

Sarah Cremin

16 August 2022

MA Thesis: Cultural History of Modern Europe

Utrecht University

Screening Homonormativity and Queer Resistance:

Irish LGBTQ Community Responses to Mainstream Film and Television Representation 2003-

2015

Introduction

In August 2004, a reader named Adrian Goodwin submitted an opinion piece to *Gay Community News (GCN)*, Ireland's leading LGBTQ magazine. The article reflected on *Will and Grace*, the U.S. television sitcom which ran from 1998 to 2006 and was seen as a landmark in LGBTQ mainstream representation. The show followed the lives of its two titular characters, Will, a gay man, and Grace, his straight best friend, along with characters such as Will's friend Jack, another gay man. Adrian wrote to *GCN* as an 'avid fan of this show for years,' having 'taken much enjoyment from the various escapades of the four main characters.'¹ However, Adrian said that recently, 'I have found myself insulted as a result of the show's blatant, stereotypical representation of homosexual people.' The cause of Adrian's discomfort lay with the character of Jack, who, unlike straight-presenting Will, 'embodies every stereotype about gay men that lingers in the society around us.' For Adrian, Jack sent a troubling message about gay people to the mainstream, straight viewers of the show, because 'we're told that, like Jack, all gay men are scene stealing, self-involved drama queens immersed whole-heartedly in their own self-importance.' While Jack's 'campness' may have been an 'accurate representation' of some men, including Adrian himself, his character 'reaffirms prejudices and cements some people's beliefs that homosexuality is something abnormal, something not to be taken seriously, something to laugh at.' This was a dangerous action given that the show reached a mainstream audience and thus was a 'powerful medium in structuring the attitudes of its viewers toward homosexuality.' Indeed, Adrian's noted with anxiety that he read a recent survey which found that 'seven out of ten students believe we live in a homophobic society,' something he felt was caused at least in part by the perpetuation of stereotypes about gay people in the media. He also imagined that representation which encouraged gay people not to be 'taken seriously' could shape and affirm the pre-existing prejudices held by those in positions of power, such as government ministers, preventing the progression of LGBTQ rights. He concluded with the warning that 'hidden very well beneath the laughter there's

¹ Goodwin, Adrian. 'Partin' Shot.' *GCN* August 2004: 40

an agenda going on and it seeks to keep us in our place. *Will and Grace* isn't changing anything. It's keeping the stereotype status quo.²

The opinions expressed by Adrian in this piece from 2004 capture many of the core anxieties of the Irish LGBTQ community across the period of interest in my research, 2003 to 2015. The opinion piece responded to a relatively new phenomenon: the presence of characters in mainstream film and television who were overtly identified as LGBTQ. It demonstrates the fact that this representation discourse was rooted in a politics of visibility, which had argued for decades in the power of LGBTQ visibility in the media to shape the lived experiences of LGBTQ people. Visibility was framed as a powerful force to encourage mainstream society to recognise the validity of LGBTQ people. Equally, negative instances of representation, such as what Adrian saw as the stereotypical characterisation of Jack, could hold back political progress for LGBTQ people. The belief in this transformative power of media visibility was deeply culturally embedded in this period, along with the understanding that, despite some setbacks, LGBTQ representation in mainstream film and television should and would inevitably move in a progressive, linear manner. Adrian's piece also reflects the ongoing tension between assimilationist and liberationist politics of the era, and the division among the Irish LGBTQ community about whether equality could be represented by seamless integration into the existing norms and behaviours of society or by a fundamental restructuring of that society.³ Finally, it offers an insight into how these discourses changed according to the social and political context of the time. Adrian's piece emerged from a period of economic boom and globalisation in Ireland, and the rising power of the pink Euro. These fundamental beliefs and tensions are what prompt the research of this thesis, the goal of which is to use *GCN* as a case study to examine the changing discourse and reception of mainstream, international LGBTQ media representation among the Irish LGBTQ community in the period 2003 to 2015.

LGBTQ visibility in the media has long been a topic of concern for academics and activists. However, there is a lack of research on the topic of how moments of mainstream representation have historically been received by audiences or of how they have been discussed in the LGBTQ press. There is also a lack of work done on the impact of LGBTQ

² *Ibid*

³ Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003: 23

representation in mainstream, international film and television on Irish audiences. As such, this thesis has been informed by a number of other sources regarding LGBTQ visibility and Irish LGBTQ history. Much of the research about the role of visibility in mainstream film and television has its roots in the work of Vito Russo, with the 1981 book *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*.⁴ This work of activism-scholarship employed textual analysis to uncover messages about homosexuality encoded in classic Hollywood films and how they perpetuated LGBTQ oppression and invisibility. This approach, with its focus on textual analysis and the evaluation of positive and negative forms of visibility, had a major influence on the work and community discourse on LGBTQ representation in subsequent decades. However, this visibility politics approach has been challenged by researchers such as Amy Villarejo with her 2014 book, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*. In it, she argued that framing television as a ‘vehicle for LGBTQ inclusion’ made a number of false assumptions: ‘that television reflects its viewers; that television ought to do so; that it has an obligation toward diversity of representation; or that diverse representation leads to political change.’⁵ By drawing attention to these inflated assumptions, she challenged and complicated television as a ‘technology of sexual becoming.’⁶ Similarly, Melanie E.S. Kohnen’s book, *Queer Representation, Visibility and Race in American Film and Television*, moved beyond traditional frameworks for evaluating representation by employing her concept of the ‘closet-as-screen’. This moved beyond the idea that queerness in the media is either visible or invisible to explore how ‘whenever a particular form of queer visibility is projected on film and TV screens, other possibilities are filtered or screened out.’⁷ Both Kohnen and Villarejo were concerned with temporality, and disputed the notion that LGBTQ visibility in the media began in the 1990s. In an Irish context, recent research has been conducted by Páraig Kerrigan on LGBTQ visibility in Irish television and film. His 2021 book, *LGBTQ Visibility, Media and Sexuality in Ireland*, was the first to take a historical perspective to trace trends and discourse surrounding LGBTQ visibility in Irish media from the 1970s to the present. He argued that the story of LGBTQ visibility in Ireland is a ‘tug-of-war’ between

⁴ Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981: 244

⁵ Villarejo, Amy. *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013: 3

⁶ *Ibid*: 7

⁷ Kohnen, Melanie E. S.. *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet*. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2016: 3

'nuance and complexity, an ever-shifting and changing dynamic between queer community activism, the state and media bodies and institutions.'⁸ He challenges narratives of visibility in Ireland which are often framed as moving progressively from 'oppression to liberation,' influenced by social events such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, the Celtic Tiger period of economic boom in the 2000s, and the campaign for marriage equality.⁹ Discourse surrounding visibility has been particularly shaped by this campaign for same-sex partnership in Ireland, and the normalisation, homogenisation politics of this have been discussed by researchers such as Ann Mulhall and Aoife Neary.¹⁰ One aspect which has often been overlooked in the research mentioned so far is audience response. In 2021, Rob Cover and Duc Dau published the article 'Placing the Queer Audience: Literature on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Film and TV Reception,' which reviewed research trends regarding LGBTQ visibility.¹¹ They noted that research on this topic has had an overwhelming focus on the meaning encoded in texts, while there has been a lack of research into how audiences engage with and interpret the films and television shows they watch. Research often makes assumptions about how audiences react to the media they consume, rather than searching for their real, individual responses to understand why they do or do not find moments in entertainment screen media meaningful.¹² They argue that the audience must be seen as 'active, self-conscious, multiple, fragmented and engaged.'¹³

This thesis acts as a discourse analysis and audience response study of the perception of international screen media among Irish LGBTQ viewers from 2003 to 2015. It responds to the fact that there is a lack of research on this topic, and that Ireland is a very interesting case study for this area. Ireland entered the new millennium as a country which had undergone intense social and economic change. It decriminalised homosexuality in 1993 and by 2015, had legalised same-sex marriage by popular vote in a referendum. It rapidly globalised and given the limited number of Irish-made films and television shows,

⁸ Kerrigan, Páraig. *LGBTQ Visibility, Media, and Sexuality in Ireland*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021: 4

⁹ *Ibid*: 5

¹⁰ Mulhall, Anne. 'The Republic of Love.' *Bully Bloggers*, April 14 2015. <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/the-republic-of-love/>. Neary, Aoife. 'Civil Partnership and Marriage: LGBT-Q Political Pragmatism and the Normalization Imperative.' *Sexualities* 19, no. 7 (2016): 757–779.

¹¹ Cover, Rob, and Duc Dau. 'Placing the Queer Audience: Literature on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Film and Television Reception.' *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 7 (2021). <https://maifeminism.com/literature-on-gender-and-sexual-diversity-in-film-and-television-reception/>

¹² *Ibid*: 19

¹³ *Ibid*: 12

consumed more UK and US based entertainment media than ever before. It was situated on the margins of Europe as a historically Catholic nation, yet geographically and discursively was between the UK and US. This historical context shaped the changing discussions about screen media representation in mainstream, international media in this period.

In order to access the opinions and discourse circulating in the Irish LGBTQ community in this time regarding mainstream representation, this thesis takes *GCN* as a case study. *GCN* is a highly useful source as it was the primary publication targeted at the Irish queer community across this period, maintained a sizeable readership, and found a balance between commercialised and community-based content. While it consistently covered entertainment news regarding film and television, it also maintained a critical perspective as a magazine which, though commercialised to ensure financial viability, remained free of charge and politically engaged. Its connection to its readership and its consistency allow it to provide a window into community discourse of the time. I will begin my analysis with the period from July 2003 to August 2009, before moving from September 2009 to May 2015. These time frames were chosen to coincide with major socio-political events in Ireland, along with major rebrands of *GCN* in both 2003 and 2009. The 2003 overhaul marked the commercialisation of the magazine as it became a semi-glossy, entertainment driven magazine. The 2009 rebrand, while less dramatic, also reflected changes in society connected to the economic crash in 2008. In May 2015, it was decided by popular vote in a referendum that Ireland would legalise same-sex marriage. My research consisted of systematically analysing content relating to mainstream film and television in every issue of *GCN* published in this period to examine the shifting discourse over time. This focus entirely on *GCN* rather than taking a comparative approach with other magazines was shaped by the fact that there was no pre-existing analysis of the magazine on this topic to draw on. This likely relates to the fact that past issues of *GCN* remain relatively inaccessible, and my research required multiple trips to the access physical copies of the magazine in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin. However, focusing on *GCN* alone also allowed me to conduct an in-depth case study and track specific changes over the course of the twelve-year period. Along with conducting a discourse analysis of the film and television content in the magazine, I utilised theoretical approaches of Foucault and Butler to examine identity formation through engagement with media representation. I used Michel Foucault's

concept of subjectification to explore the effect of mainstream media representation on identity-formation and self-perception, in ‘the way the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself.’¹⁴ Relating to this, I utilised Judith Butler’s argument about the performative nature of identity, which is discursively produced and naturalised as ‘real’ through the repetition of language, social scripts, and behaviours.

