough to be able to make available as a gay film" (though not as a "big hit").³⁹¹ So in this case, for a film with little chance of distribution, LGBT content (even in a limited amount) operated as a means to distribution; a film that would be categorized as "bad" by many standards nevertheless found distribution, exhibition, and promotion because of its acquisition by an LGBT-focused distributor. They get pulled up into catalogues, and thus made visible, because of the existence of companies defined by this identity category. A fellow LGBT-niche-aficionado pithily summarized the concept in a conversation with me: "Yeah. Movies are bad. We just don't often collect all the bargain basement shit and put it in a catalog with a couple of legitimately good movies."³⁹² This phrasing echoes Duralde's statements above both in terms of content and snark - movies are bad, and the more one sees, the more *bad* movies one will see. And the existence of industrial structures that will spotlight LGBT films will bring a number of *bad* LGBT films to our attention that exceeds the number of bad non-LGBT films we'll notice. Even in the case of a film like *Hit Parade*, whose promotion a distributor might not prioritize, the company's deals with digital exhibition venues continues to elevate the visibility of a text; for example, at the time of this writing, *Hit Parade* is free to stream on Amazon Video with a Prime

³⁹⁰ Sain, "Hit Parade."

³⁹¹ Michael Shoel, interview by author.

³⁹² James Morris, Facebook message to author, September 14, 2016.

membership, like many other of Ariztical's films including the entire *Eating Out* series. To be sure, plenty of films with LGBT content do not receive distribution deals, so its presence is no guarantee, and some kinds of LGBT content are more likely to garner attention and support than others. It is not that LGBT distributors don't take other considerations into account besides the presence of LGBT content - each company has its own relationship to this category and its own acquisition strategies. But the elevation in visibility that LGBT content often triggers is crucial to understanding overarching ideas about niche LGBT media as a body of texts.

Increases in the volume and visibility of LGBT media will naturally draw attention. With the advent of New Queer Cinema at the beginning of the 90s, and the relative explosion of LGBT (mostly gay and lesbian) representation in TV and both independent and mainstream film as part of the so-called "Gay 90s," cultural critics had plenty to say about the state of LGBT media at the turn of the century. The concerns and questions raised in this period illustrate the context in which LGBT distributors have operated, and outline some of the debates I still observe occurring in popular discourse around contemporary LGBT media. To be clear, this period did not mark the beginning of criticism/coverage of LGBT or gay-interest films.³⁹³ But besides the Gay 90s period's relation to when this dissertation's distributors were operating or beginning to operate, this period also included the formation of what Suzanna Danuta Walters identifies as a "critical mass" of LGBT content. She argues that following this period, "gay-themed films no longer exist as rare and financially risky outposts in the barren desert of heterosexual romance,"

³⁹³ LGBT niche press has long covered films with LGBT content, and Parker Tyler engaged with cinematic homosexuality and queerness in his film reviews and his 1972 book *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, 1st ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972). Even earlier, under the anagrammatic pseudonym "Lisa Ben," Edythe Eyde included film reviews in her independently-produced *Vice Versa* magazine, which ran for nine issues between 1947 and 1948; the first issue in June 1947 included a review/discussion of *Children of Loneliness* (1934). See Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 6-10, and Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Winchester, MA: Faber & Faber, 1995), 1-16.

which allowed LGBT films to “refer to each other, to construct a ‘genre’ or a group of films that engage actively in a dialogue with other mainstream entertainment.”³⁹⁴ The creation of a critical mass gives critics a body of material to theorize as well as a reason to do so. If Duralde’s eighty-five percent rule is correct, a critical mass also increases the chances that there are “bad” films to criticize.

So what did scholar-critics have to say about LGBT film at this time? In a 2000 piece for *Cinéaste*, Michael Bronski focuses on “the unrepentant, repetitious, cheery sameness” of the coming out films of the 90s.³⁹⁵ He locates this trope within its historical context, identifying them as a post-Stonewall narrative in contrast to the “problem film” approach that defined the occasional overt LGBT representation in the preceding years. Identifying the early-to-mid-80s as the era in which the coming out trope gained narrative prominence in LGBT filmmaking, Bronski offers both political and aesthetic critiques to coming out as a narrative center. But one of his ongoing concerns with these films is the way in which a need for positivity steamrolls the complexities of coming out and gay life: he criticizes them for “misjudg[ing] the harshness of homophobia in the world” and “creat[ing] a fantasy world in which coming out only has minor negative consequences.”³⁹⁶ *But I’m a Cheerleader* receives his most exacting disapproval as “one of the worst, new examples of what can go wrong with the coming out film.”³⁹⁷ He rejects the film’s campy, parodic send-up of gay conversion therapy and accuses the film of “actually lying about the current political reality of the extreme right and the deeply homophobic politics

³⁹⁴ Walters, 135.

³⁹⁵ Michael Bronski, “Positive Images & the Coming out Film: The Art and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Cinema,” *Cinéaste* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 20.

³⁹⁶ Bronski, “Positive Images,” 23.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

of the ex-gay movement.”³⁹⁸ Ultimately, his diagnosis is that “coming out films work best when they go against their first, and basic, mandate: easy affirmation and positive images.”³⁹⁹

Although I’ll go to my grave defending the merits of *But I’m a Cheerleader*, Bronski is not alone in his concerns about a relentless positivity in gay representation in the 90s. In a 1998 *Out* article later included in her *New Queer Cinema* book, B. Ruby Rich asks “What’s a Good Gay Film?” According to her, gay and lesbian festival goers are concerned with “positive values,” lesbians surviving until the end of the film (against the trope of queer characters often being killed off), and an avoidance of predictable mainstream archetypes (like the gay best friend). The “queer publics” Rich observes in these venues want films that validate and affirm, films that

reinforce identity, visualize respectability, combat injustice, and bolster social status. They want a little something new, but not too new; sexy, sure, but with the emphasis on romance; stylish, but reliably realistic and not too demanding; nothing downbeat or too revelatory; and happy endings of course.⁴⁰⁰

In short, she believes that this audience desire screen representations of “its collective best foot forward.”⁴⁰¹ She connects this desire to filmmaking of the 1970s, during which she argues gay and lesbian film was focused on politics, civil rights, and group identity building, focusing less on the “celebration and sexuality” of 1970s gay America, whose “contradictions remained off-screen.”⁴⁰² She criticizes contemporary (as of 1998) gay and lesbian film for following this

³⁹⁸ Bronski, 25.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁰ B. Ruby Rich, “What’s a Good Gay Film?,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press Books, 2013), 41.

⁴⁰¹ Rich, 41.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

tradition and “covering up the realities of our lives in order to present a respectable image in public.”⁴⁰³ She urges viewers to make a distinction “between films that pander and films that inspire, between our highest common denominator and our lowest,” and insists that LGBT films should “go beyond identification, oppression, or coming-out stories to tap into larger issues or deeper emotions. And if their aesthetics take advantage of the opportunity to depart from realist norms, so much the better.”⁴⁰⁴

Rich does inflect her critique with a wry ambivalence, mentioning that the audiences for these films leave her “feeling isolated there in the dark, the dyke done in by the critic in my cerebellum.” But ultimately she worries that “mediocrity has come to roost now that the barricades have come down.”⁴⁰⁵ But others at the time both fully embraced this kind of filmmaking and attempted to classify it. *New York Times* film critic Stephen Holden (without the same kind of critique) described much of the late-90s mainstream-adjacent gay filmmaking as “Giddy Gay Lite,” in which “gay liberation is almost a fait accompli, the AIDS epidemic barely exists and rampant homophobia is somewhere else.”⁴⁰⁶ As examples he includes *The Opposite of Sex*, *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss*, *Bedrooms and Hallways*, and *Trick*, the latter two of which opened and closed the 1999 New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Jim Fall, the director of *Trick*, had his own term for this kind of film: “happy gay wave.” He describes earlier queer films as “very much a product of their time....I personally don’t need to sit through those angry movies. I was weaned on Hollywood fluff, and proud of it....I would much rather sit through a

⁴⁰³ Rich, 43.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 40, 42.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰⁶ Stephen Holden, “Opposite of Gloom: Time to Be Gaily Gay,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 1999.

story, well told, than an angry diatribe, badly told.”⁴⁰⁷ A similar comment comes from Kirkland Tibbels, the founder of Funny Boy Films (producer of *Latter Days* and *Adam & Steve*, among others); he laments claims that a film like *Latter Days* doesn’t appeal to many LGBT producers or distributors “because it’s not edgy,” but counters that “some of us believe we’ve seen too many movies about the gay and lesbian community where we want to go home and slit our throats.”⁴⁰⁸ Yet Suzanna Danuta Walters, like Bronski, is suspicious of overly-optimistic films that create “a vision of a fundamentally embracing and accepting public.” Writing specifically about *In & Out* (1997), she argues that while seeing the gay character supported by his small-town community is “gratifying” and in line with the film’s comedic tone, the film “creates a false sense of solidarity” when it implies that the key to social change is a gay man simply being himself. This narrative overstates “the ease with which bigots can be transformed and learn the errors of their ways, making homophobia fairly benign.”⁴⁰⁹ For her, a “happy gay wave” film might provide escapist comfort for LGBT viewers and an accessible story for straight viewers, but at the risk of underestimating the reality of systemic heterosexism.

Christopher Kelly more specifically inserts sex into this conversation with a 1999 *Film Comment* article. He disapproves of the “sorry state of gay cinema,” which at the turn of the millennium has consisted of “a series of works that ape the conventions of softcore pornography

⁴⁰⁷ Jim Fall, quoted in Rene Rodriguez, “‘Trick’ Director Didn’t Intend to Make It Accessible,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 20, 1999.

⁴⁰⁸ Kirkland Tibbels, quoted in Vary, “Here Comes the New New Queer Cinema.” I have my doubts about the veracity of his statement based on my observations of distributors’ catalogs, but his framing of the issue is important.

⁴⁰⁹ Walters, 151-152.

or *Beach Blanket Bingo*-style farce, or sometimes both.”⁴¹⁰ He produces a list of the failures of a prototypical gay film:

Threadbare, ‘sexy’ plot...conflict based on hackneyed sexual misunderstandings... simple-minded moralizing about how easy it is to find a one-night stand, but how difficult ‘to get together with someone’...and in lieu of anything resembling genuine male-male affection, endless shots of tanned chiseled male torsos.⁴¹¹

It’s important to note that his problem isn’t with the filmic presence of sexuality *per se*, but rather with filmmakers’ sanitized approach to the topic. For example, he criticizes *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) for failing “to show us the dirty parts” and indicating that “ecstasy, excess, and eroticism have no place in [Todd Haynes’] portrayals of gay sexuality.”⁴¹² He describes typical gay films, what he calls “cheerful, wholly derivative pap,” as “a kind of neo-gay pornography....but it was a toothless pornography, a safe-sex- (or no-sex-) era pornography” that traffic in “cheap mindless titillation.”⁴¹³ He laments that “gay cinema....has remained stuck in an almost literal adolescence” and that filmmakers are not drawing from capital-*a* Art like Kenneth Anger or Andy Warhol but rather “television sitcoms and teen sex comedies,” a telling comparison that implicitly devalues these forms of media.⁴¹⁴

Above, Rich affirms Duralde’s position of higher-numbers-more-bad-films when she attributes an increase in mediocrity to the lowering of “barricades.” Indeed, elsewhere she argues that “the sheer volume diluted the quality” when more and more LGBT films were produced in

⁴¹⁰ Christopher Kelly, “The Unbearable Lightness of Gay Movies,” *Film Comment* 35, no. 2 (1999): 16.

⁴¹¹ Kelly, 18.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 16, 18.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

the mid-1990s; more LGBT films means higher chances of some LGBT films being bad.⁴¹⁵ But this barricade-lowering also entailed shifts in what *kinds* of LGBT films were produced. Bronski, Rich, and Walters identify and critique the overly-cheery outlook common in LGBT film being made in the mid-1990s, mentioning “easy affirmation,” “cheerful, wholly derivative pap,” “films that pander,” and films that “mak[e] homophobia fairly benign.” Rich more explicitly directs these kinds of critiques to formal elements when she mentions LGBT viewers’ demands for films that are “stylish, but reliably realistic and not too demanding.” Even the sex is easy, according to Kelly, as “cheap mindless titillation.”

That viewers might opt for a less challenging film is an idea I have seen in analyses of LGBT viewership habits since the turn of the millennium. Maureen Guthman, Vice-President of Acquisitions and Co-Production at Logo until 2009, believes that with their “dwindling amount of personal time,” an LGBT viewer would “rather see a well-acted film about straight people than a grainy, poorly-acted film” that speaks to their LGBT identity.⁴¹⁶ Similarly, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that “most gay and lesbian filmgoers - as opposed to queer ones - want films made in the Hollywood mode and will often patronize Hollywood films before they do independent queer ones.”⁴¹⁷ Both Guthman and Benshoff and Griffin are discussing straight film versus gay film, and LGBT viewers giving up LGBT content in exchange for Hollywood production and aesthetics. It follows that when given a choice, LGBT viewers would prefer LGBT content more closely resembling mainstream Hollywood (rather than more challenging experimental work). Rich points out that “a lot of audiences for the new queer cinema were not

⁴¹⁵ Rich, “A Queer and Present Danger: The Death of New Queer Cinema?,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press Books, 2013), 132.

⁴¹⁶ Maureen Guthman, quoted in Hartinger, “Gay Movie Revolution.”

⁴¹⁷ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 285.

there because they were so excited about the aesthetic breakthrough. They were there because it was the only place they could find gay content.” Once they could find their gay content “somewhere else [where] it goes down easy like classic Coke,” then LGBT audiences “flocked to films every bit as mediocre as those pulling in heterosexual dollars at multiplexes down the road.”⁴¹⁸

These ideas about what LGBT media is supposed to be and do, what makes LGBT good or bad, and how context informs our evaluation of LGBT media form a foundation for this chapter. Whether this media is good, bad, or appropriately sexy is less important than how these ideas and discourses both inform and are applied in acquisition decisions, promotion and press, and brand management. This chapter analyzes three discursive relationships to quality and pleasure that LGBT distribution companies exhibit. For “the good,” I examine Strand Releasing and its insistence on goodness and art, and its maintenance of these standards to preserve the company’s overall brand image. For “the bad,” I examine Ariztical Entertainment’s *Eating Out* series, which activates aesthetic “badness” as a form of political “goodness” in a framework that values LGBT viewers getting access to equivalent forms of media that straight viewers do, through a baseline desire for a kind of representational parity. And for “the sexy,” I interrogate the assumptions about the propriety and purpose of sexual content, analyze Here Media and (especially) TLA’s approach to and application of sex, and examine these two company’s use of “guilty pleasure” to demonstrate how they explicitly acknowledge and actually capitalize on denigrated forms of appreciation of their films.

⁴¹⁸ Rich, quoted in Vary, “Here Comes the New New Queer Cinema”; Rich, “Queer and Present Danger,” 132.

