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To be seen, to be heard: Hypervisibility of underrepresented minorities in mainstream
Hollywood Cinema

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Abstract

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In the digital age, representation of minorities in film have reached a higher relevance in the field, with audiences demanding and pushing for better representation, and the industry responding accordingly. Recent backlash to scandals in Hollywood such as the #OscarsSoWhite movement allowed an even wider discussion around homogeneity in the industry. These commentaries engaged in what I propose to be a new process I called hypervisibility: a heightened scrutiny of diverse minorities on and off-screen based on the action and reaction from audiences and executives. This thesis seeks to define hypervisibility as a cyclical process by analyzing the online dialogue that arises from Hollywood's recent move towards active representation. I will focus one respective chapter on the representations of gender, race, and sexual orientation, each as areas in which debates have been the most prevalent. These include the representation of femininity and feminist imagery, selective tokenism and the exploitation of historical instances, the exploration of sexual expression, and the depiction of romance. Through a historical events and business perspective, I seek to understand the idealization of diversity within Hollywood, which begs the question; how are minorities represented, and what do audiences think about them? I argue that the value of representation does not particularly come from within the screen and what is shown, but rather on the subsequent conversation that engages a discourse that seeks to understand different identities and continues to question: what does proper representation look like?

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**To be seen, to be heard: Hypervisibility of underrepresented minorities in mainstream
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Introduction

In January of 2015, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts announced the annual list of nominees for their award ceremony. Every person nominated in the acting categories, and all but one director, were Caucasian, sparking a huge controversy that broke out in the popular and social media. It was reported as the first time since 1999 that no Hispanic or actor of color had been nominated, and all eight films featured male-centric stories (Fritz). This discourse was led by the trending Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite started by social activist April Reign, who was inspired as an avid movie-goer to tweet in response to the lack of people of color in the nominations to call out attention online (Reign). The tweet went viral, with both the general public and industry professionals commenting on the issue and criticizing the systemic homogeneity of the Hollywood formula and industry. The following year, when all nominees were announced for the Awards, all 20 people in the acting category and all 10 directors were once again white, sparking further controversy and criticism on the lack of recognition of minorities. The hashtag began trending to a higher extent, with celebrities and avid social media users speaking out and boycotting the ceremony. Stars such as Will Smith and Jada Pinket Smith, as well as directors Spike Lee and Michael Moore announced they would not be attending or supporting the academy. Moreover, other figures such as then-President Obama, Viola Davis, director Ava DuVernay, Lupita Nyong'o, George Clooney, and more voiced support of the hashtag and demanded the Academy to make a change (Ryan).

Their concerns were warranted by the fact that, as of 2017, in its 90-year history, the Academy Awards main categories, acting and directing, have had the lowest numbers in minority representation. 3.9% of all acting nominations have been African American nominees, with only 4.4% of all acting wins. For Hispanic nominees these numbers are even more drastic

with 1.3% and 1.2% respectively, and Asian represent 0.5% and 0.9%. Moreover, openly LGBTQ+ nominees have also seen a very small amount of representation, reporting a 0.2% of all acting nominations, and no wins this category whatsoever (Sperling). This disparity corresponds to the demographics within the Academy itself, with only 27% of members being female in 2017 with a 1% increase in 2018. The same goes for the overall non-white members at a low of 11% in 2016 and 13% the following year (Romano). These numbers were at the heart of the heavy criticism of the post-2015 backlash, which led to a vote in the Academy to change its rules and standards to include more underrepresented minorities as members, establishing a new set of goals that seek to revolutionize and modernize the Academy by 2020. The controversy elevated the conversation around more than just diversity, it also sparked debate on topics such as sexual harassment and gender disparity in Hollywood.

Criticism and protest took place across multiple media platforms, ushering a stage of popular discussion that inaugurates what I am calling the hypervisibility of the Digital Hollywood Era¹. This new stage introduces popular discourse and demand for representation of minorities, in which Hollywood's response to public criticism of lack of diversity sought to appease their claims of homogeneity and take steps towards building a more progressive environment.

In the communique sent out on January 22nd, 2016, Academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs stated that the "Academy is going to lead and not wait for the industry to catch up. These new measures regarding governance and voting will have an immediate impact and begin the process of significantly changing our membership composition" (Academy of Motion Picture

¹ I will define the Digital Hollywood era as the current contemporary period governed by the rise of digital media and the internet. We could say that this era is roughly starting since 2006, with the shift from analog film to digital production. This period is characterized by the use of digital technology, CGI, and industrial mass production and distribution across digital and theatrical platforms.

Arts and Sciences). The new governance rules limited member voting status to 10 years before renewal, and members who became inactive in the industry would not qualify for voting privileges. Moreover, the Academy established three new governor seats to increase diversity, as well as adding new diverse members to the executive board. Invitations for both people of color and women to join the Academy grew by more than 350% each since the 2016 incident (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences). Overall, these immediate efforts sought to provide more diversity and inclusion given popular reactions, proving that the public's engagement in the debate generated actions by the Academy. These numbers have continued to grow: 2019 saw Hispanic/Latino artists doubling their roles in feature films, a 20% increase in leading roles for women, and an 8% increase in female directors.

It is important to understand the importance of the hashtag and social media dialogue to these advancements and structural changes. The conversation Reign initiated caused a sense of urgency in the dialogue for representation that established the grounds for this systematic change. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Oscar-nominated director Spike Lee credited the work of the #OscarsSoWhite campaign as a gateway for the visibility of his own art. He stated that *BlacKkKlansman*'s Oscar nomination "would have not happened if there was not the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. What that campaign did, it made the Academy understand that they had to diversify their membership. Look at *Moonlight* — the diversity of the voting members makes a difference" (Sinha-Roy). His comments promote the ideas of engaging in a dialogue that ensures visibility, enabled by allies and representatives at the upper level of the system that can voice out for visibility of these underrepresented minorities.

In the overall history of the Awards, the #OscarsSoWhite is not the first time the Academy has been criticized and boycotted for its lack of diversity and inclusion. Similar events

have occurred in the past, but they had never amounted to any significant changes or shifts, until now. This suggests the power of social media and the internet as intermedia platforms that allow for more public access to information and the ability to share opinions instantaneously. The combination of digital technologies and cultural shifts in the perspectives of popular audiences triggered changes in the Hollywood system, moving minorities to the forefront like never before, scrutinizing the problems of representation and Hollywood's role in the conversation. It is within this context that we see the rise of what I call the process of hypervisibility.

Hypervisibility has been used in the fields of sociology, gender studies, and race studies to explore the rise in visibility as a result of social and political movements of the 21st Century. Some media outlets have described it as the “disproportionate amount of attention” minorities receive (Reaves) given rising cultural demands of diversity and inclusion in both private and public spaces. It is important to understand that the lack of clarity and definition of this term comes from the relative recency of its use, with few to no scholarly publications on the subject defining it, not to mention the fact that the term is used mostly in spoken and popular discourse, causing it to take on many meanings depending on the context. This thesis seeks to arrive at a definition of the term hypervisibility and deploy it as a critical lens to understand the topics of representation discussed above.

As a concept in film, hypervisibility was partially introduced by Julianne Pidduck in her essay *The Visible and the Sayable: The Moment and Conditions of Hypervisibility*, in which she analyzes the representation of LGBTQ identities in Francophone cinema and refers to the logic of representation as a driver of visibility. She explains the term in the following manner:

“Images of lesbians and gay men, especially those produced by lesbian and gay cultural producers, carry the burden of making visible formerly invisible sexual identities, and of correcting stereotypical or negatives images. Emerging from the current explosion of

certain types of gay and lesbian imagery, the term hypervisibility registers a sea change in the epistemological, cultural, political and economic regimes governing the re/production and dissemination of images of same-sex desire and identity”(Grandena and Johnston)

Drawing from this definition, I’d like to emphasize three particular aspects that will further refine what my usage of “hypervisibility” will be. First, Pidduck points out the burden of making marginalized identities visible to both creators and audiences via images, which entails a more realistic, and ultimately positive portrayal of minorities in media. Secondly, she describes the emerging imagery of these identities as an “explosion,” which responds to events such as the scrutinizing of the #OscarSoWhite campaign. Finally, she focuses on the more fundamental discursive changes (epistemological, cultural, political, and economic) that govern the production and dissemination of imagery. Hypervisibility thus speaks to the interaction of these three levels and their bearing on how marginalized identities are presented.

In order to understand this concept further, we must first define its etymology. The word is divided into *hyper*, meaning heightened or extremely, and *visibility*, referring to the extent to which something has garnered attention or is seen and perceived. Subsequently, the notions of perception are attributed to the rational and emotional response to that which is visible, affirmed through the interpretation of a socially accepted definition. When put together it refers to being extremely seen, a heightened state of perception and elevated attention to a defined concept, in this case, formerly invisible identities from media and the larger issue of representation. When discussing visibility in terms of its socio-political relevance, it suggests the place of recognized identities that are culturally affirmed and able to participate in how they are perceived and represented (Settles et al.). As it relates to media and film, visibility refers to the extent to which identities are perceived and presented on screen. Predominant identities, namely male, Caucasian

and heterosexual, are considered to be visible: we accept and recognize them as a norm or the status quo of what is typically seen on and off-screen, and we are not drawn to scrutinize them or their significance.

From here, we can define hypervisibility as the scrutinized and active focus on the production and reproduction of imagery of underrepresented identities in film and media. This scrutiny is caused by the intersection of popular and industrial responses to the lack of presentation of such minorities and their cultural and social importance. This term seeks to explain and define the sudden increase in diversity and underrepresented imagery in media since 2015, as well as the relationship between audience reactions and industry response.

Hypervisibility functions through a cyclical process, where the representation of minorities on and off-screen open conversations about their significance at the audience level, primarily via media platforms. These responses, in turn, prompt reactive corrections from Hollywood executives that attempt to appease criticisms while improving structural issues of diversity. All of this occurs through a cycle of image reproduction, audience response, discussion, and industrial reaction. Hypervisible films, thus, are characterized by their ability to cause a response from audiences and critics based on their inclusion and representation of scrutinized minorities.

Similarly, I define a hypervisible identity as one which is undergoing a heightened scrutiny under the dialogue of systemic diversity by audiences, and hence participates in the proposed cycle of audience response and affirmative industry reaction. When discussing the hypervisibility of an identity, I then refer to the extent to which said identity is interacting in this cyclical process. The more hypervisible the identity, the more scrutiny it has and the more populated and contentious the dialogue online is, prompting faster and bigger structural changes from the industry.