This thesis will argue that across the period 2003 to 2015 in Ireland, the discourse surrounding LGBTQ representation in mainstream media oscillated between celebration and triumphalism on the one hand, and criticism and resistance on the other. This conflict was not binary and represented underlying divides in the community between desires for assimilation and liberation. While resistance was always present in the pages of *GCN*, this period saw an overall movement towards assimilation fuelled by factors such as the economic boom and the campaign for marriage equality, which was fundamentally normalising. Nonetheless, the magazine provides an insight into how mainstream media was used by members of the Irish LGBTQ community to construct their own queer subjectivity. Chapter One will examine the discourse present in *GCN* in the period 2003 to 2009 regarding media representation, placing it in the context of the Celtic Tiger and the commercialisation of LGBTQ life to argue that there was conflict present at this time between the dominant homonormativity of the period and alternative expressions of LGBTQ identity. Chapter Two will continue to explore this discourse, tracking how this period places more emphasis on the acceptance of diversity within the community while also enforcing defined boundaries on what is an acceptable expression of LGBTQ sexuality. In the context of the campaign for equal marriage rights, a politics of consensus and normalisation limited the range of opinions which can be expressed about representation. Chapter Three examines the entire period in question but from the perspective of *GCN*’s readers rather than editorial staff. By analysing letters to the editor and reader-submitted opinion pieces, it argues that the Irish LGBTQ community expressed opinions which were more radical and nuanced than was present in the editorial line of the magazine. It also employs a theoretical perspective to demonstrate how mainstream media representation was used by readers to construct their LGBTQ identity.

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1958–1984* (Vol. 2). New York: The New Press, 1998: 461

Chapter One: Between Assimilation and Difference in the Celtic Tiger

In August 2006, *GCN* published its two-hundredth issue, commemorated with the article, ‘200 Things that Rocked Our World since the Very First Edition of *GCN*.’¹⁵ This chronological list, curated by five of the magazine’s editorial and contributing staff writers, reflected on two hundred of the most significant events for the LGBTQ community, in Ireland and beyond, since 1988. Over one third of the milestones identified by list refer to moments of LGBTQ representation in film and television. Number 74 featured an image of Ellen Degeneres, with the simple caption ‘Ellen Degeneres comes out, 1996.’ (Figure 1) Another landmark was the beginning of the U.S. sit-com, *Will and Grace*, in 1998, which ‘historically became the first ever US sitcom led by a gay character.’ It reflected on the fact that despite initial hostility to the centrality of its gay characters, it had ‘become one of the most celebrated shows of its time,’ and was ‘now recognized as a huge advance in gay television programming.’¹⁶ The inclusion of *The L Word*, a television drama which revolved around a group of lesbian and bisexual women in Los Angeles, required no explanation to readers.¹⁷ (Figure 2) 2005’s *Brokeback Mountain* was included as ‘the most successful gay film of all time.’¹⁸ The list was filled with moments identified as historic ‘firsts’ in LGBTQ visibility – ‘the first gay kiss on Irish telly,’ ‘*Home and Away* gets its first lesbian kiss,’ ‘*Corrie* gets a transsexual!’ – accompanied by years in which characters or the celebrities who played them publicly came out.¹⁹ This article captures several key features of dominant discourse circulating in the LGBTQ community in this period regarding representation in mainstream television and film. It demonstrates how visibility was imagined to be increasing and improving according to linear narrative of progress. This reflects the underlying belief being that more positive media representation inherently advanced LGBTQ rights and social acceptance. It also shows how Irish LGBTQ people connected with a sense of international shared community identity through this media, and how these moments of visibility were imbued with a symbolic importance. The article celebrated moments of ‘coming out’ in which celebrities and fictional characters made themselves visible through acts of self-

¹⁵ Rachel Armstrong, Declan Cashin, Brian Finnegan, Stephen Meyler, Carol Lang. ‘200 things that rocked our world since the very first edition of *GCN*.’ *GCN* August 2006: 16-33

¹⁶ *Ibid*: 22

¹⁷ *Ibid*: 31

¹⁸ *Ibid*: 32

¹⁹

formation which Foucault terms as 'confession'.²⁰ The events highlighted by the article also demonstrate the type of visibility which were seen as significant in this era – the visibility of white, affluent LGBTQ people, who demonstrated the power of LGBTQ people to assimilate into mainstream media and society.

--	--

Figure 1: '200 Things' GCN August 2006: 21

Figure 2: '200 Things' GCN August 2006: 31

GCN's '200 Things' article acts as an introduction into the complex discourse in the LGBTQ community in the period of 2003-2009 regarding representation in film and television, which will be explored in this chapter. Mainstream visibility was a central issue for the community in this period due to the increased presence of characters in film and television overtly identified as LGBTQ. This visibility was often taken as a sign of LGBTQ acceptance and integration into society more broadly, a belief which was fuelled by wider events such as the economic boom and prevalent human rights discourse of the time. This chapter will analyse GCN's coverage of LGBTQ film and television in the period 2003-2009,

²⁰ Sullivan: 53

beginning with the magazine's commercialised rebrand in July 2003 and ending with its subsequent rebrand, which coincided with the beginning of the Irish economic downturn.

This chapter will begin by exploring how, in this period, there was a pull towards assimilation for LGBTQ people in a culture of pre-crash neoliberalism and narratives of social progress. It will analyse the discourse about representation in *GCN* which upheld homonormative ideals. I will then establish how this dominant discourse was challenged in other aspects of the magazine. I will argue that while *GCN*'s commercialisation led to its contribution to dominant triumphalist, homonormative narratives regarding representation, it also troubled these norms through its critical treatment of film, employment of queer readings, and questioning of narratives of progress. The tension between these opinions reflects the fragmented nature of the Irish queer community in this period, which held a diverse range of opinions regarding assimilationist and liberationist politics.

Triumphalism, Assimilation, and Homonormativity

The dominant discourse about LGBTQ media visibility in this period can be characterised as triumphalist, commercialised, and assimilationist. LGBTQ people, specifically white gay men and lesbians were seemingly more present in mainstream media than ever before. *GCN*'s April 2007 'Lesbians on TV' issue celebrated the fact that 'gay and lesbian characters have come into their own on television,' having 'kick-started a queer revolution on the small screen.' It continued to comment on how the 'post-gay' era of the television shows *Will and Grace*, *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk*, all of which revolved around LGBTQ people, 'audiences have grown largely desensitised to seeing homosexuality on TV and in movies.'²¹ This sentiment was prevalent across *GCN* in this period regarding both film and television visibility. The normalisation and mainstreaming of LGBTQ representation on television was seen as a successful result of the campaign for visibility, which had its roots in Vito Russo's activism-scholarship of the 1980s. His book, *The Celluloid Closet*, had positioned the campaign for an end to LGBTQ invisibility in the media as an essential task for LGBTQ activism.²² In the 2000s, this goal of this work was felt by many to be achieved through the fact that LGBTQ people were now being represented in the media as 'normal' people, leading regular lives and similar in every way to their heterosexual counterparts, aside from the difference in who they were attracted to. This 'post-gay' mentality reflects the homonormative discourse which characterised the period, both on and off the screen. As described by Lisa Duggan, homonormativity refers to a 'neoliberal sexual politics' which 'does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.'²³ Homonormativity asserted that correct and 'acceptable' way of being gay was being aligned with existing cultural norms of gender, sexuality, class and race, privileging heterosexual ideals and expecting gay people to conform to them. It is bound up with respectability politics, and the policing of behaviour of LGBTQ people who do not fit within heteronormative ideals and trouble the ability of gay people to assimilate. Despite its

²¹ Cashin, Declan. 'Ellen Plus Ten.' *GCN* April 2007: 14

²² Russo

²³ Duggan, Lisa. 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.' *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo et al. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002: 179

emphasis on assimilation and inclusion, this makes homonormativity a highly exclusionary force.

Examples of homonormativity can be found throughout *GCN* in this period, particularly in its more commercialised sections, that is, its high-profile celebrity interviews and feature articles. Gary Gorlick's 2006 interview with Heath Ledger regarding his role in *Brokeback Mountain* is significant, given the status of the film as one of the first and biggest mainstream LGBTQ films to achieve commercial successes. *GCN*'s '200 Things' article had noted that the film was important for portraying a same-sex relationship between two cowboys in 1950s America 'without any reference to the history of the [LGBTQ] civil rights movement.'²⁴ Instead of revolving around the LGBTQ community or gay identity, it frames itself as a 'tragic love story', evoking iconic cultural romances like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic*. The film's disconnect from LGBTQ politics and identity is framed as a positive feature which allows the relationship between Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist to be liberated from existing cultural stereotypes about gay relationships and viewed on the same terms as heterosexual counterparts. *GCN* ran its cover feature on the film in January 2006, and Gorlick's interview with Heath Ledger featured a highlighted quote from the actor which emphasized that he and Jake Gyllenhaal were 'not dry humping each other in every scene. It's a beautiful love story, it really is, and we've definitely pushed the envelope.'²⁵ (Figure 3) This suggests that for a relationship between two men to be labelled as beautiful, it must be desexualized. It revolves around the purity of universal love in distinction to the impurity of gay sex, as aspects of gay male sexuality and identity which may have unsettled straight viewers were excluded. Similarly, a 2005 interview with the actor from the U.S. television show *Six Feet Under* Matthew St Patrick commented that when he accepted the role of Keith, a gay man, he decided that he would not be 'playing a faggot,' by which he meant 'this stereotypical, overly flamboyant gay man.'²⁶ St Patrick's aversion to stereotypes suggested that he would play the character in a neutral way, as a 'normal' man. Heterosexual masculinity is not seen as an identity which is performed, privileging the heterosexuality as the default and ideal way of existing in society, which gay men should conform to. *GCN* writer Mary Considine comments that this is what made St Partick 'one

²⁴ Armstrong et al. '200 things that rocked our world since the very first edition of *GCN!*' *GCN* August 2006: 31

²⁵ Gorlick, Garry. 'Saddle Up.' *GCN* January 2006: 17

²⁶ Callaghan, Beth and Mary Considine. 'Under Class.' *GCN* November 2005

half of the most innovate gay couple to ever grace television.' Similarly, Cillian Murphy, interviewed in 2006 regarding his performance as a transgender character in the film *Breakfast on Pluto*, states that he did not want to make his character 'camp or queeny. I just wanted it to be feminine.'²⁷ Rather than embracing the 'gender bending' potential of this character, Murphy wanted to maintain preestablished norms of femininity, in opposition to masculinity. These interviews serve as examples of how homonormativity '[gives] legitimacy to queerness only when it intersects with heteronormativity,' and highlight the fact that the form of representation which was most valued in this era was assimilatory.²⁸



Figure 3: GCN January 2006: cover, 17

Duggan described homonormativity as a 'neoliberal sexual politics,' and given the intense neoliberalism of Irish society in this period, homonormativity had an environment to thrive in. The 'Celtic Tiger' was the term used to describe to the period of unprecedented economic growth which began in the mid-1990s and continued until the global financial crash in 2008. Ireland was notable both for the extent and rapidity of its economic growth, having consistently been 'one of the laggards of the European economy' since achieving

²⁷ Kehoe, Denis. 'Murphy's Law.' GCN February 2006: 16

²⁸ Sullivan, 34

independence in 1922.²⁹ With its new affluence, Ireland was transformed from a marginal, backwards nation to a ‘poster child’ of the European project, moving ‘from the periphery towards the centre of the new global economy.’³⁰ The feeling of playing ‘catch up’ to the rest of Europe and the rapid pace of growth fostered a belief in both economic and social progress, as Ireland became a truly ‘modern’ nation. This sense of progress was heightened by the rapid social change which occurred simultaneously with economic liberalism. The country which had for decades been defined by its Catholic social policies and close relationship between Church and state saw the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 and the legalisation of divorce in 1996. These social changes, campaigned for many years by activists, were aided by the EU’s emphasis on human rights in this period and their interventions in Ireland. In this context, the achievement of LGBTQ rights acted as a symbol of modernity and the success of a European project, revolving around a shared market, which had curated an image of itself as a centre for human rights, democracy, and civilisation. Ireland’s assimilation into Europe mirrored the assimilation of LGBTQ people into mainstream, heteronormative society, and both forms of assimilation were celebrated through LGBTQ media visibility. As noted by Páraig Kerrigan, ‘queer visibility was recalibrated within a new sexual landscape where queer sexualities were framed as positive, upbeat and optimistic and associated with the newfound affluence of the Celtic Tiger.’³¹ LGBTQ sexuality, by association with the ‘broader cultural trend of remaking Irish identity as international, progressive and attractive,’ was no longer seen as a threat but symbolically assimilated a symbol of Irish modernity. It is in this context that on-screen characters who are able to assimilate into heteronormative society are celebrated in *GCN*, as symbols of LGBTQ integration into national and international culture.

