Comparative Representation of the Difficulties of Sexual Minorities in 20th-Century Films

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Abstract. This paper delves into the challenges experienced by the LGBTQ+ community through the lenses of two films, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Rent*. Using textual analysis, visual analysis, and comparative studies, this paper explores the filmmakers' perspectives on sexual minorities from 1969 to 1996. By employing a comparative approach, this paper seeks to identify similarities and differences in the portrayal of challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in both films from three perspectives: disease, poverty, and dreams. It seeks to figure out the relationship between cinematic expression and real society. This analysis deepens the understanding of social, economic, and health-related factors that contribute to the marginalized status of this community. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges through awareness, policy changes, and social activism to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation. Through this essay, it is hoped that the characteristics of gay-themed films of the last century can be better condensed thus promoting the gay movement in the present and the future.

Keywords: Film studies, sexual minorities, gender studies, visual analysis, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Rent*.

1. Introduction

In recent years, significant attention has been directed towards understanding the difficulties faced by homosexual individuals in their daily lives. The progress of the gay rights movement and evolving popular attitudes from the 20th century to the present have highlighted that sexual minorities are ordinary people, differing mainly in their non-mainstream view of gender. The movie *Midnight Cowboy* was released in the same year as the famous "Stonewall" incident, signifying its place in a pivotal historical context [1].

This paper aims to find the similarities and differences between different directors' perceptions and expressions of homosexual lifestyles and difficulties in life at different time periods through a detailed analysis of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Rent* [1,2]. It examines three aspects. Firstly, there is disease in this community, both physical and mental illness. In *Midnight Cowboy*, pneumonia, a prevalent ailment in the gay community during its 1969 setting, is depicted. Conversely, *Rent* portrays the AIDS epidemic in 1996, capturing the ongoing threats faced by sexual minorities during that time. Mental health struggles are evident in both films as most of the characters grapple with depression and repression. The second is the different ways in which the two movies present poverty in the gay community. This essay compares and contrasts three aspects, including houses, basic needs, and low social status. For example, they live in dark basements or abandoned factories, they cannot afford to buy food because they do not have a stable income, and they suffer from discrimination. The last perspective is about the main characters' dreams. The comparison focuses on the aspirations behind their chosen dreams: sunshine in *Midnight Cowboy* and a stable job in *Rent*. Homosexual characters in both movies live in dark and cold places, so they dream of a place that is warm and sunny. Moreover, they cannot have a stable job because of discrimination or their own choices.

Previous research in the field of LGBTQ+ representation in films offers valuable insights for this study on the life situation of homosexuals in films. The existing literature highlights the importance of representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in media, including films, as a means of challenging societal norms and promoting acceptance [3]. Scholars have examined how films have portrayed the lives of homosexuals, addressing issues such as identity, same-sex relationships, and the challenges faced within society [4-6].

However, there are certain shortcomings in the previous work that need to be addressed. Firstly, some studies tend to generalize the experiences and situations of all LGBTQ+ individuals, failing to acknowledge the diversity within this community [7]. It is essential to recognize the intersections of identities, such as race, class, and gender, which can significantly impact the life situations of homosexuals. Furthermore, while previous research has explored the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in films, there is a need for a deeper analysis of the portrayal of their unique challenges and lived experiences. To overcome the aforementioned shortcomings, this study incorporates a comprehensive approach that combines textual analysis, visual analysis, and a comparative examination. Textual analysis allows for an exploration of literary works and personal narratives, while visual analysis delves into the visual representations found in films. Visual analysis is utilized to examine visual representations, including lights, patterns, shots, and angles, to further explore the lived experiences of homosexual individuals and gain insights into the complexities surrounding the lives of homosexual individuals. By adopting a comparative approach, this research seeks to identify similarities and differences in the portrayal of the life situations and challenges faced by homosexual characters in these films. By building on previous research, this study aims to fill knowledge gaps by providing a more nuanced analysis of the life situations of homosexuals in films. It acknowledges the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and seeks to understand the intersectional challenges faced by individuals. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ representation in films and contributes to ongoing discussions on promoting inclusivity and equality within society.

2. The Depiction of Diseases

Midnight Cowboy is a drama movie directed by John Schlesinger and released in 1969. The main characters are Joe Buck, a Texas cowboy who comes to New York City to be with a rich woman, and Ratzo Rizzo, a homosexual underclassman with pneumonia. At first, Ratzo deceives Joe, but he later invites Joe to live with him in his basement room because he is also poor and discriminated against. The two of them live a penniless life due to their shared poverty and discrimination.

Rent is a film adapted by musical, it depicts a group of offbeat artists living in Greenwich Village, New York in the 1990s. Among them are homosexuals, AIDS patients, and drug addicts. The main characters are Mark, an unsuccessful director, Collins, a college professor and Angel, a drag queen and Collins' boyfriend.