Since this conceptualization of hypervisibility arose from the digital discourse around the Academy Awards scandals concerning issues of representation, as aforementioned, we can say that the two go hand in hand. Hypervisibility navigates across social media posts, forums, blogs, news reports, and other media sources when these platforms create spaces for critical dialogue. I want to show in this thesis that the popular discourse of multimedia platforms is inherent to the development of hypervisibility, and that further dialogue and debate allow for the increased visibility of marginalized identities.

In this hypervisible Hollywood era, films are taking up active forms of representation, in which we see two forms of cinematic coding: overt and covert representation. These concepts will be keys to explaining how hypervisibility operates. I theorize overt representation as an open and clear intent to present a particular identity in a film, characterized by the explicit focus around the identity as central to the story, where it is mentioned and acknowledged through its relevance to the story. In contrast, I define covert representation as the subtle appearance of an underrepresented identity in a film, characterized by seemingly discreet, yet conscious, coding of characteristics and ideas particular to an identity, and its lack of relevance to the story.

Hypervisibility, both in its overt and covert forms, recall the former representation protocols of film by shepherding concepts of both realism and political correctness. In particular, overt representation creates more pronounced discussions in which opinions differ on the extent to which the film obtained accuracy and relatability. These dialogues almost never take the form of a consensus, but rather sustain a very high level of disagreement, where the public continually debates whether or not the film contained realistic representations. But what constitutes proper representation? Who gets to determine what is proper and to whom? These questions are attached to the audience and their personal opinions on the film as well as their intent to

participate in the dialogue. The fact that these two questions have no answers is the reason why the dialogue is so important and ceaseless: it shows audience members participating in productive conversations that return to the questions of representation: It is this dialogue that helps us understand the concept of hypervisibility and how to navigate it.

This thesis will focus specifically on how the popular responses around the representation of mainstream Hollywood films, starting from the 2015-6 scandal, participate in a productive discussion that advances efforts of diversity through the process of hypervisibility. It is not my goal to analyze the specifics of how minorities are represented and how identities are navigated and reproduced in film, but rather to analyze how the subsequent conversation that occurs online produces a change in the industry. As a methodology, I will focus on popular media and its discourses to interrogate what audiences are saying about representation in these mainstream films, which demonstrates how hypervisibility allows for audiences to wrestle with questions of identity and its presentation on screen. In particular, I will focus on specific arguments around the representation of race, gender, and sexuality and how these particular dialogues help create more hypervisibility for these identities, getting closer to answering the questions on proper representation. I will examine publications by popular entertainment news outlets such as *EW*, *Variety*, *The New York Times*, and such, as well as Op-ed sources that provide a range of opinions. Moreover, social media plays a critical role in my analysis of contemporary conversations and debates about representation, so I will turn to Twitter and Instagram posts that provide immediate feedback and commentary on these films.

The first chapter explores the hypervisibility of gender, focusing on superheroes and femininity via debates about representing and promoting strong female characters. I will closely look at *Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman* as the first two contemporary female lead superhero

films and the debate around their protagonists' femininity and heroism. The second chapter will be centered around race, focusing on the concept of selective tokenism and the alternative, analyzing the arguments around the representation of race in historical and cultural contexts as a failed effort to promote diversity while ignoring other films that explore the specificities of race. I will examine articles from the popular press on *Roma* and *Green Book* as films that created controversies around their use of historical movements as narratives to appease diversity against the importance of understanding and celebrating history. Finally, the third chapter will revolve around sexuality and sexual identity, looking at Queer filtering as a concept that explains the navigation of sexuality on screen. I will examine how audiences respond to the inclusion of ambiguous Queer codes and Queer-specific experiences through a heteronormative lens populating queer-centric films. I will be analyzing this sexual ambiguity in *Brokeback Mountain*, *Moonlight*, and *Call Me by Your Name*.

It is my firm belief that the function of art is not only to present a story and convey an emotional journey but also to generate a conversation. Art must create different opinions in its audiences through the power of identification with the imagery, creating a personal and particular response to be shared in dialogue with other members of the audience. It is this conversation that produces value and meaning to art. In this very similar manner, I want to argue and theorize that representation does not come solely from what is presented or reproduced on screen, it is not only about the image, but rather about the provoked opinion and the subsequent conversation audiences undertake. I argue that proper representation arises from the productivity of dissensus: a certain lack or agreement advances more equitable modes of representation. This thesis attempts to frame hypervisibility as a phenomenon that allows for identities to be the

center of a necessary conversation that will inherently promote diversity and continue to
question: what is proper representation?

Chapter 1: Gender

“I do hope that when we include more female storytellers, we will have more of the women that I recognize in my day-to-day life — ones that are proactive, have their own agency, don’t just react to the men around them. They have their own point of view.”-Jessica Chastain

Gender representation in film is a topic that has caused a lot of controversy in the discussions of diversity and equality, with feminist and gender theorists leading the dialogue that encourages the empowerment of women. Prominent theorists and high-profile filmmakers have been pushing for equality in the representation of women both on and off-screen. In particular, the 2016 Academy Awards scandal involved campaigns on female empowerment and sexual assault awareness, with the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements encouraging survivors of sexual abuse in the film industry to come out in support. High-profile figures such as Patricia Arquette, Lady Gaga, Jessica Chastain and Julianne Moore, among many others, publicly called out gender disparity, the pay gap, and sexual assault, calling for the need for change, all of which was shared and commented on by users online.

“Women have less trepidation about helping each other, networking with each other, being vulnerable with each other,” said the producer Amy Baer, the board president of Women in Film. “I think this is a direct result of #MeToo and women realizing that there’s strength in numbers and in having each other’s backs, much the way the boys’ network has worked for decades.” (Sperling, “Harvey Weinstein Is Gone, but Hollywood Is Still a Man’s World”)

Amy Baer’s comments shine light on the intersection of social media and post-feminism, where the sharing of experiences generates an expansive effect that helps women find support in each other’s personal accounts. These social campaigns are what I propose to be the first part of the process of hypervisibility, with audiences participating in a conversation about representation and the treatment of women in film facilitated by media platforms. Hence, as a response,

mainstream Hollywood is drawn to engage in this dialogue and act to improve standards that will appease audiences' claims. We thus see an increase in female representation, with a USC Annenberg School research study reporting that "43 of the top 100 films had a female lead or co-lead, which marks a 13-year high. In 2018, 39 films had a female lead or co-lead, while only 20 movies starred female characters back in 2007" (Schaffstall). This increase is slow and minimal where women are still being ignored both on and off-screen. Yet, I propose that hypervisibility will allow for an even faster increase due to the cyclical nature of response and reaction to bigger conversations of representation.

This first chapter will focus on the representation of gender, particularly women, through the process of hypervisibility, analyzing the demand for representation at all levels of Hollywood cinema. The chapter will specifically look at the intersection of Superheroes and Femininity, looking closely at the representation of the first female-lead superhero films in the era of comic-book adaptation films. I will analyze the portrayal of the female protagonist as an empowered and feminist figure, and the cultural significance this imagery has on viewers. *Wonder Woman* (2017) will serve as my first case study, emphasizing the discussion of the film as the first contemporary² female-led and female-directed superhero blockbuster during the Cinematic Universe Era. I will then look at audience responses to the film through the process of hypervisibility that incite a productive conversation around female representation. As a second case study, *Captain Marvel* (2019), the first title female hero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), will help me identify the conversations and positive responses to its cultural impact.

² The use of the term contemporary refers to the current era of Cinematic Universes and big comic-book superhero adaptations started by Marvel Studios in 2008. This era is characterized by the big-budget productions these tentpole films have, and the large-scale marketing and advertising. In particular, the films are in conversation with a larger franchise, characterized as a Cinematic Universe. Although films like *Elektra* (2005) and *Catwoman* (2004) were released earlier, I will not characterize them as part of this bigger cinematic movement, making *Wonder Woman* the first female title superhero under this definition.

Moreover, I will look at the representation of the female experience, contrasted by the sexist criticism towards the protagonist and the film itself. These analyses will argue that the popular discussions around these superheroes as positive female protagonists, as part of the process of hypervisibility, should cause a reaction by Hollywood to produce more similar films. Overall, this chapter will seek to understand how hypervisibility has allowed for new imagery that conceives the Ultimate Female protagonist.

Superheroes and Femininity: Female protagonists in *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*

With the new heights of the superhero and comic-book adaptation genre since the rise of Cinematic Universes³, the presence of female heroes has been highly debated by viewers online who have demanded the need for more protagonist superheroines. Dominated by Marvel Studios' Cinematic Universe (MCU), followed by other shared universes such as DC's Extended Universe (DCEU), the genre has revolutionized the industrial and marketing approach to blockbuster films, setting a standard for franchise development, and becoming some of the most profitable and marketable productions. Most female characters in superhero movies, up until 2012, are portrayed as active damsels in distress or humanizing love interests, for example Lois Lane in *Superman*, Pepper Potts in *Iron Man*, and Jane Foster in *Thor*. All these "characters were portrayed as smart, independent and successful women, yet their stories – and their positions within Cinematic Universe-society – were only there to support the emotional development of

³ Cinematic Universes, often known as shared universes, refer to a series of films and media works that interrelate to one another within an umbrella franchise. The films can stand alone independently, but fit into a larger continuity that creates a new world of fiction. This era is then characterized by franchises such as Marvel, DC, Universal's Monsters, among others that utilize their characters to spin-off into the larger continuity of the series.

their masculine counterparts” (Razenberg). Their portrayal was somewhat progressive beyond just an inactive love interest, but their role and presence in the film was reduced to support the male characters. After a decade of growth in this new lucrative blockbuster genre, Warner Brothers was the first to release a standalone, female-focused superhero adaptation in the Cinematic Universe Era, *Wonder Woman* (2017), followed by only one other female-led film, *Captain Marvel* (2019). Although the MCU had introduced other female characters and superheroines, such as Black Widow and Scarlet Witch in the *Avengers* (2012-2019) films, even villains like Hela in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), it took the studio more than 10 years to finally produce a standalone for a heroine. In an interview about her involvement with Marvel executive, producer Mia Bay said:

“It’s about changing the dominant view. It’s about equality for the audience in terms of choice. They’re wisely refreshing the brand because it needs it and they’re realizing that the usual recipe – white, brawny, male-centered, world-saving super-bro – is tired and doesn’t appeal to a lot of the audience. The international audience, especially, is coming out for the films that feel fresher” (Smith)

Both of these films, *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* were released during Hollywood’s systemic shift towards more diversity, and found themselves as defining staples for positive representation of gender and set the groundwork for further development of female driven superhero and action blockbuster films. However, the criticism and backlash these two productions faced from audiences were detrimental to their development during pre-production. These criticisms revolved around what having female superheroines meant to female audiences as sources of visibility, hence, scrutinizing the development of their characters and stories as representative of empowering female imagery. These comments focused on the high stakes they faced as the first two iterations of female title characters in the era of comic-books. In this

chapter I argue that, following the process of hypervisibility, the release of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* as Hollywood's actions towards diversity generated a productive conversation populated by positive and negative responses to the films' depiction of a feminine superhero. Ultimately, this conversation should prompt a reaction from the studios that will further the efforts of diversity and improve the representation of gender in superhero films.