The transformation of the Irish LGBTQ media landscape and strategies to target the pink euro were also factors which shaped the celebration of homonormative representations. The 2000s saw *GCN* firmly established as the primary publication for LGBTQ readers, and its status was consolidated through an overhaul of the magazine in 2003. *GCN* transformed from an A3 format tabloid newspaper to a semi-glossy, full-colour

²⁹ Ó’ Riain, Seán. *The Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger: Liberalism, Boom and Bust*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014: 4

³⁰ Donovan, Donal and Antoin E. Murphy. *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger: Ireland and the Euro Debt Crisis*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2013: 17

³¹ Kerrigan, 2021: 141

magazine, with an increased focus on lifestyle and popular culture alongside political coverage. With its updated look, *GCN* would not have looked out of place among other leading LGBTQ publications on the UK and US market, such as *Gay Times* and *Advocate*. (Figure 4) The main goal of this rebrand was to attract a broader readership and with it bigger advertisers, who desired access to the purchasing power of a newly affluent gay community in this time. While *GCN* aimed to be a publication for all members of the LGBTQ community, its 2007 readership survey revealed that the average reader was male, aged 25-34, living in Dublin, and earning above the average Irish income of €32,000 per year. Most of these readers had no dependents to support, instead spending on entertainment, leisure activities, grooming and travel.³² These affluent gay men held valuable ‘pink money’, the power of which was recognized by companies who sought to capitalize on it by marketing towards gay communities. The increasing purchasing power of an LGBTQ market was seen by many as a symbol of the community’s increasing social and political power, based on the idea that LGBTQ people could exert power and achieve equality by financial means. This was a source of anxiety for those within the community who did not have the privilege to accumulate wealth or assimilate, and were left behind as ‘shopping, clubbing and using the internet for anonymous sex [...] substituted, for many, political activism and a sense of a community identity.’³³ *GCN*’s overwhelmingly political, activist focus of the past was perceived to be less relevant for readers whose ‘international queer identity’ made them ‘to some extent less interested in political and community news now than they once had been.³⁴ This demographic of readers were seen to value assimilation into dominant culture rather than radical politics of separation, leading to entertainment reporting which reflected positively on the representation of LGBTQ characters as ‘normal’ people. As editor Brian Finnegan stated regarding the relaunch, maintaining its community focus while competing for advertisers had been a constant balancing act for the magazine.³⁵ In this circumstance, ‘slick marketing and community politics’ needed to become ‘strange

³² Brian Finnegan. ‘Pink Power.’ *GCN* July 2007: 23

³³ Julie Bindel. ‘Are gay people in the UK divided by the pink pound?’ *The Guardian*, 7 October 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/07/gay-people-uk-pink-pound>

³⁴ Kerrigan, 2021: 139

³⁵ Brian Finnegan. ‘Editorial.’ *GCN* July 2003: 1

bedfellows' in order for *GCN* to survive as a free magazine in an increasingly commercialized market.³⁶



Figure 4: *The Advocate*, November 2006

Gay Times, April 2006

³⁶ Brian Finnegan. 'Editorial.' *GCN* June 2003: 1

Liberation, Difference, and Viewing Queerly

While celebratory narratives of assimilation and homonormativity found their place in the more commercialised sections of *GCN*, commentary on film and television elsewhere in the magazine challenged narratives of progress and the celebration of homogeneity. They criticised the limitations of mainstream representation and questioned its power to reflect or change public opinion. These more critical aspects of *GCN* also engaged with more radical strategies of ‘queerly’ engaging with media representation to destabilise fixed notions of LGBTQ identity.

While triumphalism regarding representation and assimilation was prevalent in *GCN* in its celebrity interviews and features, the monthly film section, spanning one to two pages in each issue, was a space for more critical and nuanced commentary on the latest mainstream cinematic releases. These reviews were often critical of instances of representation which were celebrated within more dominant, triumphalist discourses. Film reviewers also do not hold back on criticizing films for what they see as harmful representation, as is the case with the October 2007 review of Adam Sandler’s comedy, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*. The film followed two straight men who married each other for legal reasons, finding humour in how they feigned their gay relationship. Despite the film’s attempt to sell itself as a good-natured, liberal minded comedy which ultimately spoke in favour of gay rights, reviewer Alan Corry wrote that the film was ‘packed from one end to the other with the kind of crass homophobic jokes you might expect from a 1970s lad movie.’ The movie was ‘one big joke about faggots, and a tired one at that. Did they expect us not to notice?’³⁷ Not all LGBTQ representation was indicative of progress. By contrast, high praise was given to *Transamerica* in April 2006 for being the ‘most spiritually affirming transsexual road movie to emerge in the short history of the genre.’³⁸ The film was a comedic drama which followed transgender woman, Bree Osborne, who discovered that prior to her transition, she had fathered a son, and now needed to reconnect with him. The review states that ‘for every filmic gem that celebrates the LGBT experience in all its complexity, there are 10 more films that embalm and memorialise it. *Transamerica* is a

³⁷ Corry, Alan. ‘Films.’ *GCN* October 2007: 26

³⁸ Leimgruber, Dustin. ‘Films.’ *GCN* April 2006: 23

joyful movie that spans uncharted cultural and emotional divides.³⁹ The review celebrated the complexity of the film, and its refusal to adhere to straightforward, homonormative, conceptualisations of LGBTQ identity, which would constrain the possibilities for expressions of gender and sexuality rather than allowing for fluidity. Interestingly, *Transamerica* was also praised as being ‘the anti-*Brokeback Mountain*.’ While *Brokeback Mountain* received a warm celebration as the cover story of GCN’s January 2006 issue, this review by Dustin Leimgruber was critical of the ‘suffering and self-loathing’ represented in contrast to the ‘unapologetic pride’ of *Transamerica*. He lamented that ‘it’s just too bad Bree didn’t take a side trip through Wyoming to share a beer with Jack and Ennis. She could have taught those shame-wracked cowpokes a few things about self-image.’⁴⁰

The language used by Leimgruber reflects liberationist discourse of the 1980s, which advocated for pride in LGBTQ identity and refused assimilation into what was seen as a fundamentally flawed heteronormative society. As Nikki Sullivan notes, ‘for liberationists, the imperative was to experience homosexuality as something positive in and through the creation of alternative values, beliefs, lifestyles, institutions, communities, and so on.’⁴¹ Liberationist ideals were a reaction against the assimilationist politics of previous decades, which emphasised the sameness rather than difference of gay people by arguing that being gay was not a choice. In a liberationist framework, gay people were not simply victims of their biological circumstances, but could celebrate their differences and their ability to imagine alternative ways of achieving freedom through the ‘eradication of traditional notions of gender and sexuality.’⁴² By praising *Transamerica* as the anti-*Brokeback Mountain*, Leimgruber aligned the former with LGBTQ pride and the celebration of difference, while the latter conformed to assimilationist politics and the representation of ‘shame-wracked’ gay people of the 1960s, who desired to be recognised by heterosexual society on the grounds of their common humanity. *Transamerica*, for representing more complex, diverse and ultimately uplifting queer experiences was positioned by Leimgruber as a better example of queer visibility. The homonormative discourse about *Brokeback*

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ Sullivan: 29

⁴² Sullivan: 31

Mountain which was celebrated in *GCN*'s interview with Heath Ledger became the reason it was criticised. However, politics of assimilation and difference were never opposed as a binary, with LGBTQ people holding diverse and complex opinions about what the best towards equality was.

The discourse about positive and negative representation was nuanced by a positive review was given to the 2006 lesbian romantic comedy *Imagine Me and You*. The film revolves around Rachel, who falls for her florist, Luce, while at her own wedding to her husband, Heck. Similar in structure and tone to other classic British romantic comedies of the 1990s and 2000s, Rachel ultimately leaves Heck to begin a new relationship with Luce. The film was praised for being a 'breath of fresh air,' for not being 'a movie about being gay, coming out or dealing with gay politics; it's a sweet, funny distraction that will warm your heart and that rare thing: a lesbian film with so happy an ending, Jane Austen would have been reduced to tears. Go see.'⁴³ In this case, the film's representation of a lesbian relationship within the existing genre of the romantic comedy without any discussion of gay issues was evidently part of its appeal. Assimilation on screen provided a means of escapism for LGBTQ viewers, a reminder that representation was not only seen as being politically important but also a source of entertainment and comfort. Overall, the film reviews in *GCN* highlight the presence of multiple critical voices towards the representation of the time which challenge and complicate dominant triumphalist narratives.

Triumphalist, homonormative narratives regarding representation were further subverted by the 'You've Been Framed' column in the monthly film pages. This column also moved beyond the tendency of reviews to simply categorise moments of visibility in film as positive or negative, instead employing queer reading strategies which disrupted any stability of meaning in a text. 'You've Been Framed' was a regular column, an addition of the July 2003 magazine rebrand, which tasked itself with exposing 'homosexual undertones in classic movies.' Tackling a range of films from old Hollywood to contemporary releases, the column took a tongue-in-cheek approach, narrating to readers alternative readings of these films in opposition to narratives constructed by a mainstream, non-queer audience. For example, the original *Star Wars* trilogy was in fact, according to Nicholas Holland,

⁴³ Armstrong, Rachel. 'Films.' *GCN* July 2006: 38

'The journey of the boy Luke Skywalker as he's shown around the various opportunities for inter-galactic gay love the space and time continuum has to offer. His initial guides are a pair of queer robots – C3PO, an ageing, prissy queen, endlessly fussing over his younger more adventurous companion, who has a habit of sticking his plug in strange sockets.'⁴⁴

By the trilogy's conclusion, Luke had 'resolved his daddy issues with a bit of patricide,' and could 'move on to his new gay life, with the celebration at the end of the trilogy doubling as his coming-out party.'⁴⁵ (Figure 5) The queer readings of these films were presented as legitimate interpretations. As Alexander Doty has argued, for LGBTQ viewers it is usually straight culture's reading of texts that are 'alternative', 'desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture.'⁴⁶ This was affirmed by the language of 'You've Been Framed,' which argued that in *Rebel Without a Cause*, 'gay subtexts surely don't get closer to the surface' than this. Similarly in *The Producers*, 'there doesn't seem to be much that's sub about the gay subtext.'⁴⁷ The surface separating *You Me and Dupree* from its subtext was 'very thin indeed.'⁴⁸ These queer narratives, the writers insist, were already present and waiting to be exposed. Indeed, Doty argues that no text is inherently heteronormative or queer, with its meaning being entirely constructed according to 'the ever-changing relations between texts, readers, and the world.'⁴⁹ Within all texts, and by all kinds of viewers, 'queer moments' can be identified. These are instances of 'narrative disruption which destabilise heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic.'⁵⁰ For example, the 'You've Been Framed' discussion of *Shrek 2* identified many 'queer moments' in relation to contemporary discourse regarding same-sex partnership and the importance of gay pride. It described Shrek as a film which was 'not afraid to poke fun at conventional, heteronormative values celebrated by other animation companies.' The film gained a 'definite pink elements' with its 'ultra-camp' Puss in Boots, a 'smattering of

⁴⁴ Nicholas Holland. 'You've Been Framed.' *GCN* November 2005: 23

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶ Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

⁴⁷ 'You've Been Framed.' *GCN* December 2005: 26

⁴⁸ 'You've Been Framed.' *GCN* October 2006: 20

⁴⁹ Sullivan: 191

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

characters of undecided gender,' and Shrek and Fiona's 'unusual union that Fiona's father finds hard to understand.' While the film's villain 'isn't so keen on their partnership rights,' the film's message of 'the importance of staying true to yourself and rejecting ideals that are foisted upon you by others' makes it decidedly queer, despite not featuring any characters who are identified as LGBTQ.⁵¹



Figure 5: Luke's medal ceremony/'coming-out' party in *Star Wars*

The queer readings of both older and contemporary releases in cinema were also a form of resistance to the dominant discourse of the time, which suggested that LGBTQ visibility began in mainstream film and television in the 1990s. As argued by Kohnen, this argument was not only factually incorrect, but also privileged LGBTQ visibility which was literal and denotative rather than what was suggested or connotative. While the 1990s may have seen an increase in the number of characters on screen who were directly identified as LGBTQ, queerness had been present on screen for much longer, though it has not been always labelled due to censorship laws. Kohnen argues that the 'connotative registers' used to indirectly communicate queerness in the Production Code era 'continued to thrive right alongside the new denotative possibilities' from the 1990s onwards.⁵² Valuing connotative

⁵¹ 'You've Been Framed.' *GCN* May 2005: 24

⁵² Kohnen: 178

moments of queerness in texts also highlights the fact that while literal representations of LGBTQ characters could be exclusionary through their homonormativity, connotative representations could be more open and fluid, and through this, inclusive.