“First and Foremost, It’s Gotta Be a Great Movie”: Art and Quality at Strand

Company History: Strand Releasing

Marcus Hu describes himself as a lover of the film industry even from an earlier age. He reports buying *Variety* as an eleven-year-old living in San Francisco.⁴¹⁹ As an adult, after managing a local art-house theater, he went on to work at companies like New World Pictures, Orion Pictures, United Artists, and Carolco Pictures.⁴²⁰ He met Jon Gerrans while working at Los Angeles-based Vestron Pictures, a subsidiary of Vestron Video, which video historian Frederick Wasser describes as the biggest US independent video distributor in the early 1980s.⁴²¹ The company moved into production in the late 80s to guarantee a continuing supply of product, but even following the huge success of its first production *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987), Vestron soon faltered. After a \$100 million dollar loan for future acquisitions fell through in 1989, company founder Austin Owen Furst Jr. stopped production, began selling off divisions, and finally declared bankruptcy the following year.⁴²² During this downsizing process, both Hu and Gerrans were laid off from Vestron, and Hu returned to San Francisco to begin working and co-programming at the Strand Theater.⁴²³

⁴¹⁹ Griffiths, “Strand and Deliver.”

⁴²⁰ Carlos Aguilar, “Of Fearless Masterpieces and Queer Visions: Strand Releasing Hits 25 Years of Uncompromising Passion for Exceptional Gems,” *IndieWire* (blog), April 23, 2014, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/04/of-fearless-masterpieces-and-queer-visions-strand-releasing-hits-25-years-of-uncompromising-passion-for-exceptional-gems-214320/>; Preeti Chawla, “Marcus Hu: The Peculiar Cinema of Marcus Hu,” *A Magazine*, October 31, 1992.

⁴²¹ Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 120.

⁴²² Wasser, 172-175.

⁴²³ Chad Greene, “Inside Distribution: ‘There’s Still an Audience Out There,’” *Boxoffice*, November 2007; Andrew Hines, “Strand’s Thomas Moves to Rialto,” *Variety*, September 19, 1997.

The Strand Theater, originally called the Jewel, opened in October 1917 on the “Great White Way” of Market Street, which became known for its prevalence of movie houses in the 1910s. It changed hands many times before becoming a grindhouse theater in the 70s when many businesses and theaters in the area were closing down. Mike Thomas had taken control of the Times Theater in the nearby North Beach neighborhood in 1969 and converted it into a repertory theater. He was looking for a Market Street theater at the same moment that the Strand temporarily closed in 1976 after its manager’s death. Thomas began running the Strand in 1977, as well as other theaters in the area during the following decade.⁴²⁴ During his time managing the Strand, Thomas got to know Hu through the theater’s booking of Vestron titles, which led to Hu joining the Strand part-time after leaving Vestron. In one interview Thomas fondly recalled working alongside Hu to wire the Strand’s seats with electricity for a screening of *The Tingler*.⁴²⁵

Hu’s programming at the Strand would soon lead to the formation of Strand Releasing. Hu heard about Lino Brocka’s *Macho Dancer* (1988) and booked the film at the Strand directly through Brocka due to its lack of a US distributor. According to Mike Thomas, the film’s success with the Strand’s audience led them to think that “if this film is doing so well here it would play well in other cities.”⁴²⁶ Hu got Brocka’s permission to distribute the film, with the help of a \$5,000 loan from Hu’s mother. Thomas says that they had “decided to release a film or two, never really dreaming at the time that it would take us where it's taken us.”⁴²⁷ The film grossed

⁴²⁴ “The Strand Theater Historical Display” (informational video), February 12, 2016, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq02wAW6hPI>.

⁴²⁵ Lally, “Strand Thriving.”

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

\$250,000 (or \$300,000⁴²⁸) in the US, which allowed Hu, Gerrans, and Thomas to launch Strand Releasing as a distribution company.⁴²⁹

Originally Strand operated out of Hu's one-bedroom apartment above a garage in Los Angeles, while Thomas was stationed in San Francisco.⁴³⁰ Both Hu and Gerrans had day or temp jobs for the first five years of the company. Hu worked in booking and sales as an independent contractor at Goldwyn and Gerrans worked first at Mark Damon Productions then in a series of, in his words, "the worst" temp jobs at Disney, Paramount, and Universal.⁴³¹ But Strand would begin finding its footing during this time through its connection to high-profile independent films. A 2009 *Variety* article locates Strand's emergence as a company alongside "the late 1980s explosion of independent cinema in and around the Sundance Festival."⁴³² As Gerrans describes it, "there were these people with their little 16mm cameras making feature films out of film school. We were able to...meet these people and work these low, low budget films. It was this small community, where there weren't too many options out there for distribution."⁴³³

One such filmmaker was Gregg Araki. Hu had seen and enjoyed Araki's first feature, *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (1987), a 16mm black-and-white feature the director made for \$5,000 as an MFA student at USC. Hu connected to the film's portrayal of "crazy people in Los Angeles feeling very lonely and lost" as well as "issues of sexual identity that [he'd] never

⁴²⁸ Chawla, "Marcus Hu."

⁴²⁹ Zahed, "Niche Champions."

⁴³⁰ Griffiths, "Strand and Deliver."

⁴³¹ Goodridge, "Ten Years at the Living End."

⁴³² Bob Verini, "Strand Prospers with High-Risk Ventures," *Variety*, July 8, 2009.

⁴³³ Verini, "Strand Prospers."

seen represented on film before.”⁴³⁴ He reports asking Araki, “For \$15K, could you do a color movie with real sync sound?”⁴³⁵ The pair took the script for *The Living End* to a Sundance Institute producers conference in Utah in 1991. There they met Jim Stark and Jon Jost who invested in the film and donated a camera, film stock, and sound equipment.⁴³⁶ Hu’s mother stepped in once again, loaning Hu \$15,000 and earning an executive producer credit.⁴³⁷ With Mike Thomas as another executive producer, and Hu and Gerrans as producers, Strand Releasing barely completed *The Living End* on a miniscule \$23,000 budget and took the film to Sundance.

Recognizing that Strand lacked the resources to properly distribute the film at that time, Hu sold it to October Films, another relatively new distribution company for whom *The Living End* was only its second acquisition.⁴³⁸ In 1999, Gerrans remarked that “in hindsight, it would have been better if we had kept it,” but October Films had more money and was able to pay for the acquisition in advance.⁴³⁹ Recognizing its significance, Strand eventually acquired and distributed the film on DVD in 2008, reportedly spending more than the entire original production budget just to remaster the image and audio.⁴⁴⁰ Upon *The Living End*’s 1992 release, the micro-budgeted film found huge (relative) success. Numbers vary: *Variety* reported the film grossed almost \$693,000 domestically; Araki described the film’s domestic gross as over \$1

⁴³⁴ Marcus Hu, quoted in Kyle Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview: 20 Years of Strand Releasing, with Hu, Gerrans, Araki, and Bailey,” *Movieline* (blog), July 13, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://movieline.com/2009/07/13/strand-releasing/>.

⁴³⁵ Hu, quoted in Verini, “Strand Prospers.”

⁴³⁶ Goodridge, “Ten Years at the Living End.”

⁴³⁷ Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.”

⁴³⁸ Goodridge, “Ten Years at the Living End.”

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁰ Alonso Duralde, “The Living End Lives Again,” *The Advocate*, April 9, 2008.

million (and mentioned that the film “put me on the map.” *The Advocate* set the film’s international box office at \$3 million.⁴⁴¹ In Hu’s words, the deal with October Films “helped propel the company to the next level and put some more money into our pockets.”⁴⁴²

Producing *The Living End* also strengthened Strand and Hu’s relationship with Sundance and what would become known as New Queer Cinema. Hu attended the now-famous “Barbed-Wire Kisses” panel at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, a panel that B. Ruby Rich describes as having “so many queer filmmakers in the audience that a roll call had to be read.”⁴⁴³ In a 2009 interview, Hu listed off some of that roll call: “I remember everyone was there: Derek Jarman, Gregg [Araki], Isaac Julien, Tom Kalin, Christine Vachon, James Schamus, myself...we were all part of this huge discussion.”⁴⁴⁴ Hu also recalls years of support from Sundance, including the institute offering the young company office space in Santa Monica.⁴⁴⁵ Hu describes the Sundance offices at that time as “kind of like a hippie situation - filmmakers would just be crashed on the floor,” and he would use their computer and copier and other office resources.⁴⁴⁶ Later the two companies shared offices and rent for a couple years.⁴⁴⁷ Hu served on Sundance’s advisory board, and Gerrans also credits the Sundance Channel (launched in 1996, now called SundanceTV) as an important contributor to Strand’s growth. The channel’s decision to license

⁴⁴¹ Katja Hofmann, “Gay Pix Pay Way,” *Daily Variety*, February 7, 2005; Verini, “Strand Prospers”; Griffith, “Strand and Deliver.”

⁴⁴² Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.”

⁴⁴³ Rich, “The New Queer Cinema,” 17.

⁴⁴⁴ Hu, quoted in Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.”

⁴⁴⁵ Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.”

⁴⁴⁶ Hu, quoted in Eugene Hernandez, “Do the Strand,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, Summer 1999, 25.

⁴⁴⁷ Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.”

Strand films was, according to Gerrans, “the point where we realized that maybe there is a business for [art house film] distribution, and maybe we could survive.”⁴⁴⁸

And survive they did. Strand’s has continued to traffic in the ideas associated with Sundance - foreign, independent, art house, prestige, quality. As we’ll see in the following section, this is the kind of corporate image the company cultivates to this day, but this identity also finds complex intersections with Strand’s historical and cultural association with LGBT film. In chapter one I discussed the company’s navigation of a corporate LGBT “identity.” Here I want to ask how notions of “goodness” additionally complicate this process. How do goodness and gayness intersect in Strand’s self-description, acquisition, and promotional practices?

Avoiding Gaysploitation

In 1994, Marcus Hu said that while filmmakers would often assume Strand would be interested in their films, the company “look[s] for quality films, and just because it’s gay doesn’t mean we’re going to handle it. It has to be a good movie before we’ll take care of it.”⁴⁴⁹ Of the five distribution companies this dissertation discusses, Strand Releasing produces the most discourse about the complex relationship between goodness/badness, artistic value, and LGBT media. As a company, Strand is the least definitively LGBT; its self-description via the Strand website hasn’t made reference to a specialization in LGBT media since 2003. The company is more invested in presenting itself as a distributor of arthouse, foreign, and independent work.

This self-description is interesting enough to consider in relation to categorization, but for Strand this question becomes additionally layered with ideas about value and goodness. As the

⁴⁴⁸ Jon Gerrans, quoted in Buchanan, “The Movieline Interview.” Gerrans praises IFC in the same way.

⁴⁴⁹ Hu, quoted in Lally, “Strand Thriving.”

line above suggests, the associations with LGBT film that Strand is willing to acknowledge are based on prioritizing the goodness of a film rather than the gayness of a film, in order to match Strand's overall standards of quality. When I interviewed David Bowlds in 2010, Director of Theatrical Sales and Distribution at the time, he summarized this idea in one telling statement:

For gay film, there's always going to be an outlet for bad gay films, and there's always going to be an outlet for good gay films. Strand is going to acquire the good gay films, leaving the others to go where they may. Like, *Gay Boy Sleepaway Camp* 7. You can't do that *and* the re-release of Godard's *Contempt*. It just doesn't go together.⁴⁵⁰

While the film Bowlds jokes about here does not actually exist, its title evokes a kind of text that most consumers of contemporary gay media will recognize: a film whose thin, derivative story functions to motivate shirtless homosocial romping among young, attractive male characters. According to Bowlds, a company's distribution of such a gaysploitation title precludes the same company distributing what would be considered a serious art film. In his words, "it just doesn't go together." The assumption here is not unlike Wolfe Video's relationship to pornography. In the same way that Kathy Wolfe and Maria Lynn believe that pornographic content would "pollute" their whole catalog, Bowlds expects that a title like *Gay Boy Sleepaway Camp* would damage Strand's respectability and render the company unable to successfully distribute valuable, challenging art. While Wolfe's position emphasizes (pornographic) sexuality as the threat, for Strand both low artistic value and frivolous sexual/visible pleasure threaten the reputation of the company's catalog. Strand films don't shy away from representing sex, which partly relates to its association with art house and foreign film, which (depending on the country) traditionally have exhibited a more liberal approach to sexual representation than mainstream American film. But Strand and Hu seem highly alert about sex in a film "just" offering unchallenging titillation.

⁴⁵⁰ David Bowlds, interview by author.

Marcus Hu's concern about the "ease" of LGBT media also appears elsewhere; all of the distributors' founders must navigate the complex relationship of quality to their catalogs, but historically Hu is the most outspoken critic of the "badness" of LGBT media. In a 1999 interview, he laments the "shoddiness" and repetitive "fluff" of the "many bad gay films" he sees. He even uses the term "gaysploitation" and compares the films to 1970s blaxploitation, the value of which he implicitly questions. Importantly, he places these gaysploitation films in opposition to New Queer Cinema, which were "good, edgy films" superior to the LGBT filmmaking at the end of the decade.⁴⁵¹ In a 2002 essay for *Filmmaker* magazine, he takes a similar tack. After praising the "edgy, thought-provoking" filmmaking of NQC, he expresses his longing "for the new crop of filmmakers who want to address complex gay and lesbian topics....Today's crop of American gay and lesbian films seems absolutely anemic when compared to the heyday of the early 90's New Queer Cinema."⁴⁵² This kind of comment is a common refrain for Hu. In another interview he laments that he is "not seeing new and interesting gay work any more. I am not seeing new faces - where's the new Todd Haynes, where's the new Tom Kalin, where's the new Rose Troche?"⁴⁵³ He identifies movies like *Trick*, *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, and *Better Than Chocolate* as "feel-good alternatives to the critical attitudes and sometimes-tragic complexities of the New Queer Cinema films....These [feel-good films] are the films GLAAD would embrace."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵¹ Foreman, "The Gay Glut."

⁴⁵² Marcus Hu, "New Queer Cinema," *Filmmaker Magazine*, Fall 2002.

⁴⁵³ Hu, quoted in Hernandez, "Do the Strand," 27.

⁴⁵⁴ Hu, "New Queer Cinema." *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* is an interesting addition to Hu's list, as he acted as associate producer on the film.

When asked about Strand's relationship with "good queer film" in 2009, Hu rejected the premise of a question about what makes "a great piece of gay cinema": "I think I would say, 'That's a good movie.' I would hate to think of categorizing something as a 'gay movie.'" Here Gerrans added that "if it's just a film for gay appeal, we're usually not interested. Because that usually means it's not a very good movie."⁴⁵⁵ Later in this same interview, Hu connected the question of quality back to visual erotic pleasure: "We certainly get those movies where people say, 'Oh, you've gotta see this great gay movie—the guys in it are so hot.' So we look at it and go, 'Ugh.' First and foremost, it's gotta be a great movie."⁴⁵⁶ While Hu is not explicitly saying that hot guys and a great movie are mutually exclusive ideas, he is gesturing to gay movies garnering attention based on sexual appeal rather than quality of filmmaking.

Like the other distributors, Strand is taking on the thorny questions about labeling media by its gayness, an issue discussed in chapter one. But Strand's relationship with sexual-identity-based categorization is complicated by the company's relationship with discourses around art and quality. In a 2010 interview with me, Hu described Strand, from its very beginning, as a "diversified company" not limited to "just handling gay films," a label that he finds important to avoid because companies that "pigeonhole themselves that way just paint themselves in a corner." For his standards of quality, focusing on LGBT film would limit Strand to "one good movie to distribute [theatrically] for the year."⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Hu and Gerrans, quoted in Melissa Anderson, "20 Years In, Strand Still Releasing (Prudently) on the Edge," *Village Voice*, July 1, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/20-years-in-strand-still-releasing-prudently-on-the-edge-6391418>.

⁴⁵⁶ Hu, quoted in Anderson, "20 Years In."

⁴⁵⁷ Hu, interview by author.