The lack of female representation in previous comic-book adaptations follows a trend of both systemic discrimination, and financial and strategic decisions. The gendered expectations of Hollywood production clarifies that “whether [these films are] set up to fail or merely underestimated, the message is clear: female-driven films are systematically valued differently in comparison to their male-driven counter-parts within franchising practices” (Donoghue). They are seen as a financial risk to studios. From a strategic point of view, male superhero films have had past success, with the original *Batman* series (1987-1992), Fox's *X-Men* franchise (2000-2019) and Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* Trilogy (2005-2012) for example. Although some others have been box office flops, such as *Steel* (1997) and *Punisher: War Zone* (2008), the track record shows a profitable trend for these films. In contrast, female driven superhero projects prior to the Cinematic Universe period had seen financial disaster; with both *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005) flopping at the box office with a \$20 million loss and barely a \$10 million profit respectively, setting up a precedent of financial risk. In a leaked email exchange from 2014 between former Marvel CEO Ike Perlmutter and Sony's CEO Michael Lynton, the former expressed his hesitation to greenlight female superhero films, calling all previous iterations a “disaster” (Women in Hollywood). Thus, as Courtney Donoghue states: “what this rationale reveals is how the same logic of success and failure does not apply equally to the superhero landscape where often female-driven films were seen as exceptions when profitable

and failure as the rule when not” (Donoghue). But the financial risk was not the only factor that played into part, with the “long standing Hollywood fallacy that while women will watch movies about men, men will not watch movies about women” (Itzkoff) playing a role in how executives viewed the market potential.

We see then the process of hypervisibility take place in its first stages. *Wonder Woman*, the first of the two iterations of female-centric superhero films, was greenlit for production during the time of criticism on diversity in Hollywood. Although it could be argued that it was a strategic choice by DC to respond to Marvel’s lack of female protagonists, I argue that the film’s support was a step in the process of hypervisibility, where the studios produced a reaction to appease the audience demand for the representation of gender on and off-screen in superhero franchises. When *Wonder Woman* was announced:

“You could hear the champagne popping from coast to coast, along with the joyful cries that maybe Hollywood would finally realize it’s time to demolish the glass border crossing for women superheroes and directors.” (Rutenberg)

With the MCU’s massive success with the *Avengers* franchise, audiences had been wanting a solo film for Black Widow and other female characters such as She-Hulk and Captain Marvel, amounting to an enormous evidence for the demand for such films. Users online expressed a lot of interest in these films and tweeted their desires such as: “I finally decided what my Christmas Wish is. A Black Widow Series. Say it with me now. We deserve a Black Widow series!” (@ladyOfheartssi), and “The real question is when are we getting a Black Widow movie @MarvelStudios @Marvel??”(@T_argaryens). The social media and market demand allowed the studios to recognize the potential benefit, and thus strategically release the films.

Nevertheless, they both experienced a very tumultuous journey from their development to their release that consisted of backlash, high stakes for representation, and financial risk.

Directed by Patty Jenkins, *Wonder Woman* (2017) serves as the origin story of Amazon Princess Diana, otherwise known as Wonder Woman, during Warner Bros and DC's revamping of their DC Universe of superheroes. Warner Bros began development for a live-action Wonder Woman film in early 1996, with a variety of directors and writers being interviewed for production. In 1999, director Jon Cohen came on board to adapt the film, replaced by Todd Alcott in 2001 due to creative differences with the studio. Over the course of 3 years, the project underwent a large number of changes and developments, resulting in yet another replacement for the screenwriter in 2003 until it was dropped by the studio for unknown reasons. Nevertheless, in 2005, Joss Whedon took over the project, initiating development on a new screenplay that he could not complete due to complications with the story, and ultimately abandoned the project in 2007. With the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and its immense success, Warner Bros saw the strategic possibility of starting their own shared universe as well, starting with the underperforming *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013) adaptation. Diane Nelson, DC Entertainment president, stated in 2013 that the reasoning behind all these scratched pitches was due to the Wonder Woman character being very difficult to get 'right'. According to her, Wonder Woman "doesn't have the single, clear, compelling story that everyone knows and recognizes. There are lots of facets to Wonder Woman" and assured that "she has been one of the top three priorities for DC and for Warner Bros. [The studio is] still trying right now, but she's tricky" (Kit). In late 2013, as development for the long-awaited *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) began, director Zack Snyder casted Gal Gadot in the role of Wonder Woman, to be introduced in the film and later developed as a tentpole for the franchise, simultaneously announcing the

development of a solo film. Her casting came with a lot of public and studio support, with director Patty Jenkins stating that Gadot “shares every quality with Wonder Woman. That’s what you’re looking for—someone who can embody all of those attributes on screen. She’s brave, strong, kind, loving, badass—every adjective you can think of for Wonder Woman” (Barna) in 2015 after being announced. Gadot and Jenkins worked together to develop the character and the story, affirming how difficult it’s been to approach it. Gadot stated:

“We realized that Diana can still be a normal woman, one with very high values, but still a woman. She can be sensitive. She is smart, independent and emotional. She can be confused. She can lose her confidence. She can have confidence. She is everything. She has a human heart.” (Sperling, “Gal Gadot on Why Only a Woman Could Direct ‘Wonder Woman’”)

It became clear to both director and actress that the character required an origin story that showed her humanity and portrayed the positive attributes of femininity, while remaining empowering and independent. The story was thus set in the 1910’s during World War I, at a time where Wonder Woman is yet to become the person she is meant to be, engaging her in a new take on the hero’s journey full of female empowerment.

The character made her first two appearances in *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), followed by *Justice League* (2017), before appearing in her own solo movie. Wonder Woman, as a character in this series, was met with extraordinary support, with critics and audiences stating that she “steals the show” with her appearances in “some of the best scenes” (Duralde) in both films as a powerful warrior. The project was set up for future success due to the clear positive audience reactions, but it was still met with a lot of weariness at the top level of studio executives. The stakes were seen as incredibly high, where the combination of

hypervisible demand and expectations set up the film to a very high standard. In an interview on the matter, filmmaker Lexi Alexander, who was on the shortlist to direct *Wonder Woman* stated:

“Imagine the weight on my shoulders ... many male superhero movies fail? So now, we finally get *Wonder Woman* with a female director, imagine if it fails. And you have no control over marketing, over budget. So without any control, you carry the weight of gender equality for both characters and women directors. No way” (Donoghue)

I argue that, according to hypervisibility, these comments helped the studio executives and filmmakers participate in a productive dialogue that sought to understand the importance and challenge of making this film, and the quality necessary in order to succeed and set open the path for other female-focused films. Since studio executives discussed the bad track record of female heroes in the past, and controlled the budget, it is likely that this dialogue was important to convince them to not only trust in the project, but to be open to future similar films and franchises.

I characterize this film as an effort to balance the use of both covert and overt forms of representation of gender. As the first title female superhero film since 2005, it inherently carries a social and cultural label of overt representation, utilized by the studio to market the film as a revolutionary production. Moreover, since it was released in the era of hypervisibility, the film is already under much scrutiny for its representation of Wonder Woman. We can also point out distinct moments in the film that provide overt commentary on the ideas of gender disparity: we see Diana venture into the streets of London in full armor, sword and shield in hand, met with strange glances as she enters a clothing store to find a look ‘more appropriate’ for her. The montage journeys through Diana trying out different dresses she claims are too tight and impractical for battle, mocking the usual makeover scene in romantic comedies. She settles for a trench coat and pants that cover her armor and give her agility. The scene seeks to make a

statement about the idea of gendered clothes in a comic manner, overtly discussing the underlying sexist nature of women's fashion. On the other hand, the majority of the film's scenes engage in what I argue to be covert forms of representation. For example, at moments where Diana claims her right to go to war, she is met with disbelief from the war cabinet, not because of her gender, but rather due to the disbelief and claim to her insanity. On an audience level, the discussions around the film centered on its active presentation and reproduction of an empowering female figure, where some of the themes actively portray gender parity and the overt rejection of stereotypes for women.

When discussing the film itself, there is a big focus on the presentation of female warriors and the rejection of gender stereotypes. In some of the first scenes we are taken to the island paradise of the Amazons, a tribe of only women, female warriors, who are depicted with a diverse set of body types. The film presents not only distinct races, but counter-stereotypical body perfections of the female physique; the camera travels around fight training where we see muscular, buff, fit, and even delicate bodies working together in a harmonious, yet rigorous, war training. Their agility, strength, intellect, and passion are all highlighted throughout the movie through intense battle sequences, perfectly choreographed to depict the power of the Amazons and of Wonder Woman as a hero. Yet, their sense of womanhood and femininity is not lost but rather redefined, rooted into ideas of empowerment and the resilient female body. We are drawn to a narrative that portrays Diana's journey to sacrifice and salvation, where the negative stereotypes of women in media are pushed aside and countered with the representation of a powerful female hero. Director Patty Jenkins said it herself in an interview with *Variety*: "I've known badass women in my life, and I was just trying to make a badass" (Bryant and Bryant). The construction of this character and narrative is in par with feminist ideologies of

empowerment, intersectional diversity, and collective support among women. Moreover, the *New York Times* review described some of the scenes as follows:

“There are fistfights in alleys and more extensive episodes of combat, during which Diana makes use of her aunt’s training, traditional Amazon weapons and her own unique abilities. She deflects bullets and mortar shells on a sprint across no-man’s land, tosses an armored truck and demolishes a church steeple. Even better, she is a glamorous and funny fish out of water. Diana is erudite but unworldly, witty but never ironic, supremely self-confident and utterly mystified by the modern world.” (Scott)

The review emphasizes on the combination of highly choreographed and amazing fight scenes that depict Diana as a powerful warrior with her sense of femininity. The film seeks to define the ultimate female protagonist as a complex, multidimensional woman full of power, confidence, glamour and love.