Along with employing queer reading strategies, the magazine also challenged grand narratives about LGBTQ rights and visibility in this period. Mainstream discourse suggested that the 2000s represented an era in which LGBTQ people's increased presence on screen inherently encouraged mainstream social acceptance. However, this was called into question on multiple occasions in *GCN*. In November 2006, an article was published reflecting on the U.S. sitcom, *Will and Grace*. This show developed a reputation for fuelling the acceptance of gay people in mainstream America for representing gay main characters in an everyday, normalised setting. This was consolidated by Joe Biden's comment in 2012 on NBC, that he believed the show 'probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has done for far.'⁵³ Indeed, *GCN* ranked it at number one in a list of the '50 Best Queer Telly Treasures' that same issue, asking readers not to forget how radical it was when first conceived of in 1998.⁵⁴ However, in this issue, the magazine also questioned whether its impact was indeed positive, asking whether it was an 'innocuous sitcom that sold gay as a non-sexualised commodity to America, or a cutting edge programme that pushed the boat out on gay representations and changed the face of television?'⁵⁵ While the article does not have an answer, it does point to the fact that measuring the impact of LGBTQ representation was not as straightforward as was often imagined.

The true impact of visibility was also questioned by Brian Finnegan's editorial in February 2006 in which he reflected on his experience seeing two films that month, *The Family Stone* and *Brokeback Mountain*. The former was a romantic comedy featuring Sarah Jessica Parker, which included a scene in which her character made a number of 'non-PC anti-gay faux pas' during a dinner party, each of which prompted 'gasps and astounded 'nos!' from the audience Finnegan shared the cinema with. Finnegan discussed this with his

⁵³ Abramovitch, Seth. 'Joe Biden Cites 'Will & Grace' in Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage (Video).' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6 May 2012. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/joe-biden-cites-will-grace-320724-0-320724/>

⁵⁴ Morris, Niall. 'The 50 Best Queer Telly Treasures.' *GCN* November 2006: 15

⁵⁵ McNamara, Shane. 'Just Jack... and Karen.' *GCN* November 2006: 16

friend after the film, saying that ‘no time ago, [the straight audience members] would have laughed at the homophobia. Now they can’t stand it.’ Finnegan’s experience of watching *Brokeback Mountain* a week later with an audience of gay men produced an entirely different feeling. He noted that the audience’s reaction to this ‘triumph of violence over love and self-expression was deeply palpable,’ ending with an ‘overwhelming feeling of grief in the air that resonated with me way beyond the movie.’ Despite the film’s setting in the 1950s, it reminded him that the same fear which operated in *Brokeback Mountain* ‘lives on in our hearts to this day.’ This feeling intensified as he interviewed a young man who was victim of a homophobic attack in Dublin in December, prompting him to ask the question:

‘So have times really changed? Is society growing in its understanding of gay rights as human rights and perceiving gay people as normal and valuable, as the people watching Sarah Jessica Parker’s movie might indicate? Or, despite the apparent liberalism exhibited by that audience, are there darker forces at work beneath the surface in Ireland?’⁵⁶

Finnegan’s editorial revealed a scepticism about the limitations of media visibility to shape social change. It questioned whether increased representation reflected meaningful changes in the lives of LGBTQ people, or whether surface-level displays of social liberalism which concealed more insidious forms of homophobia. In her analysis of LGBTQ visibility in television, Villarejo notes that the discourse surrounding representation often makes several false assumptions: ‘that television reflects its viewers; that television ought to do so; that it has an obligation toward diversity of representation; or that diverse representation leads to political change.’ These assumptions result in the ‘conflating [of] revolutionary or emancipatory political struggle with the appearance of queer marginalia.’⁵⁷ Television and film were ultimately products for consumption, produced with the goal of making profit. They should not be assumed to be symbols of or means of achieving inevitable social progress. Finnegan’s editorial, along with other critical discussions on the role of representation, highlight the scepticism which existed as a counter discourse to the dominant triumphalism of the time.

⁵⁶ Finnegan, Brian. ‘Editor’s Letter.’ *GCN* February 2006: 1

⁵⁷ Villarejo: 3

Analysis of the discourse among the Irish LGBTQ community in this period regarding mainstream LGBTQ visibility reveals the tension between the celebration and criticism of contemporary media representation. This tension reflected a deeper divide in the community between assimilation- and liberation-based politics. While the dominant discourse celebrated assimilation of LGBTQ people into everyday life, both on and off the screen, the counter-discourse of the time troubled dominant narratives of progress, questioned what it meant to be represented on screen, and criticised homonormative representations. The neoliberal economic climate of the time fuelled homonormativity through the depoliticization of the community and celebration of the pink Euro. There was a new belief in the power of the LGBTQ community to achieve equality and integration through economics prosperity and purchasing power, but this was a phenomenon impacting privileged LGBTQ people rather than the whole community. This chapter has demonstrated that alongside the dominant triumphalism regarding representation, there was also resistance and criticism. *GCN* employed critical and queer methods of reading texts and finding meaning in them which subverted the dominant discourse of the time. From this, *GCN* challenged narratives of progress and the uncritical belief that assimilation signalled an end to homophobia, drawing attention instead to exclusionary practices. The resistance evident in *GCN* in this period followed in a tradition of liberationist politics, and reflected the wide range of different stances held by LGBTQ people regarding what the path to equality should look like. This liberationist stance would become increasingly challenged over the following years in Ireland due to the emergence of the campaign for equal marriage rights into the mainstream. As this campaign gained momentum, it required unprecedented levels of consensus among the LGBTQ community, excluding more radical perspectives in the process.

Chapter Two: Marriage Equality and the Normalisation Imperative

In September 2014, opinion columnist for *GCN* Stephen Meyler wrote an article which represented the shift which had occurred in the years since the financial crash regarding LGBTQ representation in screen media. Meyler's piece opened with the assertion that 'Hollywood is being left behind in the dark ages when it comes to LGBT representations.⁵⁸' With the publication of the GLAAD's studio report for the 2013 period, Meyler reflected on the fact that LGBT people were not 'fairly represented in mainstream media.' The report found that only 17 of the 102 'big movies' released in 2013 included an LGBT character, and of these 17, only 7 passed the Vito Russo test. This test was introduced by GLAAD the previous year, and has been employed every year since then in their studio report to test the quality of LGBTQ representation. For a film to pass the test, it must have an identifiable queer character who is multidimensional, not only defined by their sexuality, and essential to the plot.⁵⁹ This is designed as a means of ruling out tokenistic moments of representation in film. For Meyler, these shortcomings by major studios and the continued presence of negative representation showed 'how out of touch the Hollywood machine seems to be,' constantly 'playing it safe' based on assumptions that mainstream audiences would not respond well to LGBTQ characters. This, he argued, was a particular source of anxiety for 'risk-averse investors' when productions were becoming more expensive than ever and relied on global exportation to ensure their profitability. He speculated that perhaps Hollywood's perception of the conservative nature of its audiences in China, India, and Africa 'keeps its output traditional, male and heterosexual.' The impact of globalization on the film industry and its extreme drive for profit was a source of anxiety for Meyler. It compromised the industry which had previously been seen as the source of socially and politically significant moments of LGBTQ visibility, leaving 'traditionalist Hollywood [...] a behemoth in danger of being left behind.'

Meyler's article captures the end of an era of triumphalism regarding LGBTQ mainstream representation in the period following the financial crash, and alongside the emergence of the Irish campaign for same-sex marriage rights. It reflects the growing

⁵⁸ Meyler, Stephen. 'The Last Word.' *GCN* September 2014: 48

⁵⁹ 'The Vito Russo Test', GLAAD. <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2021/vito-russo-test>

frustration and skepticism with Hollywood cinema which was echoed across the magazine in discussions of film. Mainstream releases were placed under increased scrutiny, and content relating to them became more marginalised within the magazine. However, Hollywood did not abruptly stop producing films featuring LGBTQ representation. Indeed, trends of representation from previous years largely continued. The growing scepticism occurred instead because of changing expectations of the audiences of these films, who, following financial disaster and united again through community politics, had less faith in inevitable social progress. This chapter will examine the discourse and changing attitudes towards both film and television representation in this period in *GCN*. I will argue that the re-politicisation of the Irish LGBTQ community due to the campaign for same-sex marriage rights led to more critical attitudes towards media representation, but also fuelled intensified homonormativity. The marriage equality campaign privileged assimilatory politics in order to appeal to voters in ‘middle Ireland’, and the strategic need for consensus meant that more radical, liberationist ideals were silenced. I will begin by analysing the increased scepticism towards Hollywood film in the magazine, and will continue by contrasting this with the celebration of LGBTQ representation on television.

Hollywood Film and Community Re-Politicisation

In the years after the financial crash and in the lead-up to the same-sex marriage referendum, coverage of LGBTQ representation in mainstream Hollywood film notably decreased. As reflected in Meyler’s article, there was frustration and scepticism present in the dominant discourse in the magazine regarding the ability of the Hollywood ‘behemoth’ to produce satisfactory depictions of LGBTQ themes and characters. The marginalisation of film was visually represented in the shrinking amount of space given to mainstream film reviews. *GCN* relaunched with an updated format in 2009, with a number of changes to film related content which alluded to changing attitudes. As seen in Figure 6, the ‘movies’ page of the magazine became gradually smaller over the years, granted a full page in 2009 but reduced by the placement of advertisements over a third of the page in 2015. Within the new format, mainstream releases were given less attention, being summarised more briefly than before while attention was drawn instead to independent or local cinema. These independent releases received increased priority, and were more likely to be discussed in the ‘Pick It!’ columns as critics’ choice pieces. Indeed, this shift was visually represented by

the February 2015 spread which discussed mainstream releases within one page, opposite to a full-page dedicated to the release of independent LGBTQ film *Love is Strange*.⁶⁰ (Figure 7) Mainstream film releases were discussed in a more ambivalent tone, and reviews were written by one person, *GCN*'s deputy editor Ciara McGrattan, rather than by a number of contributors each month. The 'You've Been Framed' segment of the film reviews page did not continue. Overall, these changes point to the prioritization of independent films which featured overt and detailed LGBTQ representation rather than commercialized films which tended to take more tokenistic approaches to representation.