In two different interviews in 1999, Hu uses Strand's acquisition of Gaspar Noé's somewhat difficult film *I Stand Alone* (1998) as a way to discuss the company's relationship to art and business. Citing the importance of passion for a project, Hu says that in the case of this film, "we knew that the odds were against us commercially, but I'm sure we can actually make it work for us. It's good for our profile, our company and the kind of relationships we are building with critics."⁴⁵⁸ Elsewhere he laughingly comments that unlike other companies, Strand doesn't do careful financial projections when considering acquisition. "We're more like a museum - John and I feel kind of like curators. If we like it, we're picking it up. We don't have to answer to anyone."⁴⁵⁹ This interview coincided with the New York MoMA's ten-year retrospective of Strand films, which perhaps informed Hu's particular word choice here.

Any claim that a title's salability has no bearing on acquisition decisions is likely an overstatement; regardless of a commercial distribution company's mission statement, it cannot operate at a loss for long. But the specifics of the Strand approach outlined above help distinguish the particularity of the company among LGBT distributors. Recall from chapter two where Paul Colichman of Here Media described the company's Here Tunes branch not as a cross-promotional strategy, but rather as a way to grant LGBT musicians a means to public recognition, in line with the company's commitment to visibility politics. As a spokesperson for Strand, Hu also disavows a focus on economics, but with the goal of emphasizing their commitment to good art. By invoking critics, museums, and curation, Hu associates the company with capital-A Art, which he is determined to make available to film viewers, the economic consequences be damned.

⁴⁵⁸ Hu, quoted in Goodridge, "Ten Years at the Living End."

⁴⁵⁹ Hu, quoted in Hernandez, "Do the Strand," 27.

As seen above, Hu and Strand seem highly aware of the company they keep. Even while the company doesn't "officially" self-identify as an LGBT company, company discourse (mostly produced by Hu in interviews) consistently separates Strand product from other LGBT. Hu expresses a personal hunger for LGBT media that offers the same challenges as New Queer Cinema, and reportedly directs Strand to operate in opposition to the dominant trends of shoddy, fluffy, titillating film that he sees defining much of LGBT (and here we can probably say "gay") media. His concern with "goodness" is closely connected with Strand's discursive management of both its company identity and the identity of its titles. Above I recounted Hu deflecting the idea of "categorizing something as a 'gay' movie," insisting that the question of quality and goodness should come first.⁴⁶⁰ For him, if a film is known as an "LGBT film," it's likely that the wrong things are being emphasized.

Among the companies this dissertation analyzes, Hu and Strand are in the minority. The next section will examine Ariztical Entertainment, which fully embraces an LGBT company identity, and its best known titles, the *Eating Out* series. Here we'll see how, on the opposite side of the spectrum from Strand, different definitions of and investments in "goodness" can complicate how LGBT media is evaluated.

So Bad It's Good, So Good It's Bad: Representational Parity at Ariztical

Strand produces plenty of discourse defining its titles as good within a sea of bad texts shown at LGBT film festivals or acquired by other distribution companies. Yet this "badness" can be more complex: in some interpretive frameworks, a film's *badness* may produce political *goodness* according to a rubric of representational equality and progress.

⁴⁶⁰ Hu, quoted in Anderson, "20 Years In."

A particularly productive example of this idea can be found in Ariztical's *Eating Out* series. Here I use Ariztical's history and paratexts to think about reception and criticism. Michael Shoel wanted to produce these films to deliver on the sex and skin often promised by the posters and DVD covers for gay films. Accordingly, the five *Eating Out* titles are raunchy teen sex comedies, often with mistaken identity and farce elements, and are sometimes compared to the *American Pie* series. This series is a sort of calling-card for Ariztical; the company produced these films as well as distributing them, and even years after their release, the landing page for Ariztical's website still features the four most recent *Eating Out* films.⁴⁶¹ The films are important to consider because the fact that they are "bad" and steeped in base, gross-out sex humor makes them *good* for some reviewers. In this formulation, the series is finally offering cinematic parity to LGBT viewers.

A *Stranger* review of *Eating Out* reports that Brocka wrote the film with inspiration from "hetero trash classic" *Porky's* (1981), and opines that even though *Eating Out* was poorly-made, "the filmmaker's ambition to give queer cinema a dopey sex comedy of its own is laudable." This article also captions a still of the film with "A gay version of *Porky's IP*" (while adding that "it still sucks").⁴⁶² A favorable *Indiewire* review of *Eating Out*'s screening at Frameline also compared the film's "true debauchery and hilarity" to that of *Porky's*, as well as connecting *Eating Out* to the films of John Hughes.⁴⁶³ *Variety* describes *Eating Out* as "very much the typical crass teen sex comedy," but one that is "distinguished by its determination to aim genre's

⁴⁶¹ <http://www.ariztical.com>, accessed December 9, 2017.

⁴⁶² Andrew Wright, "On Screen: Eating Out," *The Stranger*, May 12, 2005, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/on-screen/Content?oid=21338>.

⁴⁶³ Karl Beck, "Frameline Celebrates Another Successful Year as the World's Largest Queer Fest," *IndieWire*, July 6, 2004, <http://www.indiewire.com/2004/07/frameline-celebrates-another-successful-year-as-the-worlds-largest-queer-fest-78808/>.

conventions toward horndoggery both hetero- and homosexual,” a feature the review describes as a “novelty.”⁴⁶⁴

As the franchise has progressed, it has been discussed in similar terms. *The Village Voice* compared *Eating Out*'s sequelization to that of *American Pie*: “If *American Pie* could spawn a sequel, so can *Eating Out*....As its subtitle suggests, this quickie follow-up pretty much makes the most of filling the same Q[ueer]-cinema void.”⁴⁶⁵ A *Variety* review of the franchise comments that “if heterosexual lovers of juvenile sex comedies require regular helpings of *American Pie*, equal-opportunity exploitation entitles gay male auds to a steady diet of *Eating Out*.” The review ends by describing *Eating Out: Drama Camp* (2011) as not “all that bad; it just doesn't try to be good.”⁴⁶⁶ And when considering *Eating Out: All You Can Eat* (2009), *Backlot* contextualizes the film: “I liked 2004's *Eating Out* a lot. The campy gay sex farce was downright revolutionary coming after decades of earnest, angsty coming out dramas....” But in the specific case of the third film in *Eating Out* series, “there is a fresh and funny sex comedy to be made in 2009. This isn't it.”⁴⁶⁷

These reactions range from enthusiastic celebration to rueful acceptance to contextualized rejection. Plenty of reviews are more directly critical of the film, but those included above demonstrate, if nothing else, an acknowledgment of the value of this *approach* to gay filmmaking. They remark on the lack of this kind of film, they locate it in a tradition of “classic”

⁴⁶⁴ Dennis Harvey, “Eating Out,” *Variety*, July 19, 2004.

⁴⁶⁵ Rob Nelson, “‘Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds,’” *The Village Voice*, November 14, 2006, accessed December 9, 2017. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2006/11/14/eating-out-2-sloppy-seconds/>.

⁴⁶⁶ Dennis Harvey, “Review: ‘Eating Out: Drama Camp,’” *Variety*, July 11, 2011.

⁴⁶⁷ Brent Hartinger, “‘Eating Out 3’ Makes for a Mostly Unsatisfying Meal,” *The Backlot* (blog), October 9, 2009, April 24, 2013, version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130424011119/http://www.thebacklot.com/eating-out-3-makes-for-a-mostly-unsatisfying-meal/10/2009>.

teen and sex comedy films, and see the franchise as a product of fairness: if straight people get this kind of film, gay people should too. This “fairness” criterion is especially interesting in reviews that devalue raunchy sex comedy. Sometimes this is explicit, as when “dopey sex comedy” frames the genre as stupid; sometimes this is implicit, as when the phrase “if heterosexual lovers of juvenile sex comedies require regular helpings of *American Pie*” shows little patience for viewers’ desire of such films. But for these reviewers, the “badness” of this kind of film can coexist with or even *produces* “goodness”; *Variety* calls it “equal-opportunity exploitation” when gay viewers have their own version of the kind of media straight people have enjoyed for decades. Even the series’ creator offered a comparable description of *Eating Out*, framing it as “the college-popcorn-fluff comedy I always eagerly consumed, but never saw myself represented in.” He acknowledges the film is a “fantasy and guilty pleasure movie,” but concludes that “above all, it’s another voice shouting out that queer youth have the same awkward, mushy, horny, romantic, lonely, funny, crazy, fucked-up friendships, fantasies, and romances as anyone else.”⁴⁶⁸ And while the *Backlot* review above does not connect the franchise so explicitly to straight teen sex comedy, it does frame the original *Eating Out* as a departure from past norms of gay filmmaking, one that offers something fresh and previously unavailable for queer viewers.

This same idea is repeated by Ariztical CEO Michael Shoel, who produced the series. He consistently emphasizes the uniqueness of *Eating Out* because previously there hadn’t been “a raunchy gay sex comedy, a gay date movie.”⁴⁶⁹ As he describes it, the film is “funny, sexy,

⁴⁶⁸ Q. Allan Brocka, *Eating Out* press kit, accessed December 9, 2017, www.ariztical.com/images/eatingout/eatingout-press-release.pdf

⁴⁶⁹ Shoel, audio commentary. *Eating Out*, DVD. Directed by Q. Allan Brocka. Ariztical Entertainment, 2005.

sometimes light-hearted,” but these features are themselves groundbreaking. This impulse to create films that function as equivalents to established “straight” film genres is not unique to Shoel and Ariztical. Paul Colichman of Here! Media has constructed an entire discourse around the idea that LGBT audiences deserve, essentially, gay versions of what straight people watch.

In 2005, a year after the release of *Eating Out*, Shoel was asked in a San Diego *Gay & Lesbian Times* article what he looked for in an Ariztical project. Shoel stated, “I simply want to produce sexy, gay comedies. Unless things change after the release of *Eating Out* I want to continue down this path of eye candy, sex and comedy for a while and see where it leads.”⁴⁷⁰ In the EPK for the film, *Eating Out* writer and director Q. Allan Brocka used similar language as Shoel tends to:

When Michael J. Shoel from Ariztical Entertainment approached me looking for a script with a lot of humor and a lot of sex, *Eating Out* leapt to mind....It was way too gay for broad appeal and far too light-hearted to be of interest to other indie producers I worked with...but Michael’s goal was to make something fun. Thankfully he found the script as fun and sexy as I did and we were on our way.⁴⁷¹

Eating Out and its sequels fit well into the overall logic of Ariztical as a company.

Speaking more generally about how Ariztical differs from other LGBT distributors, Shoel says that they pick up “fun” films. He told me in an interview that

a lot of the early success of gay films were artistic films that were very academic, and I think stores and movie theaters brought them in as arthouse films so they didn’t have to justify it. But for me I looked for fun films that expressed gay sentiment, gay sensibility, and as much as possible, a pop culture sensibility....I looked for anything that wasn’t negative.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Shoel, quoted in Cuauhtémoc Q. Kish, “‘Eating Out’ – Eye Candy, Sex and Comedy,” *Gay & Lesbian Times*, April 7, 2005, April 16, 2015 version, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150916100409/http://www.gaylesbiantimes.com/?id=4765>.

⁴⁷¹ Brocka, *Eating Out* press kit.

⁴⁷² Shoel, interview by author.

He explained that Ariztical acquisition choices were based not so much on “artistic sensibility” (though he hesitated on that word choice and clarified that he does see artistic value in his company’s films) and more on entertainment and authenticity. He prioritizes “sexy comedies from a gay perspective, because there's a lot of good intentioned straight people that make movies about gay people, but I wanted it to be from our voice,” which connects back to his comment about “gay sensibility.”⁴⁷³

This analysis of *Eating Out*’s reception allows us to look beyond “good” and “bad” LGBT films and instead think more closely about the contexts and investments that inform these evaluative rubrics. “So bad, it’s good” is a common phrase for describing media with markers of “badness” - low productions values, trite or bizarre writing, awkward performances - that offer pleasure to viewers, perhaps in spite of these markers but more likely *because* of them. Especially in queer media studies, this idea has very often been associated with camp as a reading strategy. But in the ways we’ve seen the *Eating Out* series discussed above, aesthetic badness is politically good because it indicates and participates in LGBT mainstreaming processes. This rubric evaluates media not solely by the text, and not even by individual use of the text, but rather how it functions within a historical and political context. In this formulation, if straight people get trashy movies, then it’s *good* for LGBT people to get them too.

The inverse of this formulation also merits consideration. In the framework that informs how Shoel has historically positioned his company and reportedly made acquisition decisions, media like New Queer Cinema or Strand movies are so good, they might be bad. Their aesthetic “goodness” according to standards borne of arthouses, criticism, or academia, actually makes them “bad” in a sense because they aren’t giving LGBT viewers what they want or need or

⁴⁷³ Shoel, interview by author.

deserve, at least in Shoel's estimation. I doubt Shoel would call Strand movies "bad" because the terms "good" and "bad" most immediately suggest descriptions of textual quality according to critical standards. But he reacts against "artistic" and "arthouse" and "negative" films because he sees these as the unsatisfying majority of available LGBT media at a certain time. His comments echo *Trick* director Jim Fall's preference for "sweet and accessible" films rather than "those angry movies" that were "very much a product of their time."⁴⁷⁴ Even Rich considers this complex good/bad relationship when she recalls her temporary and ambivalent defense in the mid-1990s of

a disparaged pseudo-genre packed full of cheesecake gay male romances and chocolate-box lesbian confections. I tried for a while to justify the transformation. Hey, I would argue, why shouldn't queer audiences be entitled to the same date-night mediocrity that heterosexual audiences can buy every Saturday at the multiplex?⁴⁷⁵

Here she entertains that it might be positive for LGBTs to have parallel mediocre films, using the same parity framework demonstrated in the discussion of *Eating Out* above - that mediocrity might be *good*.

Griffin points out that when more LGBT films were produced around the turn of the century with more similarity to Hollywood aesthetics than to New Queer Cinema,

trade articles construct[ed] this as a populist evolution, casting particular viewing experiences as both a consumerist desire and a political right.... These articles characterize gay and lesbian cinema's shift toward a more moderate politics as evidence of the progress New Queer Cinema helped achieve.⁴⁷⁶

One such *Hollywood Reporter* article from 2005, which discusses Here Media's genre films, claims that "the fact that they are overtly conventional makes them revolutionary in queer

⁴⁷⁴ Fall, quoted in Rodriguez, "Trick Director Didn't Intend."

⁴⁷⁵ Rich, "Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema*, xxiii.

⁴⁷⁶ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 60.

cinema.”⁴⁷⁷ This phrasing deserves a moment of consideration; the journalist is balancing two seemingly-incompatible descriptors, “conventional” and “revolutionary,” to describe LGBT media that resembles Hollywood fare. This mirrors the journalist above who described the first *Eating Out* film as “downright revolutionary coming after decades of earnest, angsty coming out dramas.”⁴⁷⁸ “Revolutionary” here signifies that this LGBT content stands in opposition to the LGBT content produced in the previous few decades, but does so by aligning more closely with more “conventional” mainstream filmmaking. The possibilities for the conventional to be revolutionary or for the “bad” to be “good” are not a product of some kind of doublethink, but rather evidence of the complex impact of context and investment in evaluative strategies. I’ve deliberately used “good” and “bad” loosely here to move away from the narrow film-review-type of definition - this is a good movie, two thumbs up - and to think more about what a movie might be good *for* in a particular context. LGBTs historically haven’t gotten a particular kind of movie, so it’s good or helpful for them to get it. Obviously, this formulation is wrapped up in assumptions about what LGBT viewers need and want, but when is that *not* the case?