If we compare the empowering imagery with that of previous female representation, we can see that *Wonder Woman* actively defies such a restrictive dichotomous understanding of gender. The film places women in an active role, the maker of meaning of strength and power. The narrative follows the action and reaction of the female character, by centering on Diana’s hero’s journey and active engagement in the construction of the story. It is interesting to note that the male counterpart, Steve Trevor, plays both an active role in the film and a supportive passive one. He is the driver of the central narrative as he brings forward the main conflict and drives Diana to take on her hero’s journey into the real world and the war. Yet, he then maintains a more supportive role that aids Diana to become the superhero she is meant to be in the second and third act.

“*Wonder Woman*, though, resists the reflexive power-worship that drags so many superhero movies. Unlike most of her male counterparts, its heroine is not trying to exorcise inner demons or work out messiah issues. She wants to function freely in the

world, to help out when needed and to be respected for her abilities. No wonder she encounters so much resistance.” (Scott)

Her characterization of the ultimate female protagonist becomes a shift in the superhero storyline: she defies the usual standards and origin stories that focus on saving the world through self-discovery of a greater power. Wonder Woman is a free-spirited, feminine and powerful hero that acts by her own volition. I propose that hypervisibility allows audiences and critics to understand this archetypal difference, separating the male superhero to the female one on a scrutinized level that helps us comprehend and continue questioning how to represent women on screen.

Hypervisibility encouraged the scrutiny of the film that caused a plethora of positive responses and feedback after its release, which stirred the discourse towards the significance of the female character and her role shaping new generational views on gender and empowerment. The popular dialogue on the effect and necessity of female superhero role models engaged viewers of all ages, particularly young girls, to entertain their own positive thoughts on womanhood and the intersection of femininity and superheroes. Director Patty Jenkins tweeted an image with an anonymously written list of “cute Wonder Woman related things that happened within a week of the movie being released” (@PattyJenks), describing instances of children being inspired by the movie to act in self-empowerment and to admire the character. The list compiles eleven heartwarming moments ranging from “seven girls playing together during recess on Tuesday... [who] agreed to be Amazons and not fight but work together to defeat evil” to a “boy who was obsessed with Iron Man... [asking] his parents for a new Wonder Woman lunchbox” (@PattyJenks). The original tweet received 46.5 thousand retweets and over 100 thousand likes, showing the public engaging in the dialogue that describes the positive impact

the film had. Moreover, the tweet describes this as “your friendly reminder that if this movie completely changed the way these girls and boys see themselves and the world in a week, imagine what the next generation will achieve if we give them more movies like *Wonder Woman*” (@PattyJenks), highlighting her belief in the importance of positive imagery for gender in media. I argue that the presence of hypervisibility allowed this anonymous teacher, who compiled the list from Jenkins tweet, to recognize the visible and active effect the film had in her classroom, and feel enticed to immediately share such stories in social media for other users to see and comment on. Other users expressed their gratitude for Jenkins job as a director, as well as their own personal inspiration from the film:

“The year is 2055, Men are no longer legally able to work in Film, politics, or appear on television. Sexual assault is at an all time low. Patty Jenkins (*Wonder Woman*, 2017) directs every. Single. Movie. It is a golden age of film. Beyonce is President.”
(@JesseSzarowicz)

“Wonder Woman is not a fictional character. Wonder Woman is a state of mind.
#wonderwoman” (@vero_sixtos)

“Just saw *Wonder Woman* and now I am going to be Wonder Woman every Halloween for the rest of my life.” (@AimeeBuckmaster)

These responses to the film allowed for a bigger audience to be exposed to the empowering imagery and to engage in the dialogue by sharing and commenting on the occurrence. We see a productive conversation on the effect of the film that lies at the heart of the hypervisibility process to affirm that more imagery like *Wonder Woman* will have a larger and more positive effect on future generations.

The positive responses on the active representation rose among not only mainstream audiences, but also among Hollywood actors, directors and producers. Via social media, these

stars shared their positive opinions and reactions to the film, expressing both their support for the project, and commenting on the effect it had on them. Stars like Lupita Nyong'o, Josh Gad, Elizabeth Banks, Joss Whedon, Ava DuVernay, among others posted on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, engaging their followers in the dialogue. Academy Award Winner Octavia Spencer shared on her Instagram page a photo of Wonder Woman and captioned:

“I am so stoked that #WonderWoman is having her moment. To all of the mothers out there who want to influence your girls and educate your boys about the value of strong women, do yourselves a favor and make a date to take them to see this movie. The #Amazonians aren't just beautiful and fit, they are intelligent, speak many languages, and understand science. Yep, they have brains!!!! Women of various body types and ethnicities had me on the edge of my seat. So much so, that I'm paying to see it again.”
 (@OctaviaSpencer)

We can see then the role that social media plays in the concept of hypervisibility, as I theorize that these function as enabling channels to engage audiences to a larger extent. As a prominent figure, Spencer's post received over 12 thousand reactions and shared by some of her almost one million followers. In the same way, other stars and prominent social media figures allowed the dialogue to reach their own large following, making the film and the concepts of gender representation hypervisible to audiences.

However, it is worth noting that the film was also met with particular criticism, both from audiences and from professionals in the film field. In her *Forbes* article “I Thought I Was the Only Person who Didn't Like *Wonder Woman*- I Was Wrong”, author Susane Breslin expresses her disappointment towards the movie, expressing she “left the theater feeling not empowered by chagrined” (Breslin). She recounts how she shared her opinions on both Twitter and LinkedIn and found particular comments and similar blog posts that reviewed the film as disappointing in

agreement with her. Breslin explains that her reactions to the film "made [her] long for something more like Emily Blunt's character in *Sicario*" (Breslin). The character that Breslin points to is presented as FBI Agent Kate Macer, a ruthless protagonist in a male dominated field full of danger, where she is full of bravery and action in a more human and realistic storyline. In a similar fashion, filmmaker James Cameron also expressed his discontent with the film, stating:

“All of the self-congratulatory back-patting Hollywood’s been doing over *Wonder Woman* has been so misguided. She’s an objectified icon, and it’s just male Hollywood doing the same old thing! I’m not saying I didn’t like the movie but, to me, it’s a step backwards. Sarah Connor was not a beauty icon. She was strong, she was troubled, she was a terrible mother, and she earned the respect of the audience through pure grit.”
(Stowe)

It is important to point out the particular effect of these two opinions, popular and professional. Although they both express disappointments, they are still engaging in the dialogue by expressing a valid opinion on how representation should function and the reproduction of realistic female imagery. But more importantly, they both point out to two alternative representations of strong female characters, Emily Blunt in *Sicario* and Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* franchise. Hypervisibility scrutinizes these archetypes for audiences to present an opinion on what their particular ideal presentation of gender looks like.

Released in 2019, *Captain Marvel* comes as the second presentation of a female-led superhero blockbuster since 2005, the very first one for Marvel studios. Directed by duo Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, the film tells the story of Vers, a military fighter for the alien race Kree whose lost memory blurs out her true identity and the source of her superpowers. Stranded on Earth after an encounter with the seemingly evil Skrull race, she begins to remember her past life as a pilot and embarks on a quest to find and liberate herself from those who had subdued her.

The film fits within the Marvel Cinematic Universe as one of the many standalone pieces that translate into the larger cinematic storyline comprising a total of 23 films as of 2019, of which *Captain Marvel* is the twenty-first. The film came into early development in 2013 and was officially announced in October 2014, with female screenwriters Meg LeFauve and Nicole Perlman starting on the script the following year. In 2016 at the San Diego Comic-Con Marvel Panel, Academy Award winning actress Brie Larson (*Room*, *Kong: Skull Island*, *Unicorn Store*) was announced as the title character, receiving positive reactions to her casting. An entire year later, directing duo Boden and Fleck were hired to helm the film, finally initiating production for a March 2019 release. It is interesting to note the long process of development the film took six years which Kevin Feige, head of Marvel Studios, justified with the need for the studio to figure out how the character would fit in the larger universe, and how to properly flesh out her story. The film functions as the origin story for both the first female protagonist and the most powerful character in the MCU.

Captain Marvel is Marvel Studios' effort to show a more active representation of female heroes, where the film's development, marketing, and release were focused on the ideas of feminism, diversity, and progressiveness. Similar to *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel* presents a combination of coded overt and covert forms of feminism in the film's narrative and visual features. One of the most interesting moments of covert feminism and commentary came with the relationship between characters. Carol and her Kree army mentor Yon-Rogg are presented in a very close relationship, where Carol admires and follows Yon-Rogg's orders, as the latter lies to her about her past and constantly tells her to suppress her emotions and control her drive. These actions are coded to represent gaslighting and the treatment of women under stereotypes of emotionally driven behavior. It is interesting to note that the resolution to their relationship

shows overt feminism, where a disarmed Yon-Rogg challenges Captain Marvel to prove herself and her training, but is interrupted by a blast that knocks him out as Carol decides she has nothing to prove, representing the empowering moment overtly. On the other hand, the relationship between Carol and her best friend Maria is seen in an immensely positive light, coding for the ideas of support among women and friendship that allude to feminist ideologies of unity. The story itself includes particular moments of recognition that overtly code for the experiences of womanhood. Throughout the film, Carol fights back flashback memories of her past, which all culminate during the dramatic climax. As she embraces her identity as a human, claims her name as Carol, and liberates herself from the chip that restrained her powers, we flashback into her journey as a woman, transported to overt moments in her life when she was being overlooked as a woman in a male dominated environment. A young girl crashes a go-cart and falls bloodied to the ground, a teen falls off her bike and scrapes her knees and elbows, a young cadet in the air force slips from the high ropes and hits the ground, and an injured Carol lays on the crash site of her plane radiating with new power. Each one of these girls stands back up, fist clenched, determined, simultaneously to the beat of a heroic soundtrack, as Carol finally becomes Captain Marvel. A beautiful montage that portrays the overt representation of a particular coded message for women: to stand back up and never give up. The film presents these themes subtly and entwined within the development of the story, positively representing the character's identity. Moreover, *Variety* brings focus to the moment Vers finds out her memories are a lie, and describes this as:

“As an analogue of her existence as a female superhero. Everything she's been told is wrong! Can she wake up from the oppressive (read: patriarchal) mind-set of the conventions that bind her? Larson's Vers is like someone trapped in a matrix — she has

to shake off the dream of who she is to locate the superwoman she could be. And that makes for a rouser of a journey.” (Gleiberman)

The review scrutinizes the core differences between the previous Marvel male superheroes and separates Captain Marvel’s experience as an overt intersection between femininity, womanhood, and being a superhero. It provides coded commentary on feminism, a feat male heroes could not accomplish. I propose that hypervisibility allows viewers to understand these coded messages and ideas and scrutinize them to a higher extent that helps us understand the difference in representation between male and female heroes.