⁶⁰ ‘Movies.’ *GCN* February 2015: 12-13

GCN March 2015 p. 12



Figure 7: GCN February 2015

This turn towards the small-scale and the local was also reflected by the fact that there was a significant decrease in the number of celebrity interviews with actors involved in upcoming mainstream film releases in this period. Prior to the 2009 relaunch, *GCN* featured frequent interviews and cover features with actors in upcoming LGBTQ-themed mainstream releases. Many of these actors were not necessarily LGBTQ themselves, and their interviews were often a source of homonormative discourse in the magazine, as established in Chapter One. In this period, it became far more common to see interviews relating to independent or Irish queer-themed releases. There was also a new emphasis on speaking with the LGBTQ production teams behind these movies, rather than only the actors. This is captured in the August 2009 issue which featured a cover story and interview with Paul Ward, director of *Fur Coat and No Knickers*, the low-budget film which claimed to be ‘Ireland’s first ever gay rom com.’ Ward commented that the film was produced as a response to ‘the complete lack of gay lead characters in Irish film’ and that it was a ‘true queer community effort.’ He noted that the film was produced specifically for the Dublin GAZE film festival, and that ‘if it goes any further than that I’ll be thrilled. But I’m just as

delighted that Dublin's gay community are getting to see it in the cinema.'⁶¹ Ward's interview highlights the increased emphasis that was placed on LGBTQ representation in film as something important for LGBTQ viewers to engage with on a personal and community level. The primary goal of the film was not to explain LGBTQ experiences to mainstream audiences or make them palatable, but to connect the Dublin gay community and reflect their lives back at them. Independent films often dealt with LGBTQ themes with more nuance and sensitivity than mainstream film, being less profit-driven and connected more directly to their audiences. This was a long-standing trend in independent cinema and was reflected in the extensive coverage of LGBTQ film festivals in *GCN* across the entire period of this thesis. However, the value the earlier period had placed on palatable mainstream representation and the symbolic shift of LGBTQ people from the margins of society to the mainstream that it represented became increasingly troubled.

The changing attitudes towards mainstream film in *GCN* can be understood in relation to changes in the Irish LGBTQ community at the time. Firstly, the financial crash which sent the country into recession in 2008 disrupted the narratives of social and economic progress which had defined life in Ireland since the 1990s. As highlighted by Kerrigan, this feeling of progress had been bound up with notions of LGBTQ assimilation and visibility, as LGBTQ media visibility became a symbol of Ireland's modernity and progressive, globalised identity. Economic boom and the growing economic power behind the pink Euro had also been an central factor which drove optimistic views about LGBTQ integration in that period and ability of LGBTQ audiences to shape mainstream representation through their spending power. The overarching triumphalist belief in inevitable progress, a fundamentally Western, European narrative, was shattered by an economic disaster which to many had seemed impossible. The Irish economy was one of the worst affected in the Eurozone due to the rapidity of its growth, producing a general atmosphere of anxiety instability, and scepticism towards globalisation. Secondly, the emergence of the campaign for same-sex marriage rights in Ireland served to re-politicise an Irish LGBTQ community, many of whom now had less faith in the inevitability of LGBTQ rights and integration. The movement had its roots in 2003 when lesbian couple Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan deciding to pursue having their Canadian marriage legally recognised in Ireland. The

⁶¹ Finnegan, Brian. 'Lad Meets Lad.' *GCN* August 2009: 14-15

campaign gained momentum over the years, but it was not until the end of the decade that debates began to take place in full force inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. In 2010, a bill was passed by the Irish government which granted ‘civil partnership’ rights to same-sex couples. This legislation granted similar but not entirely equal rights to straight, married couples, with limitations being most notable in regard to the rights of same-sex parents and their children. The civil partnership bill had been a source of debate among the community, but also an event which re-united the community around a common cause which had been absent in the previous period. A range of opinions were prevalent regarding the passing of the civil partnership bill. Some people outrightly spoke against it on the grounds that any form of monogamous partnership represented a form of assimilation into heteronormative culture. For others, it came close enough to equality to go far enough. For the majority, however, the bill to some extent represented a legal consolidation of the fact that same-sex couples were lesser than their heterosexual counterparts. This shared sense of dissatisfaction politicised the community and prompted the push for equal rights for same-sex couples, culminating against the wishes of some in the campaign for marriage equality.⁶² Overall, a more sceptical approach to film representation may reflect the fact that the community was in general more critically engaged and politicised than before.

⁶² Neary, Aoife. ‘Civil Partnership and Marriage: LGBT-Q Political Pragmatism and the Normalization Imperative.’ *Sexualities* 19, no. 7 (2016): 757–779.

Television, Normalisation, and the Continued Homonormativity

The reunification of the Irish LGBTQ community had complex and somewhat paradoxical effects on the community discourse about mainstream representation. As seen in the coverage of film, it prompted increased criticism of mainstream representation, favouring the small-scale and the local. However, the marginalisation of film content also reflects the normalisation effect of the campaign for marriage equality in this period, and the intensified demand for consensus within the community. Marginalising mainstream film content in the magazine can be seen as a means of showing resistance against commercialised, tokenistic representations which fail to meet the expectations of the community. However, not giving space to film also forecloses any opportunity to critically discuss film or express a diverse range of opinions. This phenomenon can also be explored in the context of responses to television in this period. While film was coming under fire, mainstream television was increasingly celebrated in this period for having diverse, sensitive representations of LGBTQ people. This is best captured by Ciara McGrattan's editorial in June 2012, which opens with the statement that 'Obama may have just come out in support of gays, but U.S. TV has been doing it for years.'⁶³ President Obama had recently announced this support in the lead up to his re-election campaign, a strategic but historic move, as identified by McGrattan. However, she argued that television shows in the past few years such as '*The Office*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Game of Thrones* and even *The Simpsons* all featured or feature openly gay characters, whose storylines rarely revolve around their sexual orientation.' For McGrattan, the most significant and telling example came from the representation of multiple gay relationships on the show *Spartacus*. Given its 'macho posturing' as a show following Roman gladiators, and a target audience of young to middle-aged men, 'the inclusion of gay lovers is surprising, but even more surprising is the *normality* that surrounds such partnerships.' The two men enjoyed a 'tender, sexy and ultimately ordinary relationship' and their 'otherness' was never mentioned. They were treated on a fundamentally similar level to the other straight couples on the show, and McGrattan argued that this form of representation is more impactful than, for example, one on *Glee*, because the audience does not expect it. The comparison to *Glee* was made as it was one of the most frequently discussed television shows of the time, following a number of LGBTQ

⁶³ McGrattan, Ciara. 'Letters.' *GCN* June 2012: 3

characters who, among the wider cast of misfits, joined their high school's show choir. For McGrattan, *Glee* was certainly important as 'the most gay-friendly of all shows,' as it dealt directly with issues affecting LGBTQ teens such as homophobic bullying and coming out. However, in her opinion, the viewers of *Glee* were 'probably fine with gayness' already. *Spartacus* could make more of an impact on less comfortable audiences for the fact that their characters are simply 'gay and present. Silent, – in terms of not having to discuss or defend their relationship to others – but present, and more importantly, visible.'

McGrattan's editorial, while not overtly critical of the representation of stereotypically gay male characters such as those in *Glee*, demonstrates the subtle but pervasive continuation of homonormative discourses in this period. Her argument is that that the best type of visibility is that which shows LGBTQ people as no different to their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts. They could simply slot into these television shows with no discussion of their sexuality. The article fundamentally values the assimilation of LGBTQ people into heteronormative society over challenging those heterosexual norms. The perceived power of television as a vehicle for normalisation is made clear, referred to as 'the thing that sits in the corner of almost every home across in the globe.' As Kohnen argues about this period, 'the mainstream media's acknowledgment of gays and lesbians critically depended on normalizing queerness,' and this normalisation process inherently required the exclusion of forms of representation which did not fit.⁶⁴ Expressions of LGBTQ identity which could not be integrated without question into television shows or society more broadly were excluded through this discourse. The editorial also made the assumptions which Villarejo is particularly critical about, namely, that mainstream television has an ethical stake or connection to the community which informs its representation.⁶⁵ It is clear, therefore, that the triumphalism of the Celtic Tiger years continued in relation to television representation with a more subtle but intensified homonormativity. This can be understood as being directly related to the emerging discourse surrounding the campaign for marriage equality. This campaign was, in terms of political strategy, a success, securing a 62% share of the public referendum vote in favour of legalising same-sex marriage. However, the campaign has faced much criticism for its exclusionary, homonormative

⁶⁴ Kohnen: 178

⁶⁵ Villarejo: 3

rhetoric. As Ann Mulhall argued in a piece published shortly after the victory, Ireland's Marriage Equality movement was rooted in the broader Western trend of 'neoliberal marriage politics' with origins in 'the assimilative, conservative drive toward respectability in a putatively 'post-queer', 'post-AIDS' American LGBT 'rights' discourse.' The 'Yes Equality' campaign had always identified 'middle-ground Ireland' as its most important voter base to win over, leading to an 'idealising and normative' campaign which 'appealed to the familiar, the homely, to reassuring sameness and the norm in all respects.' This was a campaign, she argued, with no place for recognition of anyone aside from the white, middle class, monogamous gay or lesbian couple. – 'the 'B', the 'T' and needless to say the 'Q' were consigned to unspeakability for the duration.'⁶⁶ 'Postergate' was a direct example of how this consensus was enforced. When groups of young activists destroyed homophobic campaign posters from the opposition, they received major backlash from within the Yes Equality campaign for disrupting the image they were curating of a campaign taking a peaceful, democratic approach centred on love. Organisers of the campaign, professional political strategists, were tasked with 'maintaining discipline and keep[ing] everyone on message.'⁶⁷ Critical voices within the LGBTQ community, such as those opposed to marriage or critical of the exclusionary, assimilationist discourse of the campaign, were silenced for fear that they may disrupt Ireland's journey towards LGBTQ equality. The discourse within the community which had been omnipresent regarding civil partnership was shut down. In the context of a national referendum, it risked the public losing faith in an LGBTQ community which did not affirm their unthreatening sameness. Neary refers to this strategy as 'political pragmatism' and its 'normalisation imperative' as factors which '[foreclosed] radical sexual politics or broader kinship discussions.' She argues that this normalisation approach '(re)produces an 'acceptable' sexual citizen and reassigns 'others' as peripheral.'⁶⁸ The shift in discourse about media representation and the valuing of assimilation is tied to this context of normalisation.

This affirmation of assimilation as the ultimate goal for the community was also evident in how the evolution of LGBTQ television was tied to narratives of progress. While

⁶⁶ Mulhall, Anne. 'The Republic of Love.' *Bully Bloggers*, April 14 2015. <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/the-republic-of-love/>.

⁶⁷ Noel Whelan, quoted in Mulhall

⁶⁸ Neary: 757

film representation was no longer seen as an inevitably progressive medium, television became a new site for this optimism. This period saw the formation of a canon of LGBTQ television. In February 2015, *GCN* published a list of ‘Five Revolutionary Queer TV Shows,’ namely, *Queer as Folk*, *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, *Transparent*, *Glee*.⁶⁹ All of these are described as being historic ‘firsts’ in terms of representation – the first gay-centric shows, the first on mainstream television, the first to be about lesbians, transgender people or gay teens. As Kohnen argues, many of ‘the significant ‘firsts’ in queer history and queer media representations depend on simultaneous moments of deliberate forgetting’ in order to ‘allow the emergence of a before-and-after story of gay liberation.’⁷⁰ As discussed in chapter one, this approach in *GCN* limits the possibilities for what can be valued as LGBTQ representation, favouring literal representation which is shaped by assimilatory discourses over more open and abstract ones. This is particularly the case in the absence of the ‘You’ve Been Framed’ column in this period, which introduced revisionist readings. Only a particular kind of show could be valued as revolutionary, and gay liberation was identified as occurring at the time when a particular show aired.