This question falls in line with other debates about highly-visible LGBT issues, like military service or marriage. A liberal political position will argue that LGBTs deserve access to these societal institutions in the interest of fairness among citizens, while a more leftist position might argue that LGBTs should question the very foundations of these institutions rather than simply lobbying for admission. This dyad connects to Chapter Two’s discussion of media conglomeration; a liberal reading might praise LGBTs gaining control of centralized media structures that mirror the mainstream media industry, while a leftist critique might question

⁴⁷⁷ Todd Longwell, “Gays Just Wanna Have Fun - Outfest 2005,” *Hollywood Reporter*, July 5, 2005.

⁴⁷⁸ Hartinger, “Eating Out 3.”

which members of the LGBT community control these structures, what problematic business practices they might replicate, and generally what effect the attachment of queer media to advertising and capital has.

But I want to preserve space for viewer ambivalence here. When discussing the consumerist and nationalist ideologies underlying much of niche LGBT media, Griffin points out that “many gay and lesbian people find great hope and comfort in this representational schema, even as many of them recognize the limitations of the terms by which those feelings of freedom and belonging can be recognized.”⁴⁷⁹ This analysis of viewers also applies to niche media consumption. Speaking anecdotally, I have observed the full range of reactions in LGBT viewers, from unqualified appreciation and gratitude, to the rejection of the mere concept of niche LGBT based on its perceived regressiveness and ghettoization, with many positions in-between. An LGBT viewer critical of the neoliberal centralization and conglomeration of mainstream media might, even with great ambivalence, take a softer view of a company like Here Media because of the continuing limitations on LGBT media production. This kind of ambivalence is a symptom of existing within the exigencies of neoliberal capitalism. We often are aware of the limitations of capital-dependent cultural representation while simultaneously appreciating what *is* made available, even if it reifies capitalist structures, continues representing only a limited range of the LGBT community, or is aesthetically “bad.”

Above I’ve spent plenty of space discussing “badness” and “goodness,” but a crucial element that so often underlies the reception and evaluation of LGBT media is sexual content. As sex comedies, the *Eating Out* series obviously consists of plenty of skin, innuendo, titillation, and even the occasional shot of full-frontal male nudity, which is rare in niche LGBT media.

⁴⁷⁹ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 5.

While the series is critiqued on a variety of bases, its centralization of sex and nudity plays no small part in its reputation as “bad” gay movies. In the preceding pages this dissertation has made varied observations about sex, an inevitably-recurring topic in a micro-industry organized around sexual identity. But this next section will consider sex’s role in this media more carefully by investigating how it functions in relation to goodness and badness, and examining two distributors as particularly helpful case studies.

Signifying Sex

In her study of professionals in LGBT marketing and media, Katherine Sender tracks how LGBT magazines like *The Advocate* became “desleazified” in the 1980s and 90s through the removal of the sex advertising prevalent in LGBT press since the 1970s. She observed that for publishers, “sex ads were perceived to reduce the quality of gay and lesbian media, making them appear sleazy” and less likely to sell space to mainstream advertisers.⁴⁸⁰ Sender also noted that publishers had concerns that sex ads would limit the venues for their magazines: the founder of *POZ* magazine worried that sex ads would endanger his magazine’s distribution in health and social service spaces, which echoes Kathy Wolfe’s assumption in chapter one that any porn in their catalog might discourage libraries from carrying any Wolfe titles.⁴⁸¹ Sender found that publishers and marketers seemed to operate off “a commonsense distinction between ‘sexy’ and ‘sleazy,’” but that in many cases those “who appealed to standards of taste to justify their banning sexual content did not, or could not, articulate how they arrived at these standards.”⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 205.

⁴⁸¹ Sender, “Sex Sells: Sex, Taste, and Class in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 3 (2003): 341.

⁴⁸² Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 217.

Gayle Rubin and Michael Bronski have addressed these often-unexamined cultural assumptions underlying sex in Western society. Rubin identifies “sex negativity” as a key element of Western sexual discourse, according to which sex is understood as a naturally “dangerous, destructive, negative force” that is always to be treated “with suspicion.” She believes religion originated the association of genitals and libido to human inferiority or baseness, but suggests that this idea has “acquired a life of its own” as accepted wisdom even outside a religious context. Most importantly, she argues that

sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established....The exercise of erotic capacity, intelligence, curiosity, or creativity all require pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, fiction, or astronomy.⁴⁸³

Similarly, Bronski attributes homophobia at least partly to erotophobia, which he calls a “fear and hatred of sexuality” that has embedded itself as a “tenacious strain of Western culture.”⁴⁸⁴ For sexuality to be accepted, it must be “rationalized” as a sort of necessary evil within a “(re)productive potential and economic function, which support the existing social order” which, historically, certain manifestations of heterosexuality have been able to achieve while homosexuality has not.⁴⁸⁵ Here Rubin and Bronski are thinking specifically about sexual activity and the need to justify or contain it within marriage and reproduction, or at least love; but her approach contributes to a consideration of how sexual content is signified in LGBT media. If sex is at its core something to be distrusted and only permitted with specific purposes, then sexual content in media must be motivated by a need within the film, usually narrative or character

⁴⁸³ Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker (Routledge, 2006), 150.

⁴⁸⁴ Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 191, 197.

⁴⁸⁵ Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 191.

development. Sender finds the same logic in advertising, wherein “sexual or intimate bodily references were permissible if they were essential for conveying an important message” like the importance of safe sex and sexual health.⁴⁸⁶ Without a clear, grounding motivation, sexual content runs the risk of being deemed “gratuitous,” a common descriptor employed to communicate disapproval of such content in media.

LGBT media creators and critics often exhibit a hyper-awareness of the specter of sexual gratuity, ready to either respond to such charges or even preempt them. For example, in a 2005 interview, *The L Word* creator Ilene Chaiken insists that her team “only use[s] sex in the service of telling a story. It’s authentic. We’ve never done anything gratuitous. It’s great to be able to tell those stories frankly, and without apology.” In a similar vein, cast member Leisha Hailey explains that “*L Word* sex is always backed up with feelings, deep meaning or love. It’s never sex just for sex. This show doesn’t exploit sex. It explores it.”⁴⁸⁷ To drive home the point, this *Seattle Times* article is entitled “*L Word* Creator: Sex Isn’t Gratuitous.” More recently, *King Cobra* (2016) writer-and-director Justin Kelly used a magazine interview to defend his use of sex in a film about the gay porn industry; the article reports that “just because it’s set in the porn industry doesn’t mean there are gratuitous scenes, according to writer-director Justin Kelly,” who is quoted as arguing that “each scene or scandalous moment is really only there if it helps push the story forward. So it’s not just about having sex scenes because the story involves gay porn. It really is a part of the story.”⁴⁸⁸ And in a less serious but still instructive example, a 2015 episode

⁴⁸⁶ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 218.

⁴⁸⁷ Ilene Chaiken and Leisha Hailey, quoted in Gail Shister, “‘L Word’ Creator: Sex Isn’t Gratuitous,” *The Seattle Times*, February 13, 2005, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/l-word-creator-sex-isnt-gratuitous/>.

⁴⁸⁸ Will Robinson, “‘King Cobra’ Director Dishes on Film’s Wildest Sex Scene,” *Entertainment Weekly* (blog), April 19, 2016, accessed December 9, 2017. <http://ew.com/article/2016/04/19/tribeca-2016-king-cobra-sex-scenes/>.

of truTV's *Billy on the Street* featured a ShondaLand obstacle course that hosted a variety of comedic physical challenges based on shows produced by Shonda Rhimes' production company. Contestant Amy Sedaris found herself having to crawl through a group of gay men having, in host Billy Eichner's shouted words, "gratuitous, racy, enjoyable gay sex" based on *How To Get Away With Murder*, which often features sexpot Connor Walsh flirting and fucking both for business and pleasure. "Climb through the gays having gratuitous gay sex!" Eichner yells at Sedaris.⁴⁸⁹ Eichner, who is gay, is approaching the topic facetiously, and clearly at least partly approves of the "enjoyable" sexual content, but nonetheless recognizes it as "gratuitous."

When discussing HereTV, Bridget Kies remarks that "male nudity and gay sex in gay television are still regularly exploitative and gratuitous....nudity often does not advance the narrative." Yet she implicitly challenges this claim of gratuity by arguing the content does have a purpose:

full frontal shots of extra in the meta-series *Gay Dubai* and in the sex club of *Dante's Cove* serve a different - and, I argue, equally valuable - function. With nude men constantly in the background, series on Here TV reassert the network's queerness. It is impossible to watch any Here TV program and lose sight of the fact that it appears on a network for gay men."⁴⁹⁰

Against the historical context of television's institutional straightness, sexual content that doesn't progress the narrative, and is thus "gratuitous," can still serve a worthwhile function - emphasizing the show's or network's queerness. Above I examined the idea that an LGBT film's "badness" can be "good" in a context where it grants LGBT viewers texts equivalent to what

⁴⁸⁹ "Billy Eichner's Shondaland with Amy Sedaris!" (episode clip), November 10, 2015, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd4CqCxHdXI>.

⁴⁹⁰ Bridget Kies, "Sexploitation on YouTube: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Gay Network," in *Queer TV in the 21st Century: Essays on Broadcasting from Taboo to Acceptance*, ed. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016), 203.

straight people receive; here, sexual content that is “gratuitous,” or there without narrative reason, can nonetheless serve a purpose within the context of a heterocentric television history.

Linda Williams more directly challenges the very idea of gratuity. In a 1991 article wherein she discusses the “excesses” of Carol Clover’s sense-driven “body genres” (melodrama, horror, and porn), Linda Williams argues that if “sex, violence, and emotion are fundamental elements of the sensational effects of these three types of films, the designation ‘gratuitous’ is itself gratuitous.”⁴⁹¹ Here she is thinking specifically about porn, but in her 2008 *Screening Sex* she more generally addresses the idea of sexual gratuity, which she defines as “sex that is just there for sex’s sake, with no other narrative or dramatic purpose.” She argues that “gratuitous” terminology is used to “identify the so-called prurient sex that supposedly does not belong on any screen,” but counters that “once a culture decides that sex matters...sex for sex’s sake is never really gratuitous. Indeed, it becomes one of the most important reasons for screening moving pictures.”⁴⁹² In both cases she questions the very term “gratuitous,” centering sexuality as a valid purpose for filmmaking rather than depending on other validating, motivating reasons for its presence.

By bringing in these thinkers, I seek to expose and trouble the taken-for-granted (or seemingly “commonsense,” as Sender writes) ideas that inform how sex, and especially sex in media, is signified and evaluated. A personal experience demonstrated to me some of the ideas the writers above propose. When I taught an undergrad class about niche LGBT media and showed my students the film *Latter Days* as an example of early 2000s coming-out / coming-of-age films from LGBT distributors, they hesitated to discuss the sex scene in the middle of the

⁴⁹¹ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 3; Carol J. Clover, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” *Representations*, no. 20 (1987): 189.

⁴⁹² Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), 29

film until I specifically pressed them about it. They still fumbled to talk about it until I said it was okay in a college film class, or maybe particularly *this* college film class, to both discuss a sex scene, and even to *enjoy* a sex scene for its own sake. I sensed that this announcement elicited relief in many of the students, who then were glad to talk about their appreciation of the scene, to consider the filmmakers' technical choices in its creation, and to discuss how such a sex scene functioned in its time period. To my mind, the issue wasn't so much gay sex issue as it was just *sex*, with the students sensing that they shouldn't appreciate a sex scene the same way they would appreciate an important political message or a particularly meaningful editing decision. This hesitance may have been as much about their expectations on what is "academically" important or worthwhile about a film - I wonder if they would have been as slow to admit enjoyment of a particularly exhilarating, kinetic chase scene in a "mindless" contemporary action film for the same reasons - but I think it safe to say many of them had been taught, implicitly or explicitly, that a sex scene in a narrative film should be subject to higher scrutiny or at least some suspicion.

While sex negativity, as Rubin would call it, affects Western society broadly, it especially informs marginalized groups' relationships to sexuality. Sender finds that LGBT marketing professionals, as well as middle and upper class LGBT consumers, are more likely to self-police when it comes to sexual content than straight professionals or consumers. Their reputation "depends on a more vigilant level of sexual decorum...because public manifestations of queer sex, in particular, threaten their movement into or their membership in this class."⁴⁹³ Here she is commenting on some LGBTs' pursuit of mainstream acceptability and respectability, and noting the kinds of mores necessary for this membership based on the lasting social disruptiveness of

⁴⁹³ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 223.

queer sexuality. Based on a variety of personal taste-determining factors, LGBT and straight people might hold a varied range of opinions on what kind of sexual content is and isn't appropriate, artful, or necessary in a film; but having been identified so closely with and discriminated against based on sex and sexuality makes LGBT viewers' relationship with sexual content especially fraught, and may encourage them to distance themselves from or justify the appearance of sexual gratuity more fervently than another group.

As central participants in LGBT media in the US, this dissertation's distributors all must navigate questions of sexuality, gratuity, and quality. Wolfe Video provides the clearest illustration of the ideas in the last paragraph. As we saw in Chapter One, this company has taken a light touch with sexuality to avoid being associated with pornography for a variety of reasons, including their history of vendors assuming "lesbian film" meant porn and Wolfe's deliberate work in creating a categorical distinction. Strand in no way shies away from sex in their acquisitions, but does navigate the topic carefully to avoid sexual content that is "cheap" or present just for its own titillating sake, in their estimation, due to both the preferences of the owners and the need to preserve the public standards of the Strand brand. And Ariztical sees sexual content as a part of entertaining gay media, and something that gay viewers deserve after a history of more serious and dour filmmaking.

Of the five companies I have discussed, TLA Entertainment probably has the most forthright relationship with sex, making it a helpful site to examine the function of sex within this micro-industry. After recounting the history of TLA as this dissertation's fifth and final company profile, I will explore how TLA and Here Media utilize sexuality as part of their business practice and navigate (and embrace) the complex relationship between sex and quality in niche LGBT media.

Company History: TLA Entertainment

TLA Releasing's history and roots are spread across a variety of institutions throughout the city of Philadelphia. The company draws its name from the Theatre of the Living Arts, a Philadelphia avant-garde theater non-profit founded in 1964. The company renovated an abandoned movie house called the Model Theatre, and under the artistic direction of Andre Gregory staged many well-received performances with actors like Anne Ramsey, Sally Kirkland, Judd Hirsch, Morgan Freeman, and Danny DeVito. By 1967, however, many of the original company members had left, and conflict with the board of directors had driven Gregory to quit, which led to several years of less successful programming and the eventual bankruptcy of the company in 1971.⁴⁹⁴ Entrepreneurs Al and Brenda Malmfelt purchased and reopened the building as a repertory cinema, where programs included double features, matinees, midnight screenings, pornography, and most famously, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).⁴⁹⁵ Ray Murray, Claire Kohler, and Eric Moore all worked at the TLA during this time (Murray as an apprentice projectionist and the other two as ushers), and Murray recalls this period as when he was first exposed to gay films like Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) and William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970).⁴⁹⁶ The theater also held gay film festivals as early as 1980, with films like *Scorpio Rising* (1963), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), *Nighthawks* (1978), and *La Cage aux Folles* (1978).⁴⁹⁷ Upon the TLA's closing in late 1980 due to financial problems, Murray,

⁴⁹⁴ Renee V. Lucas, "Live! From South Street," *Philadelphia Daily News*, October 20, 1987.