When further discussing the film itself and its presentation of the female body and experience, I argue that it does a great job at promoting positive and empowering imagery. The title character, Carol Danvers, does not abide by stereotypical female body images. Her super suit covers her entire body, functioning as a full armor that is not tightly defining a slim figure and small waist, instead of the gendered suits that sexualize the character and often impractically leave skin uncovered. Even in her civilian outfit, she wears a grunge style fit that does not code for a fetishistic image with tight clothes. Her movements and fighting style also maintain a particular level of strength and agility that is not driven by her body but rather her powers and attitude, unlike Black Widow whose movements are coded in her sexuality. We see that her image defies the dichotomy of gender representation, in which Carol’s body does not code to please the sexual fetishistic fantasy of the male gaze. Her sexuality does not drive her imagery or her story. Moreover, just like in *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel* breaks the dichotomous standard of female passive characters, in which Carol’s role is active and her actions and reactions make her the true driver of the overall narrative. She is at the core of the hero’s journey and is the one to initiate the actions that engage the story’s continuity. The story itself alludes to

this idea a lot, with her current mentor Yon-Rogg and the leader of her planet, the Supreme Intelligence, subduing her as a bearer of power that must not be used, pushing her for a passive, subdued action that makes her a bearer of meaning. In a similar fashion, the other female characters in the film also act as active forces that direct action during the film: Maria represents Carol's link to humanity and family but she acts as a voice of reason for her and helps her in her mission as a pilot. Her past mentor Mar-Vell represents a beacon of hope and passion for most characters and functions as the driving thread that connects the story.

During the development and writing stage of the film, the studio found itself juggling both the criticism from audiences about the lack of diversity in Marvel and how to properly present the character during the era of hypervisibility. There was a bigger conversation at the studio level about navigating the release of their first female-driven film, and how to both please audiences by being socially responsible and entertaining. Writer Nicole Perlman commented that one of the biggest conversations was “about archetypes and what [they] want this movie to be about and just how to write a strong female superhero without making it Superman with boobs” (Watercutter). Hypervisibility makes the writers conscious about the meaning behind creating Marvel's first female protagonist, thus becoming active in the conversation around the responsibility of positive imagery. Perlman continued, stating that:

“Meg and I are doing a lot of brainstorming and we'll catch ourselves and say, 'Wait a minute, what are we saying [here] about women in power?' Then we have to say, 'Why are we getting so hung up on that? We should just tell the best story and build the best character.' And then we have this constant back-and-forth about how to tell a story that is compelling, entertaining, moving, kick-ass, and fun, and also be aware of what those larger implications might be” (Watercutter).

We can see that the conversation geared towards a productive engagement as to the framing of the character and the story, thinking about the specific commentary and themes that allude to gender and women in power. Moreover, we can see that they become conscious around the concept of covert and overt forms representation, deciding to balance them out both in an entertaining story that considers the implications of diversity.

As the film approached its official release, the pre-screenings incited some audience members to post negative comments about the film online. The popular site *Rotten Tomatoes* was filled with a huge divide between positive and negative reviews. The comments against the film were not actually reviews but rather complaints and negative opinions on the fact that the film exists. A lot of reviewers did not even see the film, but rather just said they were simply “not interested” in watching it. One user commented: “Oh boy first off this will be worst than the last jedi im calling it now critcs [sic] will love it audience hate it,” (McMillan). However, the user lacks any evidence or valid arguments to support his claim. Another user wrote: “Tired of all this SJW [Social Justice Warrior] nonsense,” while a second reiterated: “Strong Wamen [sic] more Hollywood BS - no thanks” (McMillan). Both of these users engage in the conversation that active representation is unnecessary and too overt, latching onto sexist and discriminatory views that see the presentation of new imagery and the discussion about it a complete “nonsense”. However, I argue that these people engage in the particular duality of the conversation of representation: although their comments criticize and are regressive to the efforts of diversity, they stand out as provocative pieces that further open up space for others to discuss the importance and the efforts of representation.

Despite the negative attacks and comments against the film, there was a massive amount of support and positive reception upon the its release. This was both shown by the \$455 million

opening weekend box office earnings, and the social media support that praised the film. Similarly, to *Wonder Woman*, the discourse around the efforts of representation by the film was highly debated on social media platforms, the film's hypervisible presentation of a strong female protagonist is recognized and discussed. Twitter user Kayti Burt tweeted that "Carol's hero moment was very cathartic/true to the female experience" and that "the MCU feels more complete now that Carol is in it" (@kaytiburt). She alludes to the story and development of the character herself, as I argued, she maintains a level of consciousness on the codes for specific gender experiences. Yolanda Machado commented: "It's very different from most of the MCU films and so very 90s. It's funny and fun and super empowering. It made me feel proud to be a woman" (@SassyMamainLA), praising the experience of watching the film. Additionally, user Sabrina Graves tweeted:

"Facts: @briarlson is an unstoppable force as #CaptainMarvel. A supreme embodiment of the late 80's to 90's heroines that we looked up to, fully formed with agency and whose main relationship is with her best friend. So many girls are gonna see themselves, their struggle & fight!" (@SabrinaHasNoR)

Similarly, to the *Wonder Woman* reactions, the tweet alludes to the film's imagery being presented and seen by little girls, where the new generation is said to be inspired and changed by these positive images. This dialogue pertains to the social and educational value that the film's story and efforts of representation have, where I believe it engages audiences in the kind of responsibility towards diversity and how it affects viewers and their personal ideologies.

When juxtaposing *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* and their distinct representations of the female superhero. Both stories follow a similar structure and construction of the hero's journey as an origin story for the character: a powerful woman whose true nature is unknown to her leaves her home on a mission, venturing into an unfamiliar Earth where she finds an ally that

helps her navigate her sense of identity as she uncovers the truth about her powers, finally embracing them through her own self-empowerment to defeat an impending evil. However, I believe that the underlying experience these two heroes undergo in this unknown Earth is extremely different, and codes for the representation of particular female and feminist ideas. In *Wonder Woman*, Diana comes from an environment full of powerful women just like her, where she is encouraged and raised under empowering ideologies that pertain to her womanhood. When she enters the real human world, she is in an environment that constrains her and subdues her to particular norms such as her power armor and her interactions with the male villains. Her experiences code for the navigation of a woman's sense of self-empowerment in a restrictive environment. In *Captain Marvel's* case, Carol goes through a somewhat opposite experience that overtly codes for the representation of self-reflection and identity. She comes from an environment that is restrictive and misleading, forcing her to hold back her emotions and power to follow norms and standards of military excellence, covered by lies that mask her true identity. When she enters a new space on Earth, she is in an environment with other powerful and inspiring women, namely her mentor Mar-Vell and her best friend Maria, and is met with a support system that allows her to understand her identity and break out of her restrictions to become empowered. I believe the representation of these two experiences become a good effort for diversity within women, where the female experience can be recognized and empowering to audiences who have had similar experiences.

With the release of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, the superhero genre is now populated with an increase in female protagonists that seek to engage in the efforts of representation and diversity. I propose that, per the process of hypervisibility, the audience responses to these two films, studios are now reacting by releasing more female driven projects,

furthering the efforts of diversity. We can see this with the release of Marvel's long-awaited *Black Widow* film, and Warner Bros' *Wonder Woman 1984*, a sequel to the 2017 installment, in 2020, with other subsequent female protagonist blockbusters in development. Marvel also announced the inclusion of other characters such as She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel in their own series on Disney+. The genre is at its peak, dominating the blockbuster area and the box office with each release, for which having these female driven films allow for a big step in representation. Hypervisibility allows these conversations around these projects to serve as enabling evidence for the studios to act in a better direction. After *Captain Marvel's* release, audiences began demanding for more female superhero protagonists, as well as an all-female team-up film:

“Seeing all the little girls wear their CM costumes is just making me think about all the little girls who would benefit from watching an all female superhero movie. let's get the #aforce movie going & give our younger selves the movie we would have wanted to see as little girls.”(@tearsofgreys)

Users online scrutinized the supporting characters in Marvel, like Valkyrie and The Wasp to be included in more central roles as protagonists. As seen in both films, the dialogue around representation of gender in strong female protagonists centered around body image, action, the nature of the female experience, the empowerment caused on audiences, and the effect these images have on children. Being a genre that is accessible and open to mass audiences of all age groups, genders, and races, the superhero blockbuster film allows for positive representation of female characters to become hypervisible to audiences. We see an active effort by studios to engage in not only having more female protagonists, but also female writers, directors, and producers that can help guide the film to represent women to its most positive extent and more consistently and frequently, inspiring audiences to reflect on their own sense of gender identity beyond stereotypes.

It is important to note that both these films received an immense amount of positive support but were also met with particular criticism that were either rooted in sexism or were simply about the lack of self-identification. In either case, the discussions at the online, audience, and studio level all conversed around personal opinions on the question: what does it mean to represent a powerful, strong female superhero protagonist and how? Regardless of their personal opinion, as seen by the vastly different reactions on both these films, they all engage in a productive dialogue that engages this identity in hypervisibility, allowing for the ideas that come up in these conversations to open the doors for more diverse and specific imagery that represent the ultimate female protagonist.

Hypervisibility operates as an expanding effect, where the scrutiny and conversations of one identity open room for that of other invisible identities. *Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman* initiated conversations about not only the representation of women, but also of other minorities in big production like superhero blockbuster films. *The New York Times* wrote about *Captain Marvel*:

“The message of the film is conveyed less through the story than through its casting: women and people of color need to have starring roles in major Hollywood productions, which, at the moment, mainly mean big-budget superhero movies, the most profitable films in the industry. Its implicit subject is more than representation—it’s also the redistribution of power in Hollywood.” (Brody)

We see here the engagement for representation at an industry and studio level, where the article points out that the presence of strong women as part of the cast is the most politically driven aspect of the film. I argue that, although I do not necessarily agree with the *New York Times*’ comments on the lack of aesthetic and visual empowerment, I do believe that they open up an interesting dialogue around casting and representation at the Hollywood studio level.