2.1. Physical Disease: Pneumonia vs. AIDS

In *Midnight Cowboy*, the physical ailment is pneumonia. Although a bus driver in the film dismisses it as “only a minor illness”, the disease is a very big blow to Ratzo's life and health. Ratzo endures prolonged suffering from pneumonia, and the description of this disease highlights the fragility and vulnerability of his physical health.

Rent portrays the harsh realities of AIDS, which was prevalent among the LGBTQ+ community. AIDS, a devastating disease that compromises the immune system, was burst out in New York's homosexual community in 1981. It can be transmitted through sexual contact, blood and blood products, and mother-to-child transmission. Premiering in 1996, *Rent* interweaves director Larson's real-life experiences with friends at a time during the peak of the HIV epidemic. Almost every main character gets AIDS, highlighting their struggle with HIV and emphasizing the long-term physical and emotional toll that it takes on individuals in this community. For example, there is a part in *Rent* where people with HIV come together to heal each other, asking questions such as “Will I lose dignity? Will tomorrow come? Will someone care?” Additionally, Angel, an optimistic and cheerful transgender girl and an AIDS patient, brightens up the lives of her friends on a desperate Christmas through a powerful dance and a thoughtful gift. However, she is eventually struck down by AIDS. Her once vibrant face fades, and her health deteriorates until she is confined to a cramped and hard-board bed. Despite the desperate wishes of her loved ones, she passes away on New Year's Eve. The

most terrifying aspect of AIDS is the loss of loved ones, friends, and dignity. Patients are left in a state of fear, unsure whether death or another day will come first. The relentless pain and discriminatory glances from others further torment them.

2.2. Mental Disease: Depression

Midnight Cowboy depicts Ratzo Rizzo's internal repression and emotional suppression as he struggles with his identity and desires. The film showcases how societal stigma and judgment lead to his psychological distress and isolation. For example, in Ratzo's first appearance, he insults a gay man in a bar by using derogatory language that reflects mainstream society's discrimination against sexual minorities. This serves as a means for Ratzo to distance himself from this group either due to Ratzo's disapproval of his homosexual identity or the social pressure to conceal his sexual minority status. Both instances highlight the director's belief in the detrimental impact of the prevailing societal attitudes towards sexual minorities. Coincidentally, *Midnight Cowboy* was made in the same year as the famous "Stonewall" incident of the American gay rights movement in 1969, suggesting that the director John Schlesinger may have captured the darkness before the dawn of this revolutionary period. As stated in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture & the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, "Gay men had to take precautions, but, like other marginalized peoples, they were able to construct spheres of relative cultural autonomy in the interstices of a city governed by hostile powers" [8]. Sexual minorities are more closed and live very repressed lives.

Rent, on the other hand, explores the impact of repression and the subsequent outburst of emotion within the LGBTQ+ community. Characters like Mark and Maureen challenge societal norms by expressing their frustrations through artistic forms of rebellion. The Bohemian spirit refers to the anti-conventional secular life, the pursuit of spiritual freedom, and like-minded spiritual revelry. Their former friend and landlord, Bunny, betrays them by proclaiming the death of Bohemia. In response, the group uses improvisation to express their irony to Bunny and their commitment to the bohemian spirit. This artistic outpouring showcases how this marginalized group identifies themselves. In the song *La vie Boheme*, they chanted about rebellion, niche artists, sexual minorities, sexual liberation, and inclusivity, showing their pride in their identity and bohemian culture. This is different from the homophobia expressed in *Midnight Cowboy*. The differences between the two films' portrayals of sexual minorities may stem from the directors' perspectives or reflect the evolving societal perception of homosexuality prompted by the American gay rights movement.

3. Contrasting Poverty

3.1. Unstable and Humble House

Rent portrays Joe and Ratzo's poverty through their shared accommodation in a dilapidated and cramped subsurface apartment. Ratzo's nickname "Rats" reflects both his name and his lowly status, mirroring the condition of their living space – a rat hole devoid of natural light and in disrepair. The director used a special design when creating the character of Ratzo, and the name was intentional, reflecting his humility.

In *Rent*, the characters face similar financial constraints. However, their living situation is showcased through their struggle to pay rent and avoid eviction. The three friends, director Mark, rock singer Roger, and college professor Collins in the story, rent the top floor of a deteriorating building owned by their former close friend, Bunny. Despite not being required to pay rent in previous years, Benny's change threatens eviction if they fail to pay. The unstable nature of the house in *Rent* is reflected in the fact that the preservation of their house depends on the mood of the owner. It highlights the constant threat of homelessness looming over the homosexual community.