⁴⁹⁵ Lucas, "Live! From South Street."

⁴⁹⁶ Lawrence Ferber, "Raymond Murray: Founder TLA Entertainment Group," *Passport*, August 2011, March 20, 2015 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20150320042846/http://www.passportmagazine.com/businessclass/RaymondMurray1183.php>

⁴⁹⁷ Advertisement in *Philadelphia Gay News*, October 31, 1980, 15.

Kohler, and Moore began planning to resurrect the theater, now one of the city's established cultural institutions. At the time Murray was working as a projectionist around Philadelphia, and the three would meet at the theater where Murray was running projectors that particular night and discuss their plans for reopening the TLA.⁴⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the theater's next owner, Stephen Starr, rechristened it The Palace (one of the venue's earlier names from before the 60s) and continued running films while attempting to get a liquor license as part of his plan to convert the theater into a live music venue. During this time Murray, Kohler, and Moore formed Repertory Cinema, Inc., a company that rented the enormous Tower Theater in Upper Darby, a western suburb of Philadelphia.⁴⁹⁹ Here they hosted a 1981 summer series called "TLA at the Tower," which Murray describes as "a cinema in exile.... We started showing a mix of art and pop stuff, and it was very successful that summer."⁵⁰⁰ Encouraged by the success of the series, and with Starr's abandonment of his plan for the theater due to his failure to secure a liquor license, Repertory Cinema Inc. first leased and eventually bought the newly-available building for \$700,000 to revert the venue to a repertory film theater once again called The Theatre of the Living Arts, or the TLA.⁵⁰¹ The TLA Video website describes the theater's programming at that time as an "oddball mix of art house films, punk documentaries, cult, Hollywood Classics and even first-run international films" that "appeared before many a stoned-out crowd."⁵⁰² According to Kohler, the popular regular screenings of

⁴⁹⁸ Pauline Reso, "The TLA Refuses to Die," *Philadelphia City Paper*, April 16, 2013.

⁴⁹⁹ Russell Cooke, "New Operators to Return Foreign and Cult Films to South St. Theater," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 1, 1981.

⁵⁰⁰ Murray, quoted in Ferber, "Ray Murray."

⁵⁰¹ Desmond Ryan, "TLA Owners to Operate Roxy," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 21, 1983.

⁵⁰² Ray Murray, "The History of TLA," *tlamovies*, May 19, 2012 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20120519073040/http://www.tlavideo.com/company/history.cfm>.

Rocky Horror Picture Show alone generated enough income to at least break even, which allowed the theater to also present more difficult or controversial fare.⁵⁰³ In January of 1983, the group also opened a second location at the Roxy Theater in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square neighborhood, a small theater that Murray and company augmented in spring 1984 by converting the adjacent building (formerly a laundromat) into a second theater, creating the Roxy Screening Rooms.

The TLA theaters were popular, but even though they didn't lose money, they were not actually very profitable. Murray recalls regular treks up to New York to fetch prints to save on shipping costs, and Kohler remarks that the eventual sale of the building was the one instance in which the TLA really turned a profit.⁵⁰⁴ Yet only a few years after the group had reopened the TLA theater, they found a profitable business model in home video rental. In 1985 TLA Video opened on the second floor of the TLA offices, where according to Murray, visitors found "a bookstore concept" where they could get "lost in the stacks."⁵⁰⁵ The store resided on the second floor of the theater's side lobby, where the TLA team cleared out offices to make a small 600 square space reached via a set of treacherous stairs.⁵⁰⁶ This tiny store was so popular that TLA Video soon began outperforming the TLA theater, and in late 1986 Murray, Kohler, and Moore put the movie house up for sale with an asking price of around \$1.2 million. Murray blamed decreasing theatrical profitability on the increase in VHS availability; he estimated the theater

⁵⁰³ Reso, "The TLA Refuses to Die."

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ Murray quoted in Ferber, "Ray Murray."

⁵⁰⁶ Murray, interview by author.

had lost an average of \$800 weekly since 1984.⁵⁰⁷ In the fall of 1987 the venue was sold to Electric Factory Concerts, a music promotion company looking to expand its product by staging theater at the TLA.⁵⁰⁸ TLA invested the return on this sale into opening additional branches of TLA Video, eventually totaling six in Philadelphia and one in New York. In early 1990, partly due to a rival theater doubling its number of screens and pulling business away, the Roxy Screening Rooms also went up for sale, completing TLA's transition away from theaters to video stores.⁵⁰⁹ Tom Gavin (then general manager of TLA Video) and his partner Jon Ralston assumed management of the theater until reclosing it in 1991, part of a trend that led one reporter to describe the theater as "famous for going out of business" during its 23 year run with owner Max Raab.⁵¹⁰

In the mid-90s Murray developed the Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which continued to expand (eventually as QFest) over the following decades. But establishing PIGLFF was but one manifestation of Murray's drive to expand TLA's business activities; in 1999, he began talks with Robert Lee, the CEO of California-based chain Video City, about the possibility of merging companies. In the 18 months preceding this merger deal, the California company had begun rapidly expanding its holdings by acquiring stores across the country, increasing its annual revenue by more than 400%. TLA's successful online presence, at this point more profitable than its brick-and-mortar stores, appealed to Video City executives

⁵⁰⁷ Gary Cohn, "The Last Reel TLA Is for Sale, with Site Likely to House Stores," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 9, 1986.

⁵⁰⁸ Desmond Ryan, "Agreement to Convert TLA into Live Theater Electric Factory to Present Shows," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 28, 1987; Lucas, "Live! From South Street."

⁵⁰⁹ Desmond Ryan, "Just What Brought Down the Curtain at the Roxy?," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 1994.

⁵¹⁰ Ryan, "Just What Brought Down." After 15 years of ownership by Bernard Nearey, the theater was purchased by the Philadelphia Film Society, according to Maria Panaritis and Steven Rea, "Roxy Theater Set to Reopen as New Home of Philadelphia Film Society," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 9, 2012.

who wanted “to take the [TLA] Internet site and mail-order business and offer it to our 1.5 million customers.”⁵¹¹ The deal was officially announced in July 1999 and the companies soon agreed upon the terms of the merger. Video City would pay TLA \$2.8 million and 633,333 shares of Video City stock, as well as assuming \$1.5 million of TLA debt. However the agreement soon fell through when Video City executives failed to close the deal on the agreed-upon September 30, and in fact announced that day that Video City was finalizing a merger with West Coast Entertainment Corp., one of TLA’s competitors.⁵¹² Besides regretting TLA’s waste of legal and travel fees and resources developing a website for Video City, Murray also criticized Video City for [receiving] so much insider information about TLA’s business and then turning around to merge with one of TLA’s competitors. TLA filed a breach-of-contract lawsuit against Video City on October 4, 1999, and the companies settled outside of court in May 2000.⁵¹³ By later that year, Video City had filed for bankruptcy and Murray reported relief at having avoided what “could have been my life mistake.”⁵¹⁴

Though burned by Video City, Murray retained his interest in diversifying TLA’s activities, and in September 2000 the *Philadelphia Business Journal* reported that Murray was launching a distribution arm under the name TLA Releasing.⁵¹⁵ In spring of 2001, TLA Releasing partnered with First Run Features, a New York-based independent theatrical distributor that also worked with LGBT films, in order to secure theatrical release for some of its

⁵¹¹ Rick Johnston, quoted in Ambre S. Brown, “TLA Entertainment Sold to California’s Video City,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 9, 1999.

⁵¹² Ambre S. Brown, “Video City Rewinds Its Plans to Buy TLA,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 16, 1999,

⁵¹³ TLA Entertainment, et al v. Video City, Inc., No. 2:99-cv-04927-HB (E.D. PA filed Oct. 4, 1999), PACER.

⁵¹⁴ The Insider, “Ray Murray Rejoices,” *Philadelphia Business Journal*, September 11, 2000, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/stories/2000/09/11/tidbits.html?page=all>.

⁵¹⁵ The Insider, “Ray Murray Rejoices.”

newly-acquired films in North America.⁵¹⁶ TLA Releasing kicked off this partnership with the release of *Trio* (1998) and *Spin the Bottle* (2000) on May 29, with *Surrender Dorothy* (1998), *The Einstein of Sex* (1999), *Forgive and Forget* (2000), and *Waiting* (2000) released in the following months. Murray described his decision to form a distribution branch as a response to constant requests for help from filmmakers he met at festivals. TLA was well-positioned to help independent, foreign, and niche films find audiences in the American video market, according to Murray, because “with our mail-order catalogues and Web site, we have also had considerable success reaching into this unique and specialized market. We therefore decided to secure the titles ourselves.”⁵¹⁷ Marketing director Rich Wolff also described TLA’s ownership of PIGLFF (as well as the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema) as “an inside track for finding titles for releasing on the label.”⁵¹⁸ Over the years the festival would also function as platform to premiere films recently acquired by TLA Releasing.⁵¹⁹ Of course other festivals were also part of the distributor’s releasing strategy, as LGBT films they acquired would play in LGBT festivals across the country.⁵²⁰ In addition, with questions about the sustainability of the video rental market arising even in 2001, he also saw distribution as a way of “hedging our bets. Launching our video and theatrical label will allow us to have a whole library of films. If something

⁵¹⁶ Steven Rea, “A Teen Romance That Defies Formulas,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 1, 2001.

⁵¹⁷ Murray, quoted in Mike Goodridge, “TLA Sets Up US Distribution Label with First Run,” *Screen Daily* (blog), June 26, 2001, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.screendaily.com/tla-sets-up-us-distribution-label-with-first-run/406093.article>

⁵¹⁸ Cindy Spielvogel, “That’s TLA, as in Tender, Loving Attention,” *Video Business*, December 18, 2000.

⁵¹⁹ Gary M. Kramer, “Gay Entertainment Company Sold,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, February 5, 2014, 5.

⁵²⁰ Liam O’Donnell, “Artsploitation Films: Ray Murray Talks TOAD ROAD, New Models for Film Distribution, and More,” August 12, 2013, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://cinapse.co/artsploitation-films-ray-murray-talks-toad-road-new-models-for-film-distribution-and-more-444bae3200bb>

happens, we'll have something to sell to video-on-demand.”⁵²¹ Wolff described this process as TLA becoming “a more vertically integrated media company.”⁵²²

This “something” did eventually happen when the remaining TLA Video stores began rapidly closing their doors a few years later. In early 2007 TLA’s New York branch sold off its stock and shut down. Both the Chestnut Hill store and TLA Video’s original location near the TLA theater shut down in 2009, which Kohler blamed on the economy, streaming video, and internet media giants like Netflix and Amazon.⁵²³ The Rittenhouse Square store stopped rentals in August 2011 before selling off its inventory and closing for good in September, and the last brick-and-mortar TLA Video held on in Bryn Mawr until October of the following year.⁵²⁴

These closings coincided not only with PIGLFF’s rebranding and reorganization, but also with the reorganization of other TLA holdings. In early 2009 Derek Curl, producer and head of New York studio Caveat Films, became head of production and development of TLA Releasing. In the following months he acted as a spokesperson for a structural overhaul of the distributor’s US-based operations in order to keep up with the changing media environment. A major aspect of the restructuring was capitalizing on other revenue streams besides DVDs. Curl explained that unlike in the past, when “the largest income came from theatrical and DVD sales,” the current “demise of retail stores and plummeting interest in niche genre films [mean that] DVD sales are

⁵²¹ Murray, quoted in Elizabeth Bennett, “TLA Entertainment Now an Indy Distributor,” *Philadelphia Business Journal*, July 9, 2001, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/stories/2001/07/09/newscolumn3.html?page=all>.

⁵²² Spielvogel, “That’s TLA.”

⁵²³ Bryan Way, “TLA Video Bryn Mawr Announces Official Date of Closure,” *Examiner* (blog), September 20, 2012, June 13, 2013 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130613202447/http://www.examiner.com/article/tla-video-bryn-mawr-announces-official-date-of-closure>; Melissa Dribben, “TLA Video Store Closes, A Victim of the Times,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 22, 2009.

⁵²⁴ Robert Moran, “TLA Video Closing Its Center City Store,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 11, 2011; Way, “TLA Video Bryn Mawr.”

in a free fall.”⁵²⁵ As a result, TLA Releasing’s new business strategy involved selling or licensing titles from its sizable catalog to television and VOD.

The restructuring also entailed forming strategic partnerships or contracting with external sales organizations to release TLA films, as part of an overall strategy to invest more resources into fewer films. Curl framed this decision as being more “choosy”: “We will co-finance productions with a smaller amount of releases per year, but the quality will increase ten-fold.” This strategy demonstrates how LGBT companies specifically are affected by contemporary changes in media production and consumption. Because of an increase in LGBT representation in mainstream media outlets, Curl says, niche companies like TLA that once had the market cornered now find it difficult to compete with the higher production value depictions of LGBT. This increase in mainstream representation paired with what he describes as “the onslaught of amateur filmmakers,” which resulted in once-desperate consumers no longer seeking out and consuming every available representation, necessitated that TLA Releasing streamline its business model.⁵²⁶

With the help of investors, in spring 2011 Curl acquired controlling interest of TLA Releasing from Kohler and Murray (although Murray remained with the company as Acquisitions Advisor).⁵²⁷ Curl affirmed his commitment to TLA’s tradition of distributing original gay and lesbian product but also expressed interest in expanding the company’s international catalogue and reinvigorating the Danger After Dark label, a horror and cult film

⁵²⁵ Derek Curl, quoted in Matthew Ray, “TLA Releasing US Announces Reorganization,” *Edge Boston* (blog), May 1, 2009, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=&sc=&sc3=&id=90571>.

⁵²⁶ Curl, quoted in Ray, “TLA Releasing US Announces Reorganization.”

⁵²⁷ Brian Brooks, “UPDATED: TLA Releasing Sold to Group Spearheaded by Derek Curl,” *Indiewire*, May 3, 2011, accessed December 9, 2017, http://www.indiewire.com/article/tla_releasing_sold_to_group_spearheaded_by_derek_curl.

focused division of TLA Releasing.⁵²⁸ Though Curl had acquired the distribution arm, Murray and Kohler retained control of TLA Entertainment Group until early 2014 when the company as a whole was acquired by Sterling Genesis International, a New York media investment firm headed by Curl and G. Sterling Zinsmeyer. Zinsmeyer's relationship with TLA had started years prior when he was an executive producer on TLA Releasing films *Latter Days* (2003), *Adam & Steve* (2005), and *Naked Boys Singing!* (2007). Zinsmeyer and Curl became COO and CEO of TLAEG, respectively. According to Curl, the 2014 acquisition's purpose was "to consolidate the LGBT film market and have more power and clout dealing with iTunes, Netflix and Amazon on a global scale," and he promised that the acquisition would increase "the digital proliferation of TLA titles and [would bring] films and the TLA brand to a global stage." Curl also praised the reorganization's potential for vertical integration, as he and Sterling could now "control the trajectory from inception and script to end consumer."⁵²⁹

How TLA and Here Media Sell Sex

Among the distributors this dissertation discusses, TLA is distinct for its unequivocal willingness to be associated with porn. Even before Murray and company took control of the Theater of the Living Arts in the early 1980s, the venue showed porn like *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) alongside its other repertory programming; a level of comfort with overt sexuality has always been part of the culture of the company, which only continued in the years to follow. PIGLFF/QFest regularly showed gay and lesbian porn and erotica programming, described by one writer as the festival's "usual smattering of borderline

⁵²⁸ Derakhshani, "Film Producer Acquires TLA Releasing," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 4, 2011.

