

By Michael Leehan for the University of Minnesota First-Year Writing Program
under the Department of Writing Studies

The Way It Looks Is Legitimate: A Case for Better Representation

More often than not, I sit down to watch a queer film with a sense of resignation—I let out a sigh as I hit the seat, tired from a long day and unenthused by my movie prospects for the night. This night was no different. After scouring Netflix for a while, willing *any* title to bring life to my jaded, gay soul, I settled on *The Way He Looks*. Judging the movie by its cover (two unfairly happy Brazilian boys), I was expecting the same old rag: a token gay boy, tangential character development, a painful coming out, subsequent anguish, and an ending just satisfying enough for the movie to reasonably end. With my standards low and my expectations even lower, I pressed play. The night that I watched *The Way He Looks* was the night that I became a little more gay, a little less jaded, and a lot more hopeful.

Happy endings are far from the norm in queer cinema. The media that is typically created for the gay community consists of cliché unhappy endings, objectification, and downright ignorance. Let's examine some classic pop culture, specifically for young adults: *Mean Girls*. Though dated, the hit teen comedy film revolving around cliques, exclusion, and what it is to be “cool,” is emblematic of many teen movies. It features a single gay character: Damien. The second half of a dynamic duo, Damien is there solely as the GBF (gay best friend), to crack jokes, and to complete the teen triad of “girl, geek, and gay.” The writing of Damien's character is a blatant objectification of a gay man and relies on a tired trope. However, *Mean Girls* is not alone in objectifying the queer community. Certainly, fifteen minutes spent watching popular television reveals a market rampant with limiting portrayals of the homosexual community. Depicted as pigeonholed and shallow, homosexual men in particular are targeted as outrageously oversexed and sexualized, the relic of a bygone era. Historically, overt sexualization of gay men served as a groundbreaking and rebellious act, however the depictions of homosexuality in media

and culture have changed over time¹. Oversexed characters are unrepresentative of many gay individuals today and struggle to depict human connection in any long term way (characters may hook up, but they won't be in a relationship.) Representation should be more varied than that, and the director of *The Way He Looks* understands how problematic these shallow depictions are. Though by no means perfect, his attempt to broaden mainstream gay cinema with a realistic portrayal of gay individuals instigates an essential dialogue about what it means to genuinely represent homosexual community, specifically gay men.

Daniel Ribeiro's debut film, *The Way He Looks*, is a well-written, superbly acted, and delightfully refreshing take on the "gay film" genre. Originally a short released in 2010, it was expanded into a full-length film and re-released in 2014. The movie is set and filmed entirely in São Paulo, Brazil, and recorded in Portuguese. The story revolves around a blind young man, Leonardo (Ghilherme Lobo), his best friend Giovanna (Tess Amorim), and a new boy named Gabriel (Fabio Audi) with whom Leonardo falls in love. The film is typical in many ways: it follows the conventional plot of a coming of age story and revolves around a budding romance. Were it not for the characters, their depiction, and their relationships, the film would be a dull exercise in cinema tropes. In a genre where genuine romance and commitment are a rarity, the story manages to incorporate all the trappings of romance while avoiding the explicit sexualization of its characters.

It is through this that *The Way He Looks* manages to be a love story that includes sexual themes without being a sexualized love story. While the former genre depicts sexuality as a natural component of human behavior and relationships, the latter objectifies sexuality and

¹ An in-depth discussion of a progression from sexualization to sexuality in gay media is the topic of another paper. Suffice to say, acts of sexual rebellion are no longer the *de facto* theme of queer cinema. This is not to say it is no longer important, simply that queer cinema has discovered other equally important, diverse outlets and themes.

depicts it as crass, obscene, humorous, or perverse. The characters in the film are not explicitly sexual until their sexuality becomes relevant to the plot. For example, the movie opens with Giovanna and Leo talking about their first kiss and how Leo wants his to be with someone special; he doesn't specify with whom, only that he wants it to be unique. We don't learn Leo's sexuality until it becomes relevant to the plot when he falls in love with Gabriel. Ribeiro writes his characters carefully in order to avoid trivializing human connection and instead uses sexuality to reinforce romantic intimacy.

In fact, Ribeiro wrote many scenes in the movie to prevent the film from trivializing characters, but one in particular comes to mind. After a night out, Gabriel forgets his jacket at Leo's house and asks him to bring it to school the next day, to which Leo agrees. Leo returns to his room and, upon seeing the jacket, picks it up and presses it close to his face. He removes his own clothes, cocoons himself in Gabriel's jacket, and begins to slowly move his hand downwards and gently caresses himself. The scene continues for a handful of seconds; Leo becomes more passionate and it is implied that he is masturbating. The scene is not graphic in nature and avoids eroticism or arousal of the viewer. Moreover, the moment is not about sex—it's about intimacy with a boy with whom he has fallen in love. Rather than being a sexually arousing scene it is emotionally vulnerable and presents sexuality as a personal and natural human behavior, preserving the complexity and sincerity of the characters rather than reducing them to their lustfulness. In doing so, the film separates itself from the mainstream portrayal of sex and homosexuality, telling a story that is truer to life, and marking a distinct departure from the genre.

Indeed, *The Way He Looks* is a departure from the genre of queer cinema because it discards popular tropes. For example, it contrasts with many gay films by showing positive

relationships between Leo and his family. While the norm is a strained relationship between the queer protagonist and their family, Leo has a healthy relationship with his. Although there is tension between them, it arises from Leo's blindness and his parents' overprotectiveness, not their reception of his sexuality. This provides a more realistic depiction of gay experiences by departing from stereotypical tropes and instead creating space for a new voice and story to be heard.

Besides creating new space for new stories to be heard, the defining difference between *The Way He Looks* and other gay films, the essence of Ribeiro's rebellion, is in its commitment to represent gay people as they should be—as themselves, not as other people define them. It is typical for the genre that gayness becomes a placeholder for character development or nothing more than a plotpoint. Moreover, the gayness of the protagonist is more important to the plot than the actual character. Rather than objectifying a character's sexuality, the film explores a budding romance between two young men. Leonardo and Gabriel are gay because they love each other, not because they conform to a trope, stereotype, or act as a cover-up for bad writing. The love that the boys hold for each other defines their gayness, and while the experiences of the two are impacted by their homosexuality, the events do not define them.

Redefining the portrayal of homosexuality is crucial in encouraging and creating genuine representation in media. Ribeiro creates a new space by defining gayness by what it is, rather than what it isn't: the love and romantic attraction that stems from sexuality, not just the sex. The newly created space opens doors for more varied, genuine, and realistic stories to be told about gay men. Furthermore, more space promotes diverse and genuine representation of minority communities in media. Representation matters: before I watched *The Way He Looks* I never thought that I could have a happy ending but, by witnessing the romance between Leonardo and

Gabriel and their subsequent happy ending, I saw that the same possibility existed for me.

Without encountering other people's stories and experiences, it can be very difficult for us to examine, understand, and dream our own. If we never see what we want, deserve, or aspire to, then how in the world can we dream it? And if we can't dream of our future, then how will we ever achieve it?

References

Ribeiro, D. (Director, Producer). (2014). *The Way He Looks* [Motion Picture]. Brazil: Vitrine Films.