Hypervisibility allows the film to generate conversations around different areas of representation, for which these dialogues of diversity are not mutually exclusive among identities. The representation of the ultimate strong female protagonist is but a start in a larger fight for diversity that continuously questions: how can we represent other minorities on screen? How does casting and director choices reflect on the efforts of diversity? How can we positively empower an underrepresented identity? It is this constant cycle of response, questioning, and reaction that will create newer forms of not only the ultimate strong female lead, but so many other new types of protagonists.

Chapter 2: Race

“We have yet to match our actual numbers in this country - and that’s black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American roles in front of and behind the cameras- across the board, we have a long way to go. We have some things to celebrate... but we can always do more.” - Gabrielle Union

Representation of race in the film industry, both on and off-screen, is a reflection of the racial tensions and dynamics of the sociopolitical environment in the US and the world, where opportunities for the inclusion of non-white filmmakers, actors, and overall imagery of diverse racial identities have been scarce. Imagery of such identities, particularly African American, have gone through a rough history of negative and stereotypical presentations, from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to the Blaxploitation movement to independent projects, the representation of race has been highly discussed in the fight for positive imagery. As the conversation about diversity in Hollywood and mainstream cinema has become more urgent, race has been one of the most notable areas of debate. Mentioned in the introduction, the very tweet that started the boycott of the Oscars, #OscarsSoWhite, was directly criticizing the lack of actors and directors of color nominated for the awards. In particular, both the 2015 and 2016 Academy Awards were heavily condemned for the exclusion of directors such as Ava DuVernay and actors like Will Smith who were not nominated despite their respective films, *Selma* (2014) and *Concussion* (2015), being nominated for the Golden Globes. Thus, hypervisibility allows discussions of opportunity and imagery that positively celebrates a wide range of stories and images of racially diverse communities to take place, and hence seek a change in the homogeneity of the industry.

This second chapter will focus on the representation of race in film through the process of hypervisibility, specifically on the tokenistic nature of the representation of racial minorities in Hollywood. I will explore overt representation as it relates to Hispanic and African American minorities, where audiences are quick to criticize the selective measures of Hollywood

executives to promote diversity. This chapter will analyze the never-ending cycle of tokenism that sees mainstream cinema celebrating a narrow representation of race that, through the exploitation of historical events and racial dynamics framed as inspiring stories, looks to appease audiences. Then, the process of hypervisibility sees audiences criticizing this tokenism and the improper representation of racial minorities and pointing out alternative films that they believe to offer better representations. I will first closely read *Green Book* (Farrelly, 2018) as an example of tokenism, where the film presents a whitewashed story of the racial dynamic between a Black singer and a White driver during the post-civil war era. The film won the Academy Award for its representation of racial tensions and relationships but was heavily criticized by audiences as a white savior story that idealizes the black experience. I will contrast *Green Book*'s controversial win with its fellow Academy Award nominee *Roma* (Cuaron, 2018), an autobiographical tale of the Mexican household dynamic between the Hispanic nuclear family and their Native Oaxacan housemaid during the 1970's Mexican Dirty War. The film was praised for its passionate portrayal of Latin American class dynamics and the microcosmic environment of society in the nuclear household. Audiences were rooting via social media for the film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, but it was ultimately beaten by *Green Book*, a decision that infuriated the public and engaged them in a conversation over the media around the legitimacy of the awards. I will argue that the Academy's selective tokenism is a safe measure that seeks to show affirmative actions towards diversity. Yet, through hypervisibility, criticism and dialogue about this tokenism seek to empower other films with a more accurate representation of race and to call for the industry to seize the production of tokenistic films with loose depictions of race.

Selective Tokenism and the Alternative: Race in *Green Book* and *Roma*

The Academy Award for Best Picture in 2014 and 2017 were awarded to films centered around black history, culture and experience, *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Moonlight* (2016) respectively, showing progress in their representation and diversity. Although *Moonlight*'s win came as a surprise that promoted diversity, audiences contend that the former film and others before feel tokenistic. This so-called Oscar bait alludes to the intrinsic pleasure Academy members feel when voting for these token films as a way to show they care about diversity.

Nevertheless:

“The existence of these movies is proof of progress in an industry that remains overwhelmingly white. They arrive in theaters as the United States is swept up in debates over mass incarceration, police violence, diversity and arguments about what “race” means. It is hardly just a black-and-white issue. But what the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal called “An American Dilemma” — the legacy of African enslavement and forms of white supremacy — remains polarizing.” (Dargis and Scott)

The constant presentation of particular topics like slavery, civil rights and racial dynamics in film revolve around the importance of such as a historical record and a push in the right direction. However, hypervisibility recognizes their exploitative nature that feels tokenistic and demeaning as these films keep overshadowing other works that deal with more diverse topics. Moreover, this further acknowledges the selective and calculated measures of the homogeneous Hollywood sphere that navigates racial diversity negatively.

“[Hollywood] deprives minority viewers of role models and ignores the contributions of people of color. They also marginalize racial minorities through their omission. Through selective exclusion, racial minorities are included in film in a way that constrains or misrepresents them. One type of selective exclusion is the ignoring of national and ethnic

variations within a race, for instance, by using one group to represent all the other or by homogenizing sub-groups into a generic [one]” (Larson)

Through the process of hypervisibility, audiences call out selective exclusion in order to seek a systemic change in the industry.

Selective tokenism scrutinizes a particular film that the Academy deems representative and utilizes it as a front to demonstrate action towards diversity in the industry. When we look at *Moonlight*, we see a film directed and written by African Americans with an all-black cast, presenting an intersectional, heartfelt story of the black queer experience of a man navigating an oppressive society. Although the film is deemed worthy of its nominations and its win for Best Picture, it nonetheless sparked a popular conversation towards the Academy’s selective tokenism of that year’s “black film”.

“A hastily changed headline for one outlet originally ran: “Academy members looking to address OscarSoWhite will be all over *Moonlight*”, while another took the time to point out that white people can also relate to a film about black gay love. The former shows that for many within the industry, films from ethnic minorities or about issues outside the few Hollywood mainly focus on are still seen as a token. Others made the case that any push toward a more diverse Hollywood could leave everyone’s favorite stars out in the cold.” (Bakare)

The same selective tokenistic behavior has constantly been applied to the nominations and recognitions in the acting categories. At the 2020’s Awards Best Actress nominations, only one of them, Cynthia Erivo (*Harriet*, 2019), was a woman of color. Media outlets called out that “the movie received mixed reviews and was far from a box office smash, yet the Academy decided Erivo’s performance was Oscar-worthy. It wasn’t—it was simply fine” (Pavlakos). The problem was not the lack of potential nominees and non-white actresses in films that year, in fact, the Academy overlooked phenomenal performances by actresses of color.

“Nominations could have gone to Awkwafina, who knocked her performance out of the park in *The Farewell* or Lupita Nyong’o with her performance in *Us*, where she took on two polar opposite roles in the same film. Neither actress is white: Awkwafina is Chinese-Korean-American and Lupita Nyong’o is Kenyan and born in Mexico.”(Pavlakos)

In fact, Awkwafina won the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Film-Comedy or Musical some weeks prior as the first Asian American to win the award. We can clearly see that the Academy selected a particular token actress, Cynthia Erivo, to nominate and celebrate to promote their efforts for diversity. Audiences took to social media to call out their disappointment in Awkwafina’s ‘Oscar nomination snub’. Users expressed opinions such as: “My happy mood for *Parasite* started fading when I realized *The Farewell* especially Awkwafina was snubbed” (@lovinbrown). It is important to also highlight that Erivo’s role was that of Harriet Tubman, a powerful historical figure from the slavery era. We can then clearly see that the Academy favorites characterizations of these historical instances, as a form of social justice responsibility while ignoring films and stories of diverse experiences beyond historical dramas.

I propose that hypervisibility, as a process, allows for audiences to recognize selective tokenism and engage in a popular conversation. Moreover, audiences productively empower and celebrate actors, filmmakers, and stories of diverse races and ethnicities and their accomplishments. As well, they discuss and reject Hollywood’s tokenism, and deconstruct the improper representation of minorities on and off-screen, signaling options for change to the industry. In itself, hypervisibility should push for Hollywood, at the top level, to understand audiences’ conversations about race and to seek ways to improve by adhering to their demands.

“The barrier to entry is the film’s devoted adherence to the oh-so-tired Social Progress film model, created to allow white audiences to connect to their humanity and create a

separation between their own sense of righteousness and that eternal bugaboo known as racism.”(McFarland)

As I mentioned before, hypervisibility should produce conversations that cause action and reaction towards progressive measures of representation. This chapter will analyze *Green Book* and *Roma* as two examples of the hypervisibility of race in film, where *Green Book* operates as the Academy’s token for diversity and *Roma* as its alternative that is overseen.

Directed by Peter Farrelly, *Green Book* (2018) journeys through the biographical story of African American jazz and classical pianist Don Shirley and his friendship with Italian American Tony Vallelonga, his driver, and bodyguard during a tour of the Deep American South in 1962. The film follows a particular white savior narrative, where the relationships and racial dynamics between the two characters frame Tony as Don Shirley’s humanizing guide to the simplicities and joys of life, overcoming his own racist behavior in a redeeming arc that saves Don Shirley from prejudice. The film was dubbed “Hollywood’s 2018 effort to make mainstream audiences feel good about Social Progress” (McFarland), ultimately winning the Academy Award for Best Picture. After the previous two years’ scandals on the lack of racial representation during the awards, *Green Book* win comes as a suspicious, yet obvious, selective tokenistic approach as a reaction to the past criticism on diversity.

The controversy around the film and its Oscar win seem counterproductive to the need for films about race receiving praise, but through the process of hypervisibility, we can see that the public’s reaction is driven by the conversations about the white savior complex presented in the story.