⁵²⁹ Curl, quoted in "Kramer, "Gay Entertainment Company Sold."

(and not-so-borderline) porn.”⁵³⁰ The sexually explicit gay film *Piccadilly Pickups* even premiered at the 1999 PIGLFF.⁵³¹ In line with his ongoing efforts to differentiate PIGLFF as a unique LGBT film festival, Murray pointed out in a 2002 interview that “what distinguishes PIGLFF from other gay festivals is that we have more adults-only fare.”⁵³² The brick-and-mortar TLA Videos also had a section for adult videos, and porn was and is a huge part of the company’s online retail presence.

TLA has also maintained close relations to people and organizations in the porn industry. In 2003 Tim Latz, who formerly directed affiliate operations at gay porn site NakedSword, was hired as TLA’s new director of affiliates relations.⁵³³ Additionally, TLA Releasing was a sponsor at the GayVN Expo (part of the overall Adult Video News expo) at least in 2004 and 2005.⁵³⁴ TLA has also advertised its on-demand services in *Cybersocket*, a magazine that once focused on gay and lesbian usage of the then-new internet but become an internet porn guide at the turn of the century. An ad in this publication read “We put the HARD back in hardcore VOD....Your gay source for DVD is now *the* source for VOD.”⁵³⁵ In 2006, TLA even partnered with indie game developer Republik Games on an online virtual sex video game called *Spend the Night*. While the game was never completed due to funding problems during its development, Republik

⁵³⁰ Adams, “The Guy Can’t Help It.”

⁵³¹ Amy Longsdorf, “Premieres, Parties and Jury Awards Top Phila. Gay Film Fest,” *The Morning Call*, July 11, 1999.

⁵³² Carrie Rickey, “Everything Under the Rainbow,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 12, 2002.

⁵³³ “TLA Video Looks to Web Presence with New Hire,” *Video Store Magazine*, January 19, 2003.

⁵³⁴ Video Software Dealers Association, “AVN Adult Entertainment Expo Attendance Eclipses 30,000 Mark” (press release), January 24, 2005, accessed December 10, 2017, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20050124005719/en/AVN-Adult-Entertainment-Expo-Attendance-Eclipses-30000>.

⁵³⁵ Advertisement in *Cybersocket*, November 2007.

Games CEO Robert Coshland cited TLA’s lack of “shy[ness] about handling controversial content” as the reason he partnered with the company for the game’s marketing and promotion.⁵³⁶ TLA also has a standing deal with Cockey Boys to carry some titles early or distribute versions and additional content unavailable elsewhere, and currently handles TitanMen.com’s online operations “in-house, so their catalog, online store, and wholesale all go through TLA in Philadelphia,” a strategy intended to match Titan Men’s content and branding with TLA’s business acumen. In 2015, TLA partnered with massive porn retailer Adult Empire to consolidate operations and share resources, with TLA managing Adult Empire’s gay content.⁵³⁷

In addition to partnering with organizations like these, TLA has produced and distributed some gay porn through its own sub-label Jackrabbits Releasing, founded around 2004.⁵³⁸ And on the straight side of TLA’s business, Brian Bangs and Spock Buckton, who for a time ran TLA Video’s straight porn division, launched PopPorn.com in 2008, a video blog with the goal of covering the porn industry in a unique way. The blog featured interviews with porn performers, porn reviews, and even short comedy sketches between Buckton and his interviewees. In 2009 the LA-based porn company Zero Tolerance, whose videos TLA Video sells, offered Bangs and Buckton a deal directing their own porn film.⁵³⁹ This film, *PopPorn: The Guide to Making Fuck*

⁵³⁶Robert Coshland, quoted in TLA Entertainment, “From Independent Films to Independent Games” (press release), March 1, 2006, accessed December 10, 2017, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/from-independent-films-to-independent-games-tla-entertainment-announces-partnership-with-republik-games-to-promote-anticipated-videogame>.

⁵³⁷ Curl, interview by author; Alejandro Freixes, “TLA Entertainment and Adult Empire Announce Partnership,” *XBIZ* (blog), October 29, 2015, accessed December 10, 2017, <http://www.xbiz.com/news/200714/tla-entertainment-and-adult-empire-announce-partnership>.

⁵³⁸ TLA also temporarily had the “Mercury Releasing” label but it was later folded into Jackrabbit.

⁵³⁹ Dan Eldridge, “Philly’s Unlikeliest Porn Kings,” *Philadelphia Weekly* February 10, 2010, 13.

(2009), received three award nominations at the 2010 AVNs, with its follow-up *TMSleaze* (2009) receiving six. PopPorn would go on to release nine films between 2009 and 2010, a turn of events that gossip blog Philebrity.com described as “Philly’s longtime chief cineastes turn[ing] into a porn empire,” since this took place amongst TLA video store closings and the cancellation of the 2010 CineFest.⁵⁴⁰

Murray told me that TLA’s treated porn as simply another part of gay culture, and that while he assumes other distributors would see this as TLA having damage its reputation as a company, he chose to embrace it. Curl is more explicit about pornography’s economic function within TLA’s operations. According to him, “TLA’s ability to be the biggest in the industry” is connected to the company’s relationship with porn, which he describes as “a cash machine for all the other things we want to accomplish within the industry.”⁵⁴¹ For example, Curl attributes TLA’s ability to invest in successful films, like *Latter Days* and *Another Gay Movie*, to the economic stability of their porn sales; the company “took what they knew they could sell and what the community desired on a retail level, and parlayed that into something that they all loved and got behind.”⁵⁴² Porn sales provides a cushion allowing the company to pursue riskier projects. Curl describes Murray as a man with a “passion for international cinema [and] film festivals” who was able to pursue his interests because of “the porn machine that was cranking out money [that] served his passions and desires,” like writing his book in 1994 or distributing less-profitable films that “served the gay community very well.”⁵⁴³

⁵⁴⁰ “Cinefest 2010 Cancelled As TLA Video’s Fate Continues To Spin Out,” *Philebrity* (blog), January 27, 2010, no longer available but transcribed by author.

⁵⁴¹ Derek Curl, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 17, 2015.

⁵⁴² Curl, interview by author.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

This subsidization model does not only apply to TLA's retail porn division; the success of TLA Releasing films that follow successful formulas can allow the company to acquire other kinds of films. When discussing this idea with me, Curl used as an example the 2011 TLA acquisition *Longhorns*, a Texas-based 1980s period film about college men exploring homoeroticism and gay identity. The film has plenty of nudity and sex, and the cast includes actor Dylan Vox, who has acted both in gay porn (as Brent Benton) and a range of B-films and low-budget gay media like Ariztical's *Vampire Boys* (2011) and *The Lair* (2007-2009), a spin-off of Here Media's *Dante's Cove*. By Curl's account, *Longhorn's* writer and director David Lewis sought Curl's advice on ideas for a new project, and Curl recalled *The Houseboy* (2007), a TLA film he had produced in collaboration with writer and director Spencer Shilly. Curl and Shilly had observed TLA's acquisition habits and deliberately aimed to make "the sexiest film we [could] manage" to increase their chances of distribution with the company. Curl observed that Lewis' previous two films, *Rock Haven* (2007) and *Redwoods* (2009), both TLA acquisitions, had been well received (Curl described them as "very endearing, very strong movies") but were only moderately successful financially. He recommended that Lewis make a film with "a lot of sex in it, a lot of nudity, and a thin story." Curl described TLA acquisition *Longhorns* (2011) as an extremely profitable film for the company - according to him, the film "made *incredible* amounts of money," far outstripping TLA's other acquisitions that year with higher production value and better critical reception.⁵⁴⁴ Then TLA can acquire films about AIDS or trans identity, two topics that Curl told me make for financially-underperforming TLA films.

Sex and titillation is also a central part of TLA's promotional strategy. Since its first posts in May 2010, the TLA Gay Facebook page has provided plenty of erotic male imagery. The

⁵⁴⁴ Curl, interview by author.

earliest instances seem to exist purely for their spectacle (and presumably to attract more followers to the page), while later examples advertise TLA products. A July 1, 2010 posts of a shirtless photo of actor Nicholas Hoult is quickly followed by a post linking to tlavideo.com where visitors can buy *A Single Man* (2009), in which Hoult appeared. Later that month a pouty-lipped photo of Chord Overstreet accompanies a post leading to TLA's site to buy *Glee: The Beginning*, a 2010 novelization of the show featuring Overstreet. These two texts contain gay characters/themes, but an October post with a photo of Jake Gyllenhaal links to the TLA's page selling *Prince of Persia* (2010), admitting that "There is nothing gay about Prince of Persia, but DAMN do we love watching Jake Gyllenhaal in some shirtless sword-fighting action!"

In this first year of TLA Gay's Facebook page, posts often lure visitors to the TLA Gay site to take often erotically-charged polls like best nude scene, sexiest hunk in *True Blood*, and hottest openly-gay actor. Posts also link to Homopop, a now inactive offshoot blog of TLA focusing mostly on porn or pseudo-think-pieces that lead to films TLA is selling - for example, a June 2011 post "Do Handjobs Count?" invite viewers to consider what acts a straight man can engage in "before he enters homoland." This post leads into a blurb for TLA's gay comedy *Longhorns* (2011), which deals with similar questions.

In 2011 the Facebook page becomes more sexually explicit. During the summer the posting frequency increases, including a series of jokes about foreskin, watersports, and buttplugs.⁵⁴⁵ During this time, the page also begins linking users to more sexual and

⁵⁴⁵ July 26, 2011, "'Golden April showers bring puckering May rosebuds.' #TLAgayProverb", <https://www.facebook.com/TLAgay/posts/242091552478787>; August 5, "'You. Make. Pee. Feel like I'm living a cum-filled dream.' Lyrics by Masturbaty Fairy. #TLAgayProverb" (an inexplicable parody of Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream"), <https://www.facebook.com/TLAgay/posts/246863095334966>; August 20, "'May the foreskin be with you.' #TLAgayProverb", <https://www.facebook.com/TLAgay/posts/254350664586209>; August 23, "'When in doubt, stick two fingers in. They'll thank you for it later.' #TwoFingerTuesday #TLAgayProverb" <https://www.facebook.com/TLAgay/posts/255662571121685>; also August 23, "We just had an earthquake here in Philly! Weirdest thing ever. We thought an electro-vibro buttplug had gone spastic somewhere in our office... until

pornographic content, both on tlagay.com and the TLA Gay twitter page, described as a “gay adult Twitter feed” where viewers can see “better,” more explicit photos than the tamer teasers that Facebook’s policies allow to be posted. Hurricane Irene is even harnessed to advertise TLA’s porn product: an August 27 post explains that the TLA offices are “battening down the hatches and prepping for a serious windjob. Our advice is this...” accompanied by an image suggesting “Still got power? Then buy porn! (Cum on, Irene!)” The hurricane’s aftermath also provided TLA staff with the opportunity to snap and post photos of a shirtless worker fixing a roof across from the TLA office building. In 2012 and 2013 TLA Gay’s Facebook expands past video, including posts about sex toys (available through Homopop or TLA Gay) and hook-up apps like GuySpy and MISTER. The page also begins linking to TLA Style, an offshoot of TLA that once carried an odd assortment of accessories, house goods, and gifts, and now mostly carries condoms, nutritional supplements, and sexy clothing (with the tagline “your source for health, happiness & hard-ons!”).

In contrast to TLA, Here Media avoids association with porn *per se*. Shortly after Here Media acquired Liberation Publications from PlanetOut in 2008, Colichman combined then shut down *Freshmen*, *Men*, and *Unzipped*, the company’s porn magazine assets. Colichman prefers that Here Media not be associated in any way with pornography; he told me that “we have no relationship to porn as a company. I don’t judge that, but I deal with the biggest advertisers in the world. They don’t want to deal with a company that deals with porn. But I feel like we have a really authentic relationship with sexuality in our movies,” he added, distinguishing the avoidance of porn from the avoidance of sex more generally.”⁵⁴⁶ The word “authentic” is

things started rattling and falling down. (PS: All of the ‘Did you just feel that?’ post-quake related tweets made us think what a great adult title that would make.)”, <https://www.facebook.com/TLAgay/posts/255713934449882>.

⁵⁴⁶ Colichman, interview by author.

important here. Colichman reported moving Here TV into original production because “there just wasn't enough good stuff to acquire” and he “wanted more authentic images that would be relatable to young people.”⁵⁴⁷ For him, authenticity is closely related to sexuality; he believes LGBT media of the 1990s and 2000s failed to provide sex-positive imagery for viewers who may be exploring their own relationship to sexuality for the first time. After connecting this idea to the fact that an HIV-positive diagnosis is no longer a death sentence, Colichman told me it is time that we

give gay kids...films that showed them in sexualized situations that were not porn. It was just about real guys having intimate relationships with each other in a non-pornographic setting so that wasn't defined as either dirty, or "porny," and sex wasn't defined as pure risk, or going to cause your death. I just felt it was missing.⁵⁴⁸

Here he is specifically referring to film, but Colichman discusses Here TV in very similar terms that ultimately continue connecting sexuality to authenticity. Historically, in press he has very deliberately explained that Here TV's availability on a premium subscription basis (and not beholden to advertisers) permits the network to show a unique kind of authentic gay programming unavailable elsewhere on television. Premium network status is important to Here TV for two main reasons that Colichman regularly rehearses in discourse about the network. It suggests the programming is of a higher overall quality, and it allows for inclusion of content that would not be allowable on broadcast television, especially in the 2000s. He claims that even at the network's conception in 2002, he and Jarchow were unwilling to compromise the creative freedom an advertiser-free system allowed: “[Advertisers] wanted me to create programming I was uninterested in....They wanted to get gay dollars in their company coffers, but they didn't

⁵⁴⁷ Colichman, interview by author.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

want to support us.”⁵⁴⁹ He relishes not having “advertisers breathing down our neck” because “if you have to meet broadcast standards, you won't appeal to the core audience in a way that's meaningful.”⁵⁵⁰

Of course by describing these advantages of Here TV's subscription model, Colichman is illustrating the ways in which the network is different and better than Logo.⁵⁵¹ Logo's June 2005 launch (coming less than a year after Here TV's expansion, and just four months before *Dante's Cove*) provided the perfect angle for journalists: is there room for *two* gay networks on television? Colichman proves more than happy to answer the challenge inherent in this question. He claims to not even view Logo as competition; while other less-content-restricted premium networks like Showtime and HBO (which by that time had programmed shows with LGBT content like *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Six Feet Under*) provide worthy rivals for Here, Colichman says that “we no more compete with Logo than HBO competes with CBS.”⁵⁵² This is not the only instance of Colichman proposing this distinction between Here and Logo – in one instance he explicitly states the binary, saying that “we're premium; they're basic,” and that “other minorities have several networks; we have one basic and one premium.”⁵⁵³ Even when turning the conversation towards a question of LGBT representation on television and how it

⁵⁴⁹ Colichman, quoted in Karrfalt, “Coming Out in America.”

⁵⁵⁰ Colichman, quoted in John Dempsey, “Two Gay Nets Throw Coming-Out Party,” *Variety*, July 23, 2007; Colichman, quoted in Andrew Wallenstein, “Viacom's Logo Coming Out: Rainbow Also Plans Gay Channel,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, 2004.

⁵⁵¹ Griffin also discusses this rhetorical move in *Feeling Normal*, 94-96.