This assimilationist, progressive discourse continued to permeate discussions about LGBTQ visibility on television. However, the division between assimilationist and liberationist politics is often imagined as a binary, which fails to reflect the complexity of the community discourse. This was evident in a 2009 article which reflected on the ten-year anniversary of the premier of *Queer as Folk*, created by British showrunner Russel T Davies. The show had gained notoriety for its explicit depiction of gay life in Manchester, ‘unapologetically refusing to entertain the notion of ‘positive images’, and instead depicting queer characters as flawed and fucked-up as they were fabulous and funny.’⁷¹ It featured, among other things, explicit sex scenes and drug-usage, showing gay life in a way which refused assimilationist demands placed on LGBTQ representation. Indeed, Declan Cashin’s article in *GCN* reflected on the controversy it caused, even among gay activists, many of whom criticised the show for affirming stereotypes rather than trading in ‘positive images.’⁷² Cashin wrote positively about the radical influence of the show and how it

⁶⁹ McNamara, Shane. ‘Five Revolutionary Queer TV Shows.’ *GCN* February 2015: 22

⁷⁰ Kohnen: 178

⁷¹ Cashin, Declan. ‘Nowt Like Folk.’ *GCN* April 2009: 16

⁷² *Ibid*

reflected the feeling that at that time that ‘pre-millennial gay people were liberated, we were complicated, we were alive.’⁷³ While celebrating the liberationist perspective of *Queer as Folk*, and its power to disrupt mainstream culture, he also employed the language of assimilation in his review. The ultimate achievement of the show’s representation of LGBTQ characters was that it showed ‘they were ordinary, and they were human.’⁷⁴ In this context, unlike dominant discourse regarding assimilation, Cashin expresses belief in the possibility for society to change, rather than LGBTQ people, in order to accommodate them as normal. A 2015 interview with Davies about his new shows, *Cucumber*, *Banana*, and *Tofu*, also overtly reflected on the assimilationist urge of the community, accepting it as a natural development but one which should not mark the end of the fight for rights. These shows followed a group of gay men ‘concerned with the trappings of equality’ and the expectations for gay people to assimilate into heteronormative life, and how this impacted gay identity. While Davies remarked on how in many ways ‘we’re in a rather good state of equality’ by 2015, he argues that ‘it’s just the beginning.’⁷⁵ Indeed, this form of inclusive integration was reflected in the fact that trans issues began to receive attention they had not had before, as *GCN* celebrated shows such as *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black* as positive first steps in the representation of trans characters.⁷⁶ Regarding the latter, *GCN* featured a 2013 interview with trans actress Laverne Cox, noting that her role was the ‘first time a worldwide audience was seeing a trans character, played by a trans actor on their television screens every week.’⁷⁷ While this was important for trans people to ‘feel less invisible,’ it was also not enough, as Cox emphasised the need for support in the trans movement for people suffering in their everyday lives.⁷⁸ While assimilationist rhetoric remained dominant, there were forms of resistance and a call for diversification found within the magazine.

Overall, the discourse surrounding representation in this period marks a shift from the years prior. While resistance to dominant homonormativity was still present in the

⁷³ *Ibid*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*: 17

⁷⁵ McNamara, Shane. ‘Cucumber Cool.’ *GCN* February 2015: 32

⁷⁶ McGrattan, Ciara. ‘Trans Mission.’ *GCN* March 2015: 24-26, Casey, Jane. ‘Orange Bounty.’ *GCN* September 2013: 27

⁷⁷ Casey, Jane. ‘Orange Bounty.’ *GCN* September 2013: 27

⁷⁸ *Ibid*

magazine, it was significantly constrained due to the normalisation imperative and enforced consensus of the Marriage Equality campaign. Assimilation became taken for granted as the goal for LGBTQ activism, and ideal representation was imagined to be that which showed LGBTQ people as fundamentally the same as everyone else in society. The Irish campaign, while effective in securing the referendum, creating an environment that was hostile to discussions which marriage as the definitive goal of the community. In this context, discussions about the role of representation were also limited. While the return to the local over the globalised contributed to the marginalisation of Hollywood, television was described through the familiar narratives of triumphalism and positivity as a medium which could change the opinions of the wider public about LGBTQ people. Missing from this consideration is how television and film could impact LGBTQ people themselves.

Chapter Three: Audience Discourse and the Construction of Identity

In its May 2007 issue, *GCN* published a letter submitted to the editor by Ger from Dublin entitled ‘The S Word.’ The letter was short and direct:

‘I love *GCN*, really I do, but seriously what is the story with *The L Word*? Every other issue has some gorgeous lady lover on the cover. Grand have gorgeous lady lovers on the cover but do they have to be those blooming *L Word* women? It's *everywhere* and it's shite.

I can't remember when gay culture has been so saturated by a TV show. At least *Queer As Folk* was good. *The L Word* is just awful: shit acting, crap sex and the clothes? Don't get me started. Please dear mister editor, please no more bloody *L Word*, I'm sick of it Enough!'⁷⁹

Ger’s letter and his feelings towards one of the most successful mainstream queer-themed television shows of the time capture several things about *GCN* and its readers. The letter is informal in style, highly personal, and does not shy away from criticism of the media or of *GCN*. It demonstrates the power of media representation to provoke emotional responses from viewers, and its publication also reflects the fact that *GCN* was willing to highlight opinions from its critically engaged readership which may not necessarily reflect the beliefs of its editorial staff. The significant presence of readers’ voices makes *GCN* a valuable resource through which to access the opinions of the Irish queer community in this time, a diverse group of people with correspondingly diverse feelings on the issues affecting them. This direct access to readers is particularly important relating to the analysis of discourse about media representation. As argued by Rob Cover and Duc Dau, research on LGBTQ representation often forgets the fact that audiences are as ‘active, self-conscious, multiple, fragmented and engaged,’ decoding the media they consume in individual and unexpected ways.⁸⁰ Chapters one and two have analysed the discourse present in *GCN* about LGBTQ film and television representation based on the contributions of the magazine’s editorial staff. However, editorial staff were somewhat constrained in their writing by the commercial nature of the magazine and its need to cater its content towards a diverse audience. This

⁷⁹ Ger. ‘The S Word.’ *GCN* May 2007: 2

⁸⁰ Cover and Dau: 12

chapter will analyse reader's perspectives, as expressed in their monthly letters and opinion pieces. It will begin by establishing the dominant discourses among readers of *GCN* about this representation, arguing that Irish audiences responded to instances of media representation in more critical, diverse and polarising ways than *GCN*'s editorial staff, but their writing reflected similar tensions between assimilationist and liberationist politics. Reader opinions on representation also became limited by the normalisation imperative of Marriage Equality. It will go on to examine how these readers engaged with mainstream media representation in ways which contributed to the formation of LGBTQ identity. I will apply the Foucault's theory of subjectification and Butler's concept of performativity to understand this process of queer identity formation through engagement with media representation.

Screen Representation and Audience Discourse

Across the period of 2003-2015, *GCN* was a publication which gave a prominent place to reader's opinions and community discourse, signalling that it meant both to cater to and to help form that community. The most notable similarity in discourse between the letters and main editorial line was in their heteronormativity. The prioritisation of assimilationist discourses was present in all aspects of the magazine. In particular, the representation of the effeminate, camp gay man was frequently identified by some readers as damaging for 'making gay people into a laughing stock.'⁸¹ Adrian Goodwin wrote a letter to *GCN* in July 2004 expressing his belief that shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Fairy Godfathers* were 'pathetic and vile' for only showing gay people as 'prancy, condescending and judgemental queens who know it all when it comes to dressing and looking your best.' These limited representations 'further our plight and keep us firmly bound into corners.' As I discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Adrian expanded on this opinion in a longer opinion piece the following month, in which he discussed *Will and Grace*. He acknowledged that 'the fact that homosexuality is getting primetime recognition is beyond commendable.'⁸² However, he had recently found himself 'turning [his] head away in disgust' at the show for its 'blatant, stereotypical representation of homosexual people.' As was discussed previously, Adrian's main problem with the show was its stereotypical representation of Jack. In this expression of anxiety about Jack's queerness and the visibility of effeminate gay men elsewhere in the media, Adrian's letter demonstrated the pervasive homonormativity of the era of that period of time. By arguing that the representation of effeminate gay men 'cements some people's beliefs that homosexuality is something abnormal,' Adrian's piece suggested that for gay characters to be seen as normal, they must exist within the norms of heterosexuality. However, readers also criticised this homonormative rhetoric. In October 2003, Kevin wrote to *GCN* to share his experience of how 'recently a friend said I made her uncomfortable because sometimes, 'the *Will & Grace* Jack thing is a bit much'.⁸³ This comment, which criticised Kevin for his similarity to Jack as an effeminate, camp gay man, left him to wonder 'how can we, as members of the gay community, complain about verbal queer-bashing and derogatory

⁸¹ Adrian Goodwin. 'The Stereotyped Guy.' *GCN* July 2004: 3

⁸² Adrian Goodwin. 'Partin' Shot.' *GCN* August 2004: 40

⁸³ Kevin. 'Camp Corner.' *GCN* October 2003: 2

comments from heterosexuals when we do it to each other? [...] Surely our marginalisation should have made us more openminded and tolerant? Or is everyone just bitter?'⁸⁴ Kevin's letter shows that the discourse about homonormativity in representation was mirrored by the policing of real-life LGBTQ identities.

Reader submissions also confirm that homonormativity transformed in the years approaching the marriage referendum, manifesting in new ways but remaining omnipresent. In January 2012, Dylan wrote to *GCN* in response to the previous month's editorial which reflected on the positive changes in gay representation on TV, as seen in shows like *Glee*. The show received praise for its inclusion of multiple queer characters, who were more diverse in terms of gender and race than had been seen before on mainstream television. However, Dylan argued that 'the show gives out a mixed message about being gay, and it's not all positive,' primarily because of the characterisation of Kurt, 'the gay focus of *Glee*.' According to Dylan, Kurt was 'walking stereotype, the kind we thought we had got rid of in the 70s.'⁸⁵ He felt this following a recent episode, in which Kurt was deemed too effeminate to be cast as the male lead in the school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. For Dylan, this signalled that the show was 'telling us that gay men are not real men,' and he said he would have had more respect for the show if Kurt received the part of the male lead as an affirmation of his masculinity. Instead, his femininity was emphasised even further with him 'prancing about in the High School corridors with posters of him as a pink unicorn.'⁸⁶ This letter highlights a continuing anxiety about the representation of effeminate gay men in mainstream media, and a belief that LGBTQ equality required assimilation and the rejection of queer-coded behaviours.