“Critics were less enthusiastic, pointing out how the film fit a little too neatly into a history of white savior films, from *Blood Diamond* to *The Blind Side*. The Root said it “spoon-feeds racism to white people.” *The New York Times* wrote that the film has “very

little that can't be described as crude, obvious and borderline offensive." *Indiewire* labeled Shirley's character a "Magical Negro," whose sole purpose in the film was to change a white man for the better." (Chow)

The film, written by Tony's son himself, clearly favors and focuses on the perspective of Tony, thus framing him as the protagonist and hero of the story, and whitewashing the journey to a simpler story that seeks to idealize racial politics in the South. Moreover, the film is said to alienate Shirley's character from his own sense of identity, estranged from his own 'blackness' as a plot device to try and explain the tense racial structure that forces people like Shirley to hide and isolate. "The film implies that there is no 'safe' place for blacks because the entire country is infected with racism, whether it's overt, passive or institutional" (Abdul-Jabbar). In all, the film seeks to tokenize and capitalize on the surface-level of the historical and political nature of racism in the '60s, a topic that although hard to navigate, appeals to the Academy's sense of social responsibility, making it the ideal film to select as a token.

I characterize this film as an effort to engage in the overt representation of race and racial dynamics, which I believe to be inherent to its selective tokenistic nature. The film is overtly focused on the representation of race and makes it a central plot. As an Academy Award favorite, the film gathers a fantastic cast, with Academy Award winner Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen bringing the characters to life. We can point out specific moments that overtly present the politics of race and seek to focus on the representation of such. For example, at the beginning of the film, when Tony awakes in his home, he finds his colleagues sitting on his sofa watching a baseball game, all who point out in Italian that they are there to keep his wife company just in case. The camera cuts to a point of view shot that looks at the kitchen, where Tony's wife is watching two black men fix a pipe. The point of view shot cuts to a close up that scrutinizes these men and judges them racially. As the men leave, Tony walks into the kitchen and stares at

the cups they drank water from, picking them up with only two fingers and throwing them away. The scene is simple and short, but overtly comments on the prejudice that rules the interaction between races. One of the most notable examples comes halfway through the film: as Tony and Shirley stop at a motel, Tony is alerted that his boss is in trouble at a bar. As he races to the scene, a bloody-faced Shirley is being beaten up and mocked by a group of white men using racial slurs on him. No one at the predominantly white bar seems to care or do anything, until Tony arrives and confronts the men, calmly asking them to hand Shirley over. The men laugh and say Shirley will get what he 'has coming' before being threatened by Tony. The fight ends as the bartender points a shotgun at everyone and asks for the conflict to end. It is interesting to note that the bartender did not do anything before Tony arrived, he was minding his own business and ignoring the fight with Shirley, and only stepped in when another white man was about to be involved. The sequence shows an overt representation of racism and racial politics that portray tensions in the Deep South. Hollywood has always relied on scenes like this; their token films foreground race through the dynamics between races, yet hypervisibility scrutinizes these scenes for audiences to understand their tokenistic nature that fetishizes a white savior narrative.

The film's tokenism, despite Ali's celebrated performance, was highly focused on Tony's characterization and has a lack of representation of Shirley's real experience. The film fails to explore his persona as a singer, and as a black gay man, and rather appears to be a device to portray racism and at a superficial yet impactful level. We can see this in scenes such as when the car breaks down on the way to Raleigh and as Tony fixes the car, Shirley carefully watches a nearby field full of black laborers who stare back at him. The scene is filled with guilt and curiosity, carefully cutting back and forth between the workers and Shirley as to show the

strangeness between the two. As simple as the scene is, it carries commentary on racial dynamics in the South versus in the North, but it fails to go to a deeper level; the scene is short and immediately jumps to the next gig, making it seem lackluster and incomplete. Moreover, another particular scene that follows this same notion is when Shirley is detained at the YMCA in Macon after being found having sexual relations with another man. The scene follows Tony's perspective as he receives the call, walks down to the site and talks with the policemen, bribing them to release Shirley without any trouble. The scene leaves Shirley's sexuality in an undescribed ambiguity, where the encounter is left to the audience's imagination and the scars on his face are to be assumed as assault from whoever caught them. As Shirley is released and they walk to the car, we get no commentary on the interaction, no exploration of what this incident means aside from the focus on Tony saving Shirley through a bribe that the latter disapproves of. It presents an idealized white savior narrative that ignores the queer and racist core and focuses more on Tony's actions to protect his boss. The incident is only briefly referenced later as Shirley apologizes, without explicitly mentioning what happened, and Tony explains he understands it's a complicated world, leaving the moment to an ambiguous air that remains focused on his actions as a white man. These moments utilize Shirley as device to situate the moment of racism and discrimination, but it is Tony who the narrative focuses on and who bears the action. These instances are often depicted by Hollywood, for which hypervisibility makes the audience able to scrutinize them as white savior narratives and question why they are not framed through the perspective of the black man instead. It is said that the lack of depth to his character and the focus on Tony's perspective is due to the writing itself, all done by not only white screenwriters but by Nick Vallelonga, Tony Vallelonga's real son himself, using letters from his father and stories that were supposedly consulted with the Shirley family. Clearly, a white man

without any personal experience on the black and queer reality in the South has no way of framing such a story in a realistic way and is biased towards the portrayal of his father as a positive and heroic figure. Enter the tense conversations on media platforms about the film allowed for Edwin Shirley III and Dr. Maurice Shirley, Don Shirley's nephew, and surviving brother respectively, to come out and comment on the false and fantastic nature of the film. The entire plot itself was described as a "symphony of lies" (Obie) by Shirley III, who clarified that although the two real-life protagonists did in fact work together, they did not have a close friendship. Moreover, the film's characterization of Don Shirley's isolation from his family to endure his blackness and queerness in the South was heavily criticized by Maurice Shirley, who stated that despite the film's claim of his estranged brother, he was a family man and civil rights activist.

"At that point [in 1962 when the events of the film supposedly take place], he had three living brothers with whom he was always in contact. One of the things Donald used to remind me in his later years was he literally raised me. There wasn't a month where I didn't have a phone call conversation with Donald." (Obie)

In response to this backlash, the studio and writer Vallelonga stated their intent to be as truthful as possible and the consultations they made with actors of color such as Octavia Spencer and Mahershala Ali to try and be as respectful as possible to the black experience, but failed to consult the Shirley family. Ali, who played Don Shirley in the film, felt personally responsible about apologizing to the Shirley family and called both the pianist's brother and nephew. He respectfully said: "If I have offended you, I am so, so terribly sorry. I did the best I could with the material I had. I was not aware that there were close relatives with whom I could have consulted to add some nuance to the character." (Harris). I propose that the process of hypervisibility allowed this interaction to happen almost instantly. The film's representation of

race and of Don Shirley as a black pianist engaged Shirley III to be outspoken about the truth, opening up a conversation about historical accuracy that prompted Ali to participate in this dialogue as a reaction. The conversation is then taken to the broader ideas around the selective tokenism and Hollywood's lack of research and respect for particular identities and characters, used only to further storylines such as racial politics and history.

The film still received a lot of praise and positive reactions from audiences. The formulaic and tokenistic nature of a white man and a black man becoming unlikely friends is completely recognized by audiences but justified by its cultural significance. A critic for *RogerEbert.com* stated that the formula “works beautifully for nearly the entirety of its two hour-plus running time. *Green Book* is the kind of old-fashioned filmmaking big studios just don't offer anymore” (Lemire). Other audiences praised Ali's performance and presentation of Shirley's character as he “beautifully captures the complexity of the man who juggles whiskey-soured, morning-after regret with a stubborn pride in his true self” (Ide). Social media users were quick to express content and positive opinions on the representation of racial dynamics.

“Depicting time in 1962 where people were segregated for their skin colors. ‘Dignity always prevails’ something I should keep in my mind. Watching with mixed feelings of sadness and belief in the goodness of people. Masterpiece throughout the clip”
(@Tomoviedairy)

“Just watched @greenbookmovie & am still wiping away tears of joy. Mahershala Ali & Viggo Mortensen were perfection. A beautiful film & so exquisitely acted. Such deserved Oscar nominations by @TheAcademy #GreenBookMovie” (@ImGraceKaufman)

We can point out the particular conversations started by positive comments such as the previous ones. The reactions praise the acting and the powerful message of the film, that although tokenistic, still holds a valuable lesson of racial politics. Hypervisibility allows for reactions that support selective tokenism to take place, where the arguments ignore the controversial

representation of race due to the phenomenal cinematography and acting of the film. These comments become valuable in the larger conversation that seeks to continue questioning what representation of race should look like.

Although the film was highly criticized by both audiences and critics upon its release for its bland and exploitative presentation race and the story of Shirley, it is said to “give audiences — particularly white ones that are eager to consider our era “post-racial” or “color-blind,” or who think black people keep pulling out the “race card” — the ability to leave the theater saying, Whew, the 1960s were a crazy time. Glad we fixed racism!” (Wilkinson). Audiences themselves took to social media to call out this particular issue, mocking and criticizing the absurdity of how the film was championed. For example, one user expressed mockingly: “The guy who made *DUMB AND DUMBER* just solved racism we're so blessed” (@KevinFallon), while another tweeted a “regular reminder that white creators of *Green Book* relied on a fraudulent white savior narrative that isn't even historically accurate” (@AsteadWesley). The industry itself kept being called out for its selective tokenism and for acting “like it wants to hear from marginalized voices but it only wants to see enough of us on screen to feel good and to feel like ~the work~ is being done and it's so embarrassing every time”(@Ayoedebiri). In all, hypervisibility scrutinized the film and criticized it for its missed opportunity to explore an important issue of racial dynamics, and instead favored the selective tokenism that serves as a perfect reaction to the claims of the visibility of race in Hollywood.