3.2. Struggles with Basic Necessities

Both films depict characters grappling with poverty as evidenced by their struggles to meet basic needs. In *Midnight Cowboy*, neither Joe nor Ratzo has a reliable income. They seal windows with

wood to combat the cold and pawn belongings for survival. Joe even sells his blood to afford Ratzo's medicine. However, due to Ratso's unrelenting pneumonia and poverty, he is unable to seek proper medical attention. The lack of proper ventilation in their dingy living space exacerbates his condition, and the harsh winters and inadequate clothing worsen his health. As mentioned in *Closing the (Heterosexual) Frontier: Midnight Cowboy as National Allegory*, "Joe quickly discovers, to his dismay, the cowboy image's largely exclusive appeal to gay men: for Joe, the city is a disorienting and homosexualizing environment" [9]. However, the minority of gay-friendly favorites that were emerging at the time were unable to put gay men squarely in the sunlight, much less provide them with stable jobs.

Similarly, *Rent* presents characters like Mark and Roger who face financial challenges, leading them to search for jobs. The beginning of the film mentions their lack of heat, necessitating an "illegal wood-burning stove." Moreover, their electrical appliances are connected to a single extension cord snaking out of a window. On a cold Christmas Eve, homophobic attackers steal Collins' coat, leaving him in torn clothing and near freezing. These scenes all show their dire lack of even the most rudimentary necessities for a decent life.

3.3. Representation of Low Social Status

Both films shed light on the societal treatment and discrimination faced by individuals from sexual minority groups due to their low social status. In *Midnight Cowboy*, Ratzo Rizzo experiences social rejection and is degraded by others as a "rat." He is subjected to ridicule, exploitation, and violence due to society's stigmatization of his identity. Likewise, in *Rent*, the characters face discrimination and marginalization based on their non-conforming lifestyles. They often encounter prejudice and job discrimination, and are treated as outcasts by mainstream society. This represents a broader issue of how society tends to view and treat sexual minority groups.

Some may say that these people might lead a normal life, at least enough to pay for their housing expenses, if they pursued traditional jobs such as waitressing or dishwashing. It is believed by some that their pursuit of less profitable endeavors like songwriting and filmmaking is a personal choice and that their lack of success is due to insufficient effort. However, from a sociological point of view, many people in society are forced to live at the bottom of the social ladder and are unable to improve their quality of life through their efforts, not to mention the fact that the protagonists of *Rent* are discriminated against as homosexuals, transvestites, and AIDS sufferers. In *Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise,* Alan Jonason argues that "we will never eradicate poverty if we follow an individualistic perspective " [10]. Like in a race, even if the top five percent reach the finish line due to their effort, there will always be a bottom 10%. *Rent* is about social issues and marginalized groups, depicting a group of young people pursuing their dreams rather than focusing solely on individual efforts and defined moral standards.

4. Reasons for Dreams

4.1. Sunshine and Darkness

One very interesting phenomenon is that both films mention the protagonists' dream places. In *Midnight Cowboy*, this place is Miami, and Ratzo's dream is to bathe in the sun. The movie depicts these dreams by showing them in a shady room, fantasizing about sunny Miami and the possibility of chasing and frolicking there. The darkness of the ugly room is contrasted with the brightness of Miami. This shot uses a strong contrast of light and dark to make the audience feel even more distressed by Ratzo's illness and poverty.

In *Rent*, their dream place is Santa Fe. Again, they long for the warm climate and sunshine of Santa Fe because they live in rooms that leak and have no electric heat.

4.2. Stable Jobs

These dreams also mean stable jobs for the main characters of both movies. In *Midnight Cowboy*, Joe Buck realizes on his way to Miami that relying on wealthy women is an unreliable survival strategy. He is determined to find a steady job there. He wants to support Ratzo and himself with his paycheck. In *Rent*, Collins, Angel, and Mark want to open a restaurant in Santa Fe. Collins has arranged positions where he can be the door solicitor and Angel can cook delicious food and perform drumming, ensuring a steady income to pay rent and avoid the threat of being homeless again. These similarities are a great testament to the importance of a steady income for these financially disadvantaged gay men.

However, in both films, their dreams are not realized. Coincidentally, both dreams fail due to death; Ratzo dies of pneumonia, and Angel, a transgender girl in a Christmas costume, dies of AIDS. Thus, both dreams exacerbate the tragedy of the characters and emphasize the struggles of the queer community.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Midnight Cowboy* and *Rent* provide insightful narratives about the challenges endured by homosexual individuals. The essay compares these two films by exploring the impact of physical and mental diseases, the burden of poverty, and the broken dreams experienced by LGBTQ+ communities in the movies. The presentation and opinions in these two films have some differences due to the directors' perceptions and the process of the New York Gay Revolution. Nonetheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly in the realm of exploring societal attitudes toward homosexuality through films. A more comprehensive analysis could have incorporated a wider range of audience opinions, although this was challenging due to limited access to movie reviews in the past. By dissecting these aspects, a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by homosexual individuals emerges, urging society to work toward inclusivity and supportiveness.

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