However, a response letter from another reader the following month to Dylan's opinion highlights a shift in the discourse surrounding representation in this period. William Quill, in his letter entitled 'Glee Diversity,' commented that Dylan's assertion that *Glee* perpetuated stereotypes 'betrays a prejudice of his own [...] against effeminate gay men.' He argued that Dylan misinterpreted the episode according to his own biases, when in fact, the episode was commenting on the fact that gay men should be able to express their

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

⁸⁵ Dylan. 'Not So Gleeful.' *GCN* January 2012: 4

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

sexuality and gender in multiple ways. Kurt's father told him that there was 'nothing wrong' with being seen as feminine, and encouraged him 'not to conform to the perception of what a real man is.' William drew on LGBTQ history to encourage Dylan to remember that these stereotypes existed because in the past effeminate men 'couldn't help but stand out,' and because of their visibility, the 'the public at large couldn't pretend that gay people didn't exist.'⁸⁷ He concluded with the statement, 'now that full legal equality is within sight, it would be a remaining social injustice if we were to continue the claim that effeminate men are not real men.'⁸⁸ William's response highlights the influence of a new, more subtle form of homonormativity in this era. While he defended the inclusion of effeminate gay men in the community, he did so by affirming their masculinity within pre-existing heteronormative gender roles. They qualify for inclusion based on their status as 'real men,' with the implication that those who cannot meet the criteria to fall safely within masculinity may be excluded. It also privileges marriage rights as 'full legal equality,' when this was not the case. While it is more inclusive than in previous years, it is framed around a more subtle exclusionary process. Both William and Dylan's letters also highlights the fact that developments in queer theory remained distant from non-academic audiences. Both employ forms of textual analysis to make their points, with the assumption that an inherent truth about how Kurt is being represented exists within the text, and simply needs to be read correctly. This approach reflects more closely the work of Vito Russo, whose ideas were made accessible through the documentary version of *The Celluloid Closet*, as opposed to the poststructuralist approaches of queer theory, which emphasis the inherent instability of a text's meaning and the power of the audience to engage queerly with it. Queer theory resists definition, but can be seen as a strategy which works to destabilise meaning, and 'articulate a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family.'⁸⁹ This approach is not evident in reader discussions about representation. For example, while queer theorists advocate for the possibility of reading texts queerly and identifying 'queer moments' in texts without overt queer characters, mainstream discourse still prioritised overt representation. In February 2009, Conor Clancy wrote to question why the previous month's issue had featured a cover story

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

⁸⁸ Quill, William. 'Glee Diversity.' *GCN* February 2012: 6

⁸⁹ Sullivan: 43

on *Star Trek*. He commented that ‘some gay people may be obsessed with *Star Trek* (just as some straight people are), but does that mean a show that has consistently, and to my mind, homophobically, shied away from proper gay representations, should get the much-coveted *GCN* cover space?’⁹⁰ He suggests that other stories warranting a cover story that month could have been the death of Vincent Hanley, ‘our first gay celebrity’, the premier of the film *Milk* at the GAZE festival, which ‘celebrates gay rights activism,’ or the new queer radio shows available on RTÉ.⁹¹ Conor’s letter highlights how the literal representation was seen as the most or only legitimate form of LGBTQ visibility.

While reader submissions often affirmed heteronormative rhetoric about representation, there were some which posed deeper criticisms about community discourse about mainstream visibility. In November 2003, a reader wrote to *GCN* in response to the cover story it had run on the actor playing a new gay character on the long-running British soap opera, *Coronation Street*. Patrick Hannah wrote that while he was sickened by the sensationalised inclusion of gay characters in soap operas to draw in viewers, what made him ‘even sicker’ was when ‘the gay press feed in to the whole sham and feature supposedly queer soap characters as cover boys.’⁹² Similar dissatisfaction was expressed in a July 2007 letter regarding the previous month’s cover story on gay actor Rupert Everett. Fidelma criticised the interview for being ‘asinine and pointless,’ questioning ‘why was he on the cover of *GCN* anyway? Do you simply have to be gay to get on the cover?’ For Fidelma, this focus on celebrity visibility over ‘politics and real people’s lives’ represented the loss of *GCN*’s ‘political backbone.’ She did not see his visibility as having any impact on the pressing ‘issues that affect our lives,’ stating that ‘I don’t care about Rupert Everett. I care about the fact that I can’t marry my partner.’⁹³ A similar sentiment had been expressed by Patrick Hannah:

‘A gay kiss on *Coronation Street* is not going to change nothing. It’s not going to help the gay kid who is being abused at school, or the guy who might get bashed tonight

⁹⁰ Clancy, Conor. ‘Trek Travesty.’ *GCN* February 2009: 2

⁹¹ *Ibid*

⁹² Hannah, Patrick. ‘Straight Street.’ *GCN* November 2003: 2

⁹³ Fidelma. ‘Bring Back the Old.’ *GCN* July 2007: 4

on the way home from the pub. *GCN* should be focusing on the realities of being gay in this world instead of selling heterosexual shite for the masses our way.'

For Patrick Hannah and Fidelma, the concern about media representation found in *GCN* and the queer community more broadly at that time, whether it was deemed positive or negative, was merely a distraction from the pressing social and political issues affecting LGBTQ people in Ireland. Their letters were critical of the placement of gay storylines in media which was fundamentally heteronormative, and they expressed an opinion contrary to the dominant belief that LGBTQ media representation inevitably advanced LGBTQ rights. This hostility towards assimilationist rhetoric existed alongside celebratory responses in this period, highlighting the variety of opinions expressed by readers before the increasing need for consensus among the community limited this.

Media Representation and Identity Formation

Reader submissions to *GCN* offer an insight into the diverse and shifting opinions within the Irish queer community, and also can be used to understand the processes by which engagement with LGBTQ media representation influenced the construction of the queer subject. It was implicitly accepted in many discussions about LGBTQ representations in the media that it was important for LGBTQ people to see themselves made visible in film and television. However, the ways in which queer viewers were impacted by and chose to engage with on-screen representations were often overlooked. I argue that engaging with mainstream film and tv representation in this period was a subjectifying and performative act through which viewers constructed their queer identity. To understand this, I will apply Michel Foucault's concept of subjectification to explore the effect of LGBTQ media representation on identity-formation and self-perception, in 'the way the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself.'⁹⁴ This offers an insight into how subjects are constructed by examining how they are moulded by the pre-existing norms and practices of the society they live in. Relating to this, I will apply Judith Butler's argument about the performative nature of identity, which posits that identity is discursively produced and naturalised as 'real' through the repetition of language, social scripts, and behaviours. Butler's theory builds on the work of Foucault, with an extra emphasis on the agency of the individual to shape their own identity through performativity, though still within the limits of 'a highly rigid regulatory frame.'⁹⁵ Choosing to engage with queer media representation was, among other things, a performative act, which was productive of individual and community identities.

Dominant narratives in this period regarding the importance of LGBTQ representation in film and television argued that seeing LGBTQ characters allowed LGBTQ viewers to identify with those characters. A central idea what that an LGBTQ person, especially when young, who may have had no other LGBTQ people in their life to see or speak to, could benefit from media representation by being given the language to better understand themselves, their innate LGBTQ identity, and connect to a collective identity.

⁹⁴ Foucault, Michel. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1958–1984* (Vol. 2). New York: The New Press, 1998, p. 461

⁹⁵ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 25

This belief acted as the foundation for activists' calls for 'positive' representation on screen in the form of role-models. One issue with this framework was that it often overlooked the power of representations that were seen as 'negative' or problematic to be equally formative for queer identity. The opinions expressed by readers in *GCN* were most often motivated by frustrations with instances of LGBTQ representation which they perceived to be detrimental to the community and LGBTQ identity. Identity-forming work was evident in these letters, as the authors regularly defined their own identity in opposition to what they saw on screen. This was present in discourse about stereotypes, and was evident in the multiple pieces submitted by Adrian Goodwin, as discussed previously. In his initial letter, 'The Stereotyped Guy,' he opened with the introductory statement that 'I am one of those gay people who refuses wholeheartedly to give in to the increasing amount of stereotypes that linger like a giant fart in the air.'⁹⁶ He continued, 'you can understand then, my complete disgust and dismay' at the prevalence of television shows which 'only serve to depict gay people as prancy, condescending and judgemental queens.' Adrian defined himself in opposition to these stereotypical depictions on television, and acknowledged that he was not the only gay man who felt this way. He positions himself within a community of gay men who refused to conform and felt disgusted by stereotypes of effeminate, camp gay men. His 'refusal' to 'give in to' these stereotypes suggests that there was a social pressure to conform to a certain way of behaving, which he must actively fight against to avoid being made into a 'laughing stock.' His own identity was discussed in the statement that he viewed himself as different to these television stereotypes, though his feelings of 'disgrace' 'disgust' and 'dismay' suggested to readers that he was quite unlike what he saw on screen. This example demonstrates how identity was formed within the boundaries of the 'regulatory norms' of the time, as Adrian constructed his identity as a gay man by drawing on the discourse which was circulating at the time regarding stereotypes and assimilation.

While his piece acts as evidence of the process of subjectification, which emphasises that subjects are formed by the cultural ideas and power dynamics surrounding them, Adrian's statement that he worked to resist stereotypes also highlights the agency that individuals hold, which could only be exerted within a 'highly rigid regulatory frame.'⁹⁷ In

⁹⁶ Goodwin, Adrian. 'The Stereotyped Guy.' *GCN* July 2004: 2

⁹⁷ Butler, 2990: 25

this way, Adrian's rejection of stereotypes was a performative act. It is clear that despite his criticism, his identity was dependent on the existence of stereotypes so that he could define himself in opposition to them. Indeed, writing this letter was also a performative act through which he engaged with a collective LGBTQ identity while also affirming his difference. He affirmed his position within a community of other gay men who disagreed with this representation. This construction of identity continued in Adrian's 'Partin' Shot' opinion piece on *Will and Grace*, which he wrote a month later and I discussed previously.⁹⁸ He introduced himself here as a 'registered homosexual (I say registered, in order to emphasise the fact that I have been out for a long time).'⁹⁹ In this piece, Adrian identified both with and against the representation of gay men in *Will and Grace*. He commented that 'Jack's campness may be, for those homosexual people out there who are naturally camp (myself included), an accurate representation', drawing connections between himself and on-screen representation in order to identify with Jack's character. He also acknowledged the truth of representations of the gay scene as highly sexualised by saying he has experienced it himself – 'I have been there and bought the t-shirt.' However, he argued that it was 'by no means every pixel of what is a very large picture.' He ultimately called for recognition of more diverse depictions of gay men unlike Jack, even if many believed the show to be 'in somewhat accurate' representation. Through these engagements with media, Adrian formed his identity according to assimilationist ideals.

The construction of the queer subject was also evident in discourse surrounding the language used to describe and categorise queer people on screen. Language and terminology were central and often contentious issues for the LGBTQ community, as the adoption of these labels transformed same-sex attraction or alternative gender expressions into LGBTQ identity. As Butler argues, sexual identities are created and maintained through speech acts. Labels such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer do not refer to the inherent truth of someone's sexuality, but their repeated iteration constructs a person's sexual identity and subjecthood. Paul Davies' letter in May 2005 touched on the importance of such labels. In response to *GCN*'s review of the film, *Kinsey*, in March, Paul wished to make a correction to the review, which referred to one of Kinsey's assistants, Clyde Martin,

⁹⁸ See Introduction. Goodwin, Adrian. 'Partin Shot.' *GCN* August 2004: 40

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

as ‘the gay one’ when in fact he was bisexual. He noted that it was made clear in the film that this character was bisexual, as he said he fell in ‘the middle of the ‘Kinsey scale’’ and had relationships with women.¹⁰⁰ For Paul, this perhaps reflected the fact that ‘gay’ was often used as a generic term for ‘various pansexual communities,’ or that the reviewer missed the point of the film, which commented on the fact that ‘you can’t put people into boxes’ regarding sexuality. He suggested that it was ‘another example of bisexuality being made invisible [...] we are out there you know, a scary thought to some maybe, but true none the less.’¹⁰¹ Engaging with this character affirmed Paul’s identity as someone who he could connect with under the umbrella of bisexuality. Paul’s insistence that this character be labelled correctly as bisexual reflected the power of speech acts to create what they seemed to merely describe. His comment reflected the fact that bisexuality was often overlooked or treated with scepticism as a unique identity within the magazine. Naming his sexual identity would not only recognise it but bring it into existence. As Butler argues, ‘the ‘I’ only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated.’¹⁰² Paul also highlighted the ‘expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses,’ that is, that identifying with the label of bisexuality and seeing it become more validated was a means of achieving autonomy.¹⁰³ His investment in this character being recognised as bisexual is therefore informed by the power this naming process would have to construct Paul’s own subjectivity.