⁵⁵² Colichman, quoted in Nordyke, “Here! Comes a Lot of Originality.”

⁵⁵³ Colichman, quoted in Chris Schmidt, “The Battle of Dante's Cove,” *Observer* (blog), February 19, 2007, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://observer.com/2007/02/the-battle-of-idantes-covei/>.

compares to other underrepresented groups, he succeeds in reiterating the difference between Here and Logo.⁵⁵⁴

While above Colichman makes a Here TV vs. Logo and HBO vs. CBS analogy, at other times he draws a more insulting comparison: “We make sure a premium network looks, feels and smells like a premium network. It’s kind of like comparing HBO with TBS.”⁵⁵⁵ In a particularly shady comment, Colichman calls Logo “a helpful companion....It gives me a place to advertise my service....It also gives me a place to sell my programs after they are off pay television like HBO did with *Sex in the City* when it went to TBS.”⁵⁵⁶ These two instances of him comparing Logo to TBS occurred about a year and a half apart, suggesting these comments were a deliberate choice to serve his rhetorical needs (instead of off-the-cuff remarks), and the TBS re-airing of HBO’s *Sex in the City* (1998-2004) is notorious for excessive content editing to make the show acceptable for cable, especially in the case of Samantha’s sex-filled storylines. While apparently offering an explanation of the natural working relationship between Here TV and Logo, Colichman ridicules Logo’s inability to broadcast “explicit” content and, by specifically citing *Sex and the City*, implies that Logo’s content will be somehow defanged by its content restrictions. Essentially, he argues the restrictions on sexual content will make it less authentic.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁴ Even Here TV’s audience is framed as “premium”: in a September 2006 press release about the launch of Here Video, Colichman was full of praise for his customers, describing them as a “tech savvy audience” that “demands the ultimate interactive experience,” which was provided by the authentic, exclusive Internet TV destination” that Here TV offered via streaming video. In Here Networks, “here! Networks Selects Maven Networks.”

⁵⁵⁵ Colichman, quoted in Schmidt, “The Battle of Dante’s Cove.”

⁵⁵⁶ Colichman, quoted in Greg Hernandez, “MTV-Developed, Gay-Themed TV Channel Debuts,” *LA Daily News*, June 29, 2005.

⁵⁵⁷ Although I focus on Here Media, Logo also performs rhetorical self-positioning: Dave Mace, Vice President of Original Programming at Logo, argues that “I don’t think that we need nudity or profanity to tell good stories,” directing a little shade back at Here TV and its reputation for gratuitous titillation (quoted in Schmidt, “The Battle of Dante’s Cove”).

But this will not happen at Here TV, as claimed by their 2007 advertising campaign with the slogan “Gay Television. No Apologies.”

This kind of discourse was common between 2005 and 2007, during Logo’s early days. When asked about Here and Logo more recently, Here Media executive Josh Rosenzweig downplayed the comparison, implying that it was an invention of the press and that the two companies actually enjoyed camaraderie rather than “a real dramatic sort of horn-locking” or “some kind of dramatic gay battle.” However, Rosenzweig did rely on the same tropes about the networks’ dynamic, albeit with more charitable phrasing. Unlike Here Media and its freedom as a “premium service,” Logo needs “to find advertisers to support their original content, which is a really, really challenging hurdle in this day and age. I’m grateful that we can go a different route.” And because Here TV does not have to rely so heavily on programming’s immediate salability, Rosenzweig says they can experiment with content that is “a little more authentic to our stories,” reiterating the same framing that Colichman employed during Logo’s launch.⁵⁵⁸

Logo began its controversial “gaystreaming” (or “gay-jacent”) process in 2012. The cable network began rebranding itself as less LGBT-specific, a shift well-documented by Eve Ng.⁵⁵⁹ As Hollis Griffin has pointed out, Here TV took this opportunity to begin calling itself “America’s *only* gay TV network,” italics included, in promotional materials.⁵⁶⁰ Colichman takes a position quite contrary to Logo; he believes that increasingly visibility and equality for LGBTs will actually create more desire for LGBT media as “people will start feeling more comfortable engaging with their gay selves [and] engaging with their own community....I have seen no sign

⁵⁵⁸ Rosenzweig, quoted in “Charlene Weisler Interviews Josh Rosenzweig - Mainstreaming and Competition.”

⁵⁵⁹ Ng, “A ‘Post-Gay’ Era?”

⁵⁶⁰ Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 96.

that gay media is declining - in fact I've seen every sign of the opposite."⁵⁶¹ In response to terms Logo has used like "gaystream" and "gayjacent," Colichman opined this was tantamount to "not gay....If you're adjacent, what *are* you?"⁵⁶² By staying specific to its target market and not employing Logo's "dualcasting" strategy, Here TV claimed to remain actually and authentically LGBT.

As the network's first original series in 2005, *Dante's Cove* was Here TV's first chance to demonstrate its difference from Logo and show off the explicit content a non-advertiser-supported network could carry. The opening sequence of flagship *Dante's Cove* includes a scene of anal sex between two men. The penetration is not actually shown but when the pair is surprised and break apart, one character's penis is shown clearly for several seconds (outside of Here TV, a relative rarity even for gay-targeted non-porn media). This strategy is similar to that employed in another "first" for gay representation on American TV. In the first episode of *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005, the U.S. version), sex god Brian picks up virgin Justin outside a gay bar and they return to Brian's apartment. While full frontal male nudity is just barely kept out of frame, Justin and Brian use many phrases associated with gay sex ("top," "bottom," "versatile," "rimming") and engage in long bouts of sex shown in a level of detail remarkable for television at the time. This *Queer as Folk* sequence is very strategic, meant to demonstrate to the viewer exactly what kind of content they can expect to see, content they have not been able to see on television up until that point. The opening sequence of *Dante's Cove* does the same thing. These characters have relatively explicit sex and, to take a step past *Queer as Folk*, actually expose frontal (although flaccid) nudity to the camera. Especially on a network advertised by its ability

⁵⁶¹ Colichman, interview by author.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

to show unedited content, this first-episode branding establishes the possibilities of the show, aiming to pull in viewers with scenes of nudity and same-sex activity that cannot be found elsewhere on television. However, in line with Colichman's insistence that Here Media does not traffic in porn, he describes the explicit content of *Dante's Cove* as "a bunch of hot guys and girls exploring their young sexuality in a way that I don't think was pornographic."⁵⁶³ However it is worth noting, as Bridget Kies points out, that "Here TV makes no secret of the fact that its various television series frequently cast former porn stars" like Frankie Valenti / Johnny Hazzard and Dylan Vox / Brad Benton, which potentially draws these actors' porn fans to HereTV programming as well as providing the kinds of titillating images that Kies sees demanded by both gay porn and gay television.⁵⁶⁴

Dante's Cove is also significant for the way it weaves (homo)sexuality into the show's narrative and mythology. Especially for the male warlocks on the island, having lots of sex with multiple partners is a way to recharge their powers and keep their magic strong, which narratively justifies the inclusion of plenty of nudity and sex scenes in the show. The diegetic necessity of copious amounts of homosex helps shore up Here TV's position as a premium subscriber network - the show can fully exploit the venue's ability to show sex in a way not possible on Logo or elsewhere on TV.

This use of sex is not limited to Here TV's early programming. *Threesome* (2011-2013) is a talk show whose content features frank discussion of relationships and sexuality by a panel of comedians, personalities, and experts, but the design of *Threesome* weaves sex into the very structure of the show. The season one opening sequence features quick shots of a belt being

⁵⁶³ Colichman, interview by author.

⁵⁶⁴ Kies, 204

undone, an ass being groped, a shirtless man being handcuffed, two pairs of feet rubbing together, lube being dispensed, a condom being opened, and breasts being squeezed. The hosts describe *Threesome* as “the most provocative talk show on television” and emphasize that no topic is off-limits. The season two opening sequence and interstitials include visual innuendos of a number of phrases describing sex or masturbation: “screw,” “put the hot dog in a bun,” “feed the kitty,” “butter the muffin,” “tickle the pickle,” “pop the top,” “hide the salami,” “nail,” and so on. This season is also hosted by Glenn Payne, a producer and project manager for Here Media who appears in a variety of clothing that shows off his fit torso (tanktops, leather harnesses, suspenders clinging to a bare chest) and who delivers innuendo-laden introductions of guests and viewer questions.

Here Media’s choices all comport with the company’s stated strategies; as detailed above, Colichman often defines Here TV’s unique authenticity by its sexual explicitness, and in 2006, *Variety* reported that “Paul Colichman says the mission of Here! is to ensure that the gay characters seen throughout the channel are realistic, not a glossed-over or patronized version often depicted in broadcast television.”⁵⁶⁵ For Here TV, not glossing and patronizing commonly means delivering the (homo)sexuality unavailable on both straight networks and competing LGBT networks, and then some. But companies like Here and TLA still operate within a culture highly aware and suspicious of sex (especially queer sex) and its meanings. In the following section, I will examine the ambivalent position Here and TLA take to acknowledge the “gratuity” of their sexual content while still including and benefitting from it.

⁵⁶⁵ Stuart Levine, “Cablers Step Up to the Plate with Original Gay Programming,” *Daily Variety*, April 7, 2006.

Having Your Beefcake and Eating It Too: Guilty Pleasures at TLA and Here Media

As demonstrated above, Here Media and TLA Entertainment aren't shy about using sex to sell product, producing highly sexualized media, or in TLA's case selling and even producing porn (even while Here Media distances itself from the idea). But these companies do not completely ignore the stigma attached to the "badness" of sex that is perceived to be base or titillating. Here we come to the idea of "guilty pleasures." Both TLA and Here Media use the phrase in official promotional discourse and packaging, explicitly acknowledging and actually capitalizing on less "respectable" forms of appreciation of their films. They navigate the phrase differently, but it allows both to take a less dogmatic position than Strand about acquisition (and production) choices while still working under some similar assumptions about what is good and bad. Here Media's use of the idea will be explained further below. In TLA's case, "guilty pleasures" relate to brand management in a way that mirrors Strand's practices. Strand is interested in good art, and hesitates to be associated with anything else because it would harm its ability to traffic in good art (recall *Gay Boy Sleepaway Camp 7*). Although TLA as a company is comfortable with a range of approaches to and uses of sex, its use of "guilty pleasure" demonstrates the persisting threat that some sexy, "bad" media could sully a distributor's overall catalog.

The "Guilty Pleasures Collection" is a subset of TLA Releasing films. A 2011 version of *tlamovies.com*'s "About Us" described Guilty Pleasures as a specialty label "for films that defy genre conventions."⁵⁶⁶ Murray described the Guilty Pleasures line as fun, sexy films with poor critical reception. He said that the TLA team found it wise to introduce some separation between

⁵⁶⁶ "About Us," *tlamovies.com*, Oct 8, 2011 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20111008125206/http://www.tlavideo.com/company/aboutus.cfm?v=1&sn=1&g=1633>

these films and TLA's other gay titles so that people ordering these films would know what kind of product they were getting. I asked if it were a way to not "tarnish" the other films in their catalog, a phrasing he agreed with.⁵⁶⁷

One entry in the Guilty Pleasures Collection is *The Hole* (2003) is a porn parody of the Korean horror film *Ringu* (1998) and its American remake *The Ring* (2002). Produced by Jet Set Men (whose videos TLA's retail site has carried since 2000), this two-hour hardcore film follows muscled young men who, after watching a video tape full of strange imagery, receive a telephone call informing them that "in seven days, you will be gay." The movie appears in the Adult DVD section of tlagay.com. However a different version of the film also appears in the DVD section of tlagay.com as well as on the TLA Releasing site. This latter version is categorized in the Guilty Pleasures collection and clocks in at 80 minutes, meaning a full 40 minutes of the hardcore cut did not make it into the "special edit," as the DVD cover describes it. The review on tlagay.com states that in this movie "the dicks are hard, the sex seemingly endless and the boys breathtaking," but qualifies its description with the comment that "this is soft-core, no cum-shots, no penetration."⁵⁶⁸

The Hole is the only example of a film that is explicitly categorized as a porn (and produced by a porn studio) and then repackaged as a TLA Releasing film that, while still unrated and described as erotica, is made available alongside the narrative non-porn films that the company distributes. Other films that have been categorized within the Guilty Pleasures Collection include *Vanilla / A Little Comfort* (2004), *Locked Up* (2004), *eXposed: The Making of*

⁵⁶⁷ Murray, interview by author.

⁵⁶⁸ "The Hole: Special Edit," tlagay.com, May 18, 2017 version, *Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20170518094407/http://www.tlavideo.com/gay-the-hole-special-edit/p-197539-2>

a Legend (2005), and *Schoolboy Crush* (2007). TLA also released the *Guilty Pleasures Collection, Vol. 1* in 2006, which contained *The Hole* (the softcore edit), *Locked Up*, and *eXposed*; a second volume was never released.

These Guilty Pleasure films are available on TLA's family of retailer websites (like tlavideo.com and tlagay.com), but *Schoolboy Crush* (also called *Boys Love 2*) is the only Guilty Pleasure film that is currently featured on TLA Releasing's website, the separate and much smaller website specifically for TLA as a distributor. The differences in how the film is framed in these different contexts are instructive. First consider the film's synopsis on tlareleasing.com:

Aoi, a young teacher with striking good looks, has just learned that his newest student Sora is the alluring teen prostitute he once hired. Here the nightmare begins. As the walls of the prestigious academy become a percolating hotbed of sexual intrigue, prostitution and blackmail, other students, including Sora's nerdy roommate and the sinister campus bully, are pulled down the same torrid path of unquenchable desire toward the inevitable moment when obsession turns deadly.⁵⁶⁹

This description does draw the reader's attention to sexual or titillating elements in the film, but overall it reads like a standard-if-mildly-salacious summary of a film. On tlavideo.com and tlagay.com, however, the movie is described more succinctly: "When a schoolteacher discovers that the beguiling teen prostitute he once hired is now a student at his school, a scandalous series of events, queer schoolboy drama and lots of nearly-naked shower room scenes ensue. *Schoolboy Crush* is a Japanese animated film come to life." Short and to the point, this summary uses its limited space to assure viewers that they'll see plenty of shower nudity and queer drama.

On this family of retailer websites, each film's individual page usually includes a small "3 Reasons to Buy This Film" section. Two of *Schoolboy Crush*'s reasons are not even about the film's content *per se* (the film is back in print after a period of unavailability, and the DVD costs

⁵⁶⁹ "Schoolboy Crush," tlareleasing.com, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://tlareleasing.com/films/schoolboy-crush/>.

only \$9.99) and the final reason speaks specifically to the film's erotic potential: "If Asian twinks are your passion, *Schoolboy Crush* is a must." Also included on this page is a blurb/review that remarks that the main character is "as petulant as he is hot" and describes the film, in comparison with the director's previous work, as "even more naughty, explicit and a bit demented, boasting substantial eye candy and more nearly-naked shower scenes than you could throw a towel at."⁵⁷⁰

Similarly to Strand, TLA's Guilty Pleasures sub-label exhibits concerns about categorical purity - Murray explains wanting to separate out these sexually-oriented titles and shield the TLA's whole catalog from become associated with the lowbrow forms of pleasure associated with titillating film content. While Strand would refuse to acquire *Gay Boy Sleepaway Camp 7* in the first place, TLA might carry it but just brand, categorize, and locate the film in a way that serves two purposes: to indicate to consumers looking for certain kinds of sexual content that this title may be of interest; and to keep it away from the company's more "serious" or "respectable" films.

The *Schoolboy Crush* example is particularly interesting; while a film like *The Hole* has two very different versions, with one missing forty minutes of content, TLA sells only one version of *Schoolboy Crush* yet, through two different sets of paratexts, explicitly offers two different viewing experiences - one based around a sexy film about obsession and murder, and one based around shower scenes and petulant Asian twinks. Rather than providing different versions of the film for different viewing desires, TLA paratextually activates, or at least spotlights, different aspects of the same text. The centripetal motion I described in the introduction comes into play here; according to the venue, these paratexts make different aspects

⁵⁷⁰ "Schoolboy Crush," *tlagay*, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.tlavideo.com/gay-schoolboy-crush/p-270845-2>.

of the film its center of gravity, encouraging the viewer to engage with the text and make meaning in particular ways.

Like with TLA Video, the idea of “guilty pleasures” is explicitly activated by *Dante’s Cove* paratexts, which guide viewers into a partially-ironic engagement with the show. Here TV placed an ad in the September 2005 issue of *The Advocate* (before Here Media owned it) that called the show “Your Newest Guilty Pleasure” a month before its premiere. This same phrase made it onto packaging for the first series’ DVD, and the combined package of the first two seasons, released in December 2007, was called the “Guilty Pleasure Collection.” Even years later during a failed 2016 Kickstarter campaign to fund a long-promised fourth season of the show, HereTV’s Twitter used this same terminology to raise money: “Go to the #DantesCove #Kickstarter and please put your money where your guilty pleasure is! #BringBackDantesCove.”⁵⁷¹ As part of this campaign, the *Dante’s Cove* Kickstarter page also posted a drinking game with plenty of rules emphasizing the show’s sex and nudity. The list of reasons to drink includes “naked derriere scene,” “Griffin sets a thirst trap,” “male full frontal nudity :),” “male full frontal and you’re ‘*spiritually moved*,’” and “orgy scene.”⁵⁷² All of this is in addition to one of the main taglines for the show, “Possessed and undressed.” These kinds of framings for the show do connect to Colichman’s stated desire (see chapter two) for non-political programming that can simply entertain LGBT audiences the way television has traditionally entertained straight audiences. As *Dante’s Cove* actor Charlie David describes it, the show is

⁵⁷¹ Here TV, Twitter post, November 17, 2016, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://twitter.com/heretv/status/799366577971990528>.

⁵⁷² “Discover the Dante’s Cove Drinking Game,” “Bring Back *Dante’s Cove* - Season 4, The Next Generation” Kickstarter, December 14, 2016 update, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1070598095/bring-back-dantes-cove-season-4-the-next-generatio>.

meant to be “the type of television [where] you sit down with your friends, pour the drinks, and...have a good time.”⁵⁷³

The *Dante’s Cove* paratexts do plenty of work encouraging certain consumption methods of the show, but on HereTV sometimes the texts themselves call attention to the explicit sexuality particular to the network and maintain the same self-conscious relationship (without actually using the term “guilty pleasure”). In the first episode of drag variety show *She’s Living For This* (2012-13), as way of introduction to the drag queen and series host Sherry Vine tells a joke about a man smelling her vagina, laughs, then says wryly, “Yeah, it’s gonna be that cheap. ‘Cause this is Here TV, so I can say whatever I want to say, show gratuitous nudity, and drink real alcohol - which I encourage you to do, because the more you drink, the better I’m going to look and sound.” Ten seconds later, a muscled, naked man walks on stage to give Vine a glass of water, his penis in full view.

However, the most self-conscious textual engagement of Here’s approach to sex and nudity appears on *From Here On Out* (2014-), a self-reflexive scripted show about screenwriter Jimmy Randall getting his project (called *Guy Dubai: International Gay Spy*, itself an in-diegesis iteration of LGBT genre texts) on Here TV. Shot in the actual Here Media offices, and reminiscent of *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and its constant jokes about NBC and network television in general, this backstage comedy makes endless references to the nature of Here TV as a programming venue; Bridget Kies observes that

the series subscribes to many of the conventions of LGBT television at the same time as it critiques them....[such as] rampant male nudity and indiscriminate sex....*From Here On Out* uses a show-within-a-show to highlight, rather than ignore, the challenges that

⁵⁷³ Charlie David, in “Backlot” featurette, *Dante’s Cove* Season 2 DVD. Here Media, Directed by Sam Irvin. E1 Entertainment, 2007.

LGBT media often faces and is often criticized for: miniscule budgets, tiny audiences, and poor production values, including the writing and the acting.⁵⁷⁴

From Here On Out pokes fun at its own use of nudity: the Here TV president's assistant is constantly and improbably having his shirt splashed by various substances, necessitating that he begrudgingly take off his shirt to reveal a toned physique; when [TJ Hoban]'s character appears shirtless in his first scene of *Guy Dubai*, an incredulous comment is made about his shirt being singed off in a plane crash; and full nude shots of a couple side characters. All of this nudity is itself framed as a simple network imperative by the Here TV president, starting in the first episode when Jimmy wants to differentiate his show from previous Here TV productions *Dante's Cove* and *The Lair* by prioritizing "a little less skin and a little more plot...ish." The comically-young network president counters that 97% of gay male viewers watch Here TV programming to see frontal male nudity, and they need to give viewers what they want. This scene playfully sends up consumer research, and invokes a common suits vs. creatives conflict that will play out as the show continues.

From Here On Out does not use "guilty pleasure" branding like *Dante's Cove*, but it treats its sexual content with the same self-conscious distancing. The show exhibits that Here recognizes that its programming may be perceived sexually gratuitous, which I argue lends the network a certain amount of cultural capital - viewers may appreciate the network recognizing and making light of its foibles - while *simultaneously* narratively justifying the inclusion of this same content that presumably provides the draw for at least some of Here TV's viewers. Even in the case of the assistant constantly losing his shirt, while this is not narratively justified in the same way as all the nudity related to *Guy Dubai*, this trope is at least featured in a winky way that implies the show is making fun of it (while still, again, getting his bare torso exposed). The

⁵⁷⁴ Kies, 201.

show acknowledges that gay viewers are being pandered to both in this instance and often in LGBT media more broadly, and the viewer gets to participate in affectionate mocking of idiosyncrasies of this gay TV network, perhaps sharing a distanced awareness of the peculiarities of LGBT media. But again, they still get to show / look at nude (or nearly nude) muscled men, a pleasure emphasized in the show's promotion. So with a show like *From Here On Out*, and with "guilty pleasure" films in general, viewers and distributors get to have their beefcake and eat it too.

Conclusion

Obviously, with TLA and Here Media we can see stark differences in strategy when compared with Strand: TLA and Here Media accept, on a visible, official level, these "baser" forms of art while overtly calling them "guilty pleasures" or treating them as such, which at least builds in an acknowledgment that one *shouldn't* enjoy these texts according to cultural standards of taste and the proper place and use of sex. This does not mean that these media practitioners fully accept these aesthetic or moralistic evaluations of their product; a 2007 *Advocate* article relays Colichman's firm rejection of critiques of the sexuality in *Dante's Cove* and *The Lair* (and if this interview had occurred later, I expect *From Here On Out* would have also been included) as "soft-core porn." He argues that this is "a double standard. This kind of sex on-screen has been going on in pay television in the straight community now for decades."⁵⁷⁵ While "decades" may overstate the case, this statement highlights Colichman's awareness of how queer sex has historically been signified differently than straight sex. But to deem this a "double standard" based on a gay/straight binary is a little myopic; the "soft-core" designation also hinges on

⁵⁷⁵ Colichman, quoted in Corey Scholibo, "Interview with a Vampire," *The Advocate*, July 13, 2007, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.advocate.com/politics/commentary/2007/07/13/interview-vampire>.

production value. Kies points out how Here TV's budgetary limitations provide a different context for the sexual content than the "pay television" that Colichman invokes:

Whereas "quality" television series revel in artful cinematography and lavish production design, series on Here TV intentionally embrace the limitations imposed by their restrictive production budgets. The end result, once combined with scenes of graphic male nudity and male-male sex, is something akin to amateur or low-budget pornography.⁵⁷⁶

The "intentional embrace" idea applies most aptly to *From Here On Out* and its self-aware jokes about sexual gratuity and production value, but Kies identifies a budget's effect on how sexual content is perceived; when separated from the visual markers of "art" that one might see in, for example, an HBO show, sex becomes suspect, and viewers inclined to such assumptions may deem the sexual content a cheap attempt to create some form of appeal in a text with little other value. In these contexts, different assumptions about sex and its "utility" in media are at play - and again we find ourselves considering contexts in this dissertation.

Contexts are equally important for thinking about the evaluation of goodness in a text and what role sex plays in this. The Strand and Ariztical examples above showed different approaches to the idea of what makes an LGBT film "good," with different rubrics arising from what seemed needed in a particular context. Strand's Marcus Hu, working in arthouse and foreign film, has long noted a sort of feebleness to the LGBT media he sees and associates the label itself with lower quality film. As such, for him a "good" film is one that moves beyond that categorization of "LGBT" altogether and avoids it as an industry construct. While for TLA and Here, at least in the examples above, sexual content can make a text "bad" but in a way that viewers are expected to still sheepishly enjoy, acknowledging this "failure" of taste on their part but still enjoying the experience, for Strand sexual content intended to titillate or act as a central

⁵⁷⁶ Kies, 204.

draw for the film, rather than to challenge viewers, is bad in a less qualified way. It's simply undeserving of Strand's attention and better left to other distributors. Ariztical's Michael Shoel, on the other hand, assumes LGBT viewers want media experiences equivalent to what straight viewers get, and as such saw the predominance of "academic" and "negative" LGBT media for much of recent history as a disservice to LGBTs. And within the "so bad it's good" logic of the *Eating Out* series, rampant and titillating sexual content is what makes the films "good" - if they weren't raunchy sex comedies, they wouldn't offer the politically-equalizing trashiness for which reviewers (usually resignedly) lauded them.

Some of the first ideas for this dissertation project came from my decision, just before I entered my MA, that LGBT (and specifically gay, based on my experience at the time) films were bad, and I wanted to figure out *why* they were so bad, a question I often hear from queer friends curious about my research. But in my years researching this phenomenon, my clear-eyed mission faltered as I began to take into account the variety of factors that inform how this very evaluation is made: the industry structures that regularly promote LGBT content, the different approaches to "goodness" based in historical contexts and assumptions about what LGBT people want and need, and wide-reaching, deeply-embedded cultural understandings of the propriety and purpose of sex and sexual content in media. My hope for this chapter has been to introduce nuance and context into the evaluation of LGBT media, even that considered the most normative or trashy, and draw attention to the highly-contingent nature of any one configuration of what is "good" or "bad."

Conclusion

Like any other late-stage PhD student, I was asked dozens and dozens of times what my dissertation is about. I eventually got in the habit of being cute and glib by identifying “bad gay movies” as my topic and expertise. Sometimes the person asking was excited to name their own most treasured/hated LGBT media, and we would get into the kinds of conversations I recount in Chapter Three. But sometimes the person would be interested in the details of studying such media, and I would expand on the actual goals and questions that define the project. I would explain the lack of academic attention to most of these distribution companies due both to the supposedly “middlebrow” content they pump out, and to the general invisibility of distribution in popular understandings of media practice. Then I’d summarize how each chapter illustrates the impact of distribution companies on how we categorize, politicize, and evaluate LGBT media. If my conversation partner was still engaged at this point, I’d fight the urge to propose marriage.

This conversational path mirrors my own perspective’s development over the course of the project. While my earliest engagements with the topic entailed testing individual texts against a prescriptive standard of what LGBT or queer media should do, my approach broadened to understand niche LGBT media as an industrial phenomenon that warrants attention in its own right. The dissertation’s main work has been twofold: to provide a history of these five distribution companies as important participants in LGBT media practice; and to examine how these media practitioners navigate the peculiarities of niche LGBT media as a phenomenon. My contribution here has been to a deeper understanding of the media practice of a historically underrepresented and disenfranchised identity community. Within the field of queer media studies, I specifically directed my focus towards content and approaches which have not received their due attention.

But a broader implication of this project is the instability of a text's meaning. Chapter One denaturalized common categorization practices by demonstrating that a text's identity is contingent on its contexts. A label does not simply identify a text, but shapes its meaning and reifies a classification system. Chapter Two examined how companies can harness a community's traditional lack of control over its own representation, using it as an industrial context that signifies business practices with particular political value. And in Chapter Three, differing expectations about what LGBT media should do and what LGBT viewers need act as contexts that complicate how we evaluate a text. In all three cases, I have argued that a text is not intrinsically, eternally one thing, whether that involve it being a "gay film," politically progressive, or good art. Rather, these texts circulate and activate differently in different contexts, a process that, in my project's examples, is driven by distribution practice. Distribution does not simply shape a text's extant, intrinsic meaning, but rather is a crucial site of producing meanings. These lessons, applied in this project specifically to LGBT media and distribution, are widely applicable to media and cultural studies. Plenty of work has examined the impact of individual authorship and reception on a text, but this project calls for continued attention to the role of industrial and production contexts in creating a text's meaning. These processes are sometimes obscure, but always crucial.

Niche LGBT media finds itself in a tenuous position in the 2010s. As part of accelerating cultural shifts in social perspectives towards (some) queer people in the U.S., mainstream media includes increasing numbers of queer representations. Media watchdog groups like GLAAD report increasing percentages of LGBTQ characters on television, especially on cable but broadcast networks as well. Films like *Carol* (2015) and *Moonlight* (2016) have brought gay and lesbian stories to the Oscars, and with 20th Century Fox's upcoming release of *Love, Simon*

(2018), a major studio is producing and distributing a gay coming-of-age film. In addition, the rapid advent of digital and streaming media since the mid-2000s has forced media companies large and small, like so many times before, to reconfigure their business practices around new technologies and shifting audience demands. Accordingly, niche LGBT media distributors must adapt to these industry-wide changes without the capital of a large studio while also examining the role of identity-based niche media in a marketplace with increasingly diverse representations. If the original function of niche LGBT media was to provide viewers with the content they could not find elsewhere, then what is its continuing function when LGBT viewers can see LGBT stories in media that increasingly mirrors mainstream or straight media in form and budget? Will LGBT viewers' attention shift to media that combines LGBT characters and stories with recognizable celebrities and glossy production values, as some critics predict in Chapter Three?

The evolution of LGBT niche media will require continued attention as the twenty-first century progresses, but I will close with some preliminary thoughts. As it did throughout this entire dissertation, context matters here. A film might be a hackneyed coming-out story to a thirty-something gay man who lives with his partner in West Hollywood and has watched most of the LGBTQ category on Netflix; this same film might simultaneously be a crucial, identity-affirming (and -shaping) text for a closeted teen boy living in an area with little visible local gay culture. A no-budget autobiographical webseries made by a group of queer Asian-American women might be aesthetically unappealing for a fan of the *mise en scène* in Todd Haynes' work, but provide the first-ever instance of this intersectional representation for a viewer who desperately needs it. Media that no longer feels necessary or relevant to a queer person who has "outgrown" niche LGBT content or who organizes their life around different axes, may function quite differently for another person living in a context that encourages different definitions,

desires, and affects. Even a narrowly-targeted identity-focused media industry will result in a broad range of engagements from individuals within this identity group. Future research must continue attending to how media practitioners and viewers' investments in niche LGBT media change alongside shifts in the media marketplace, cultural attitudes towards queerness, and even queer people's navigations of their own identities.

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