Identity labels were a topic of conversation in *GCN*, and the use of the term ‘queer’ was also hotly contested throughout the magazine in this period. In Adrian Goodwin’s ‘Partin’ Shot,’ he criticised *Will and Grace* for using the term, which had become ‘celebrated’ in the gay community. In his opinion, ‘used on mainstream television the term ‘queer’ borders on defamation and labels us as ‘odd’ or ‘strange.’’¹⁰⁴ The integration of this term ‘isn’t progress; it’s a disgrace.’ This discourse about the use of queer was prevalent across this period, as readers frequently resisted the increased incorporation of the term in media. While for some readers, it was a painful term to hear normalised given its history as a slur. Adrian’s commentary offers insight into precisely why so many others found it

¹⁰⁰ Davies, Paul. ‘Kinsey Correction.’ *GCN* May 2005: 2

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

¹⁰² Butler, 1993: 18

¹⁰³ Butler, 1993: 19

¹⁰⁴ Goodwin, Adrian. ‘Partin Shot.’ *GCN* August 2004: 40

uncomfortable. Butler argues that ‘queer’ has operated as a ‘shaming interpellation’ through which the subject is produced, which ‘derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult.’¹⁰⁵ In a climate in which assimilatory discourses dominated, the normalisation of the term queer as a term connoting strangeness or difference was at odds with the sameness promoted by homonormativity. As the term gained popularity, it became incorporated into the mainstream, maintaining a troubling hint of radicalism which dominant representation was trying to erase. It troubled notions of progress which envisioned the end goal as assimilation. While in some ways ‘queer’ had lost all of its political radicalism, neutralised by its incorporation into mainstream discourse, the continual anxiety it caused *GCN*’s readers is a reflection of the fact that it was a remnant of liberationist discourse which continued to haunt those who sought assimilation.

This chapter has examined audience perspectives on LGBTQ representation in mainstream media in this period to establish the discourse that was prevalent among readers and how their engagement with representation informed their own identities. Analysis of reader responses highlights the diversity of opinion which existed among the community which affirms and diverges from the discourse of the magazine. In the early period in question here, prior to 2009, there was more space for extreme or fringe opinions which were not necessarily representative of the entire community but gave insight into the diversity of perspectives among the community. Assimilationist discourse and resistance to it continued to shape the formation of individual identities through the processes of subjectification and performativity. Engaging with media is performative act which is productive of identity. It connected Irish LGBTQ people to an imagined community, consolidated their understanding of their own identities and was used to position oneself within that community. This chapter has ultimately demonstrated that the readership of *GCN* was critically engaged with media and used it as a reference point through which to understand events in society and their own identities.

¹⁰⁵ Butler, 1993: 18

Conclusion

Discourse surrounding LGBTQ media representation across the period I have discussed both shaped and was shaped by Irish LGBTQ identity. Over the course of a twelve-year period, homonormativity became consolidated as the dominant discourse relating to media representation present among the Irish LGBTQ community, as represented in the pages of *GCN*. However, the emergence of this homonormative, assimilationist discourse was complex, and was always met with varying degrees of resistance among those who took issue with its normalising imperative. In an Irish context, assimilation and liberation were constantly at odds with each other as underlying community issues, and indeed, were responded to in diverse ways by individual members of the community.

The period 2003 to 2009 was characterised by an overtly exclusionary homonormativity, which was accessible only to those who fit within the ideals of white, affluent, respectable Irish society. While this period was characterised by calls for assimilation in representation, there was space within the community to express resistance and voice alternative opinions. This changed in subsequent years, as the Marriage Equality campaign enforced a powerful normalisation imperative and a need for consensus among community members. While on the surface, Irish society appeared to become more diverse and accepting of non-normative expressions of LGBTQ sexuality, the boundaries were simply redrawn to continue a politics of exclusion which operated more covertly than before. Narratives of progress were prevalent across both periods, with the continuous belief, even in times of scepticism, that LGBTQ mainstream representation would inevitably continue to improve to better reflect the lives of the community. While community re-politicisation seems to have fostered more critical attitudes in some ways, such as towards Hollywood film, the specific dynamics of the push for same-sex partnership rights also perpetuated homonormativity. This was reflected in the increased praise of television, a medium which wielded power to normalise LGBTQ identities for a mainstream audiences. However, *GCN*'s reader responses challenged underlying assumptions about representation as a force for assimilation and equality. The diverse range of responses to media visibility among *GCN*'s readers act as a reminder of the individual nature of engagement with media. Reader responses affirmed the trends of discussion which were present in the magazine itself, while also nuancing them. Ultimately, reader perspectives combined with the editorial

perspective of the magazine to capture the attitudes held by Irish LGBTQ people towards mainstream LGBTQ representation across a historically and culturally specific moment.

There are a number of topics which were beyond the scope of this project but are deserving of further research. Firstly, more research is generally needed on the Irish LGBTQ community's response to mainstream forms of representation and visibility, particularly in international media, given its dominance in the entertainment media landscape in Ireland. There is space to track this across various time periods and according to different social and political contexts. A comparative approach between *GCN* and international LGBTQ publications would offer telling insight into how much of this discourse was specific to an Irish context or influenced by the globalisation of gay identities. Audience studies are also an important area to focus on for future research. While this thesis indirectly studied audience responses, future work could also use sociological or anthropological methods, incorporating direct contact and interviews with audiences. It is a more difficult and time-consuming form of research but would be essential in complementing the huge field of textual analysis which has developed over the past decades. It would also be important to test the assumptions that are constantly made about the power of LGBTQ representation to positively shape public opinion on LGBTQ issues. Incorporating these approaches, along with aspects of queer theory, would prove illuminating in understanding the relationship between LGBTQ people and the media they constantly consume. This form of research would also be useful to explore the influence of and limitations of queer theory to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ audience members.

This thesis has been informed by queer theory in its criticism of limiting identity politics and homonormativity in the discourse about LGBTQ representation. It has highlighted the value of alternative, queer readings of texts and the opportunities these can provide to explore more diverse expressions of sexuality than simply recognising literal LGBTQ visibility. However, this thesis has also revealed that in this period, visibility politics of the 1980s continued to shape the discourse among readers of *GCN* rather than the more abstract ideals of queer theory. This reflects a central issue of queer theory, which is that it can be too inaccessible and disconnected from the real political struggles of the LGBTQ to filter into non-academic discourse. In its criticism of assimilation politics, it can also lose

sight of the fact that many LGBTQ people will never desire an overhaul of society or separationist politics over an ordinary, everyday life, a reality that must be recognised.

This thesis was possible only due to the archive of *GCN*, and the magazine remains an extremely valuable resource for the Irish LGBTQ community in terms of research and continuing activism. The process of digitisation of the magazine which is currently underway will open many new avenues for studies of Irish LGBTQ history. As my research has made clear, *GCN* has provided a sense of comfort and community for many of its readers, as reflected by the many letters to the editor expressing as much. To conclude with a letter written to *GCN* in June 2007, entitled ‘Opinion We Like,’ Killian wrote:

‘I wanted to write and tell you how much I love *GCN* and how much of a lifeline it is for me [...] *GCN* is a true gay community magazine, but I love that it’s a funny, entertaining, and an informative read at the same time. Keep up all the good work everyone at *GCN*, and remember how much what you are doing means to so many people.’¹⁰⁶

Discussions on LGBTQ representation in mainstream media were an integral component of *GCN* over these years and reflected the existence of a critical, connected and engaged and Irish LGBTQ community.

¹⁰⁶ Killian. ‘Opinion We Like’ *GCN*

Bibliography

- Abramovitch, Seth. 'Joe Biden Cites 'Will & Grace' in Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage (Video).' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6 May 2012. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/joe-biden-cites-will-grace-320724-0-320724/>
- Ayoub, Philip M and David Patternotte. 'Europe and LGBT Rights: A Conflicted Relationship.' *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, edited by Michael Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Momin Rahman, 153–167. Online edition: Oxford Academic, 2019.
- Barker, Meg-John and Julia Scheele. *Queer: A Graphic History*. UK: Icon Books, 2016.
- Bindel, Julie. 'Are gay people in the UK divided by the pink pound?' *The Guardian*, 7 October 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/07/gay-people-uk-pink-pound>.
- Bond, Bradley J., and Brandon Miller. 'From Screen to Self: The Relationship Between Television Exposure and Self-Complexity Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth.' *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 94–112.
- Bradway, Tyler and Ellen Lee McCallum. *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory and Sexuality in the 21st Century*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Butler, Judith. 'Critically Queer.' *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 17–32.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cover, Rob, and Duc Dau. 'Placing the Queer Audience: Literature on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Film and Television Reception.' *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 7 (2021). <https://maifeminism.com/literature-on-gender-and-sexual-diversity-in-film-and-television-reception/>.
- Donovan, Donal and Antoin E. Murphy. *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger: Ireland and the Euro Debt Crisis*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Duggan, Lisa. 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.'

Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics, edited by Russ Castronovo et al., 175-194. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

Faubion, J. D. (Ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1958–1984* (Vol. 2). New York: The New Press, 1998.

Fejes, Fred. 'Making a Gay Masculinity.' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 17, no. 1 (2000): 113-116.

Gay Community News. Owned by the National Lesbian and Gay Federation, Ireland.
Published in Dublin. 1988-Present.

Ghaziani, Amin. 'Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction.' *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (2011): 99-125.

Horvat, Anamaria. *Screening Queer Memory: LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television*. UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Joyrich, Lynne. 'Epistemology of the Console.' *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (Spring, 2001): 439-467.

Kerrigan, Páraig. 'After Marriage: The Assimilation, Representation, and Diversification of LGBTQ Lives on Irish Television.' *Television & New Media* 22, no. 1 (2021): 47–64.

Kerrigan, Páraig. *LGBTQ Visibility, Media, and Sexuality in Ireland*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021.

Kerrigan, Páraig. 'Projecting a Queer Republic: Mainstreaming Queer Identities on Irish Documentary Film.' *Studies in Documentary Film* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1-17.

Kohnen, Melanie E. S.. *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet*. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2016.

Leemans, Inger, and Geertje Mak. 'Identity/Collective Identities.' *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method Articles*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

May, Todd. 'Subjectification.' *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, edited by Leonard Lawlor and John Nale, 496-502. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

- Mancuso, Luke. 'Brokeback Mountain and the History of the Future of the Normal.' *Coming Out to the Mainstream: Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, edited by JoAnne Juett and David Jones, 91-112. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010.
- McCann, Hannah and Whitney Monaghan. *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*. London: Red Globe Press, 2020.
- McIlroy, Brian. *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism*. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007.
- Mulhall, Anne. 'The Republic of Love.' *Bully Bloggers*, April 14 2015. <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/the-republic-of-love/>.
- Neary, Aoife. 'Civil Partnership and Marriage: LGBT-Q Political Pragmatism and the Normalization Imperative.' *Sexualities* 19, no. 7 (2016): 757-779.
- Ó' Riain, Seán. *The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger: Liberalism, Boom and Bust*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Peters, Wendy. 'Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV.' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2011): 193-212.
- Pullen, Christopher. *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.
- Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Teal, Janae and Meredith Conover-Williams. 'Homophobia without Homophobes: Deconstructing the Public Discourses of 21st Century Queer Sexualities in the United States.' *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 38 (2016): 12-27.
- 'The Vito Russo Test', GLAAD. <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2021/vito-russo-test>.
- Villarejo, Amy. *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.