The criticism and negative responses to the film occurred after it won the Academy Award for Best Picture over other fan-favorites such as *Roma*. The discussion centered around the obvious selection of the film as a promotion of diversity, criticized by the problematic

aspects of the film. Audiences responded with anger and disappointment that the Academy gave the film its top honor:

“*Green Book* is an inspirational tale of how we can end racism if everyone, regardless of background, just works together. So please welcome the stage the producers of *Green Book*: 1000 white guys who were all born in 1961” (@Gilbertjasono)

“How many more times is the American Negro going to bundle up their hopes and dreams in somebody else's award? #Oscars will continue to #GreenBook you until you finally decide that your opinions matter more than anyone else's.” (@AfricanaCarr)

Reactions at the Awards ceremony itself were exactly similar, where the cameras showed audience members at the theater expressing confusion and disgust. It was reported that some attendees even walked out of the venue and were very vocal about their disappointment. This included, in particular, fellow nominated Director Spike Lee (*BlacKKKlansman*, 2018) who:

“Was visibly angry when *Green Book* was announced as the winner of best picture at the Oscars, waving his arms in disgust and appearing to try to storm out of the Dolby Theatre before he was stopped at the doors. He returned to his seat when the speeches were over.” (@andyjamesdalton)

These negative responses are a clear example of the process of hypervisibility and its relation to selective tokenism. I propose that, given the previous scandals and dialogue about the lack of representation, the Academy sought to respond by selecting a film they believed to be a good standard of diversity. With *Moonlight*'s win two years prior, the members of the Academy probably sought to continue capitalizing on the praise they gained for selecting this film by selecting a token one, *Green Book*, to continue the efforts of diversity. They looked for one with a storyline that is both inspiring and historical, and that plays on the representation of race with diligence. Hypervisibility created this cycle where *Green Book* served as a token response to efforts of diversity, yet was rejected by audiences, sparking a new conversation that pushed the

ideas of representation of race to new arguments. It is here that we introduce the alternative; an underdog film that does a good job at representing race without exploiting it but fails to qualify as the select token for the Academy and Hollywood. The alternative film is highly favored and recognized during the audience reactions through hypervisibility. In this case, the alternative film was *Roma*, the fan favorite for the Best Picture Award film by Alfonso Cuarón which lost the award to *Green Book*.

Directed, produced and written by Academy Award Winner Alfonso Cuarón, the 2018 epic drama film explores the social dynamics of Mexico in 1970s, following the life of the housekeeper of a middle-class family in Mexico City. Premiering at the 75th Venice International Film Festival, the film was released in November 2018 on Netflix for mainstream viewing. The film serves as a semi-autobiographical retelling of Cuarón's own childhood, a thank you letter to his own housekeeper growing up. Cuarón's take on Mexican sociopolitical dynamics and racial representation paint a beautiful and intimate tale, a nostalgic and mythical exploration of a nuclear Hispanic family in the 1970s. On a technical and aesthetic level, Cuarón acts as cinematographer, filming in black and white, and makes a point of exploring deep focus and tracking to portray the somewhat mystic mise-en-scene and the tale of everyday life. The writing and acting of the film were also commended for its personable and powerful depictions of real-life, diving into the complexity of social dimensions in Latin-American culture. Critics labeled it a masterpiece and milestone in filmmaking:

“This tone-poem to his youth is shot through with vivid sensory cues that pulse with equal parts delight, sensuality and sadness. Shot by Cuarón himself in widescreen black-and-white — a format that lends monumentality and permanence to the quotidian, evanescent events depicted here — *Roma* achieves the rare feat of making the personal

authentically political, not through explicit polemic or tortured metaphors, but simply by observing life with enough perspective to reflect it in all its contradictions.” (Hornaday)

The film was praised for its powerful and accurate presentation of race and class, in particular the complex racial dimensions of Latino societies. On a production, off-screen level, the film employs a refreshing take on representation, with Hispanic/Latino producers, cast and crew, and overall production team. In particular, the film casted its main character, an indigenous live-in maid, after a yearlong search for someone that could bring the character to life in the most accurate and intimate way possible. Cuarón casted Yalitza Aparicio, a non-actor, Oaxacan woman who came from a lower socioeconomic status and had been a live-in maid in the past. Her performance was labeled as heartbreaking, beautiful and emotional, for which she became the first indigenous woman to be nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award. Her presence on screen and subsequent press allowed for the greater visibility of both indigenous identities and Hispanic ones in mainstream media, with countless interviews and photoshoots for magazine covers. She has continuously commented on her role in the film, and her newfound fame as a platform for advocacy:

“So the thing is to use this current high to lend visibility [to indigenous communities] and to explain to more people the things that I have been concerned about... We are not new faces, we are simply the people we always were, but who nobody had ever bothered looking at before... I bump into more and more people who say 'Yes I can do this,' and that gives me lots of energy.” (AFP)

We see hypervisibility here taking place as the process through which Aparicio’s presence engages in a conversation about her identity that could ultimately lead to more indigenous people on and off-screen. It is interesting to contrast indigenous racial representation as it has not had as long of a history of development and discussion as the representation of Hispanic or black identities. We could say that Aparicio’s work is a first step to initiate the dialogue around

indigenous imagery which, although will take years to develop, will be subject to high levels of scrutiny through hypervisibility that will accelerate the process.

I characterize *Roma* as having more covert forms of racial representation, where the nature of the film operates more as a nostalgic poem to Cuarón's childhood and Mexican life than an overt push for Latin American imagery. The film does explore themes of racial dynamics but are more intertwined within the overall narrative of family and nostalgia. As per most of Cuarón's films, social class structures are explored in depth in *Roma*, where his deep-focus cinematography explores the class divide between the housemaids and the nuclear family by framing a nostalgic image of the Mexican household. The relationship between the main family and Cleo, the housemaid, takes an interesting focus that is extremely representative of Latin American culture. In countries like Mexico, most middle-class families have at least one housemaid like Cleo living in their home. They become a quasi-member of the nuclear family and are treated as such in a particular context. For example, the grandmother accompanies Cleo to buy a crib, and later takes her to the hospital and helps her when giving birth; actions that show her care for Cleo. In the climax, the two middle children are caught in the waves at the beach on the verge of drowning before Cleo dives into the water, not knowing how to swim, and saves them. When she returns, she hugs the children and is embraced by the rest of the family, who reassure her how much they mean to her. The camera frames a beautifully nostalgic climax, where the deep focus positions the roughness of the sea and the softness of the sand around the focal point of the family embracing. Between sobs, Cleo reveals she wanted her stillborn daughter to have lived and is met with a tighter embrace and Sofia's affirmation that they are all a family. The scene is framed as a disruption of the usual class structure, but also as a key

moment of Latin American representation and the family dynamics that include the housemaid; it cannot function without her.

It is fascinating to note the relationship between the children and Cleo; it seems almost maternal and nurturing, but still divided by the class dynamic. Cleo takes care of the children in every aspect of their lives, she dresses them, cooks for them, cleans, plays with them, etc. just like a mother would do, and is embraced as a nuclear member by the children. We see one of the children playing with Cleo on the rooftops, imagining scenarios and stories while the camera frames the two surrounded by hanging laundry and the neighborhood roofs. The scene is extremely intimate, and absolutely so detailed to the point it is recognizable as Cuarón's own memory. I argue that this scene focuses on the covert representation of Mexican culture, where this relationship seems strange and unfamiliar to most audiences, but nostalgic and endearing to Latino audiences. A particular, and recognizable moment for a Latino childhood that is often overseen. The children interact with Cleo during the film more than they do with both their parents and show an endearing relationship with her. The children are said to be able to cross the class divide more freely, as they are seen engaging in both intimate spaces for the family and spaces designated to the help, such as the kitchen and laundry room. In such a case, the children are able to dismiss and cuss out Cleo freely without repercussions, they throw tantrums and make it clear that they are still Cleo's bosses. These lines are so clearly defined in Mexican and Latino cultures, and the children's innocent nature allow them to engage in a close maternal relationship with Cleo, but still separate themselves freely from her; at the end of the day they are still in a higher class than Cleo.

Nevertheless, the film makes a point to portray the other side of such a dynamic, ranging from more intimate and covert scenes inside the household, to the juxtaposition of the

neighborhood Roma and Cleo's village through a fade out transition. We can further deconstruct the relationship between Cleo and the family, and the way she navigates the space beyond her closeness to the children. She is always present in the household scenes, whether as the main focal point, or in the background, framed by the deep-focus photography. During the course of the film, the family goes on a trip to the mountains and to the beach, both in which they take Cleo to help. She is allowed access to these spaces and is brought as a helping hand with the children but separated to the rest of the family and grouped with the rest of the house maids and cooks who reside there. The social classes are divided within a confined space that operates as a microcosmos of the overall Mexican society. If we further look at spaces, we can analyze the particular way Cuarón explores the spaces within the household and how they represent class and race. Cleo, as the housemaid is tasked with cleaning and keeping the house in order, for which she is capable of moving through the spaces freely. Throughout the film, Cuarón utilizes a deep focus long shot that frames all the rooms in the house, and we see Cleo moving through the spaces going about her routine and tasks without interruption. Moreover, when the family occupies the space, Cleo is unable to move freely onto these, and stops herself from entering unless granted permission. She lowers her head and responds diligently to orders, as we track with the camera into the space almost scrutinizing the divided environment. The clear divide portrays the particular reflective dynamic of a lower-class member of the household. The scenes are simple but present a covert but clear representation of class divisions in Latino communities. The cinematic coding is extremely personal to Cuarón, and functions as an invitation for the audience to engage in a particular form of representation: the experience of growing up in Mexico in the 70s.

Acting as cinematographer, Cuarón focused on making the experience of the film as immersive as possible. He sought to create the feel of a memory, an atmospheric nostalgia that through the black and white image, mirrors an old photograph from Cuarón's own childhood. His use of deep-focus photography and tracking long takes help bring the scene to life by inviting the audience into the environment, almost as a part of the nuclear household. Moreover, the film does not have a soundtrack or scoring, but rather makes a critical emphasis on the diegesis, utilizing the surrounding sounds, noises, and lighting to create a multidimensional vibrant scene. I propose that this immersive environment is key to Cuarón's representation of Latin American society, and thus of race. He seeks to envelop the audience in his own memory, a conception of a Hispano-American household that reproduces cultural and racial signifiers through powerful imagery that represent the Latinx experience. Moreover, the film makes a point to present the diversity within the Latin American community, with the more Hispanic-white characters and the indigenous ones interacting along the lines of a classist society. I believe that this diverse imagery is detrimental for Cuarón's own agenda of representation, which seeks to explore the intimate experience of a Hispano-American household. I propose that hypervisibility scrutinizes Cuarón's imagery to engage in a conversation that discusses race and class dynamics within Latin American society; all at a mainstream level across digital platforms beyond just Latino audiences that identify with the film.

Roma received particularly positive reactions upon its release on Netflix, with critics and audiences praising every aspect of the film; from the cinematography and script, to the acting and the directing. The film was particularly commended as a point of pride and advancement for Latin American representation and Mexican filmmaking, celebrated across the world and the Hispanic community. Many Latino film critics took the spotlight to share their love and praise

for the film, with most calling it a masterpiece and a beautiful tale full of memories. Critic Claudia Puig stated that: “Cuarón’s gorgeous, revelatory opus feels recognizable even to those who grew up on the other side of the border. An exhilarating masterpiece, *Roma* is at once quintessentially Mexican and profoundly universal” (Estaff). Others praised the narrative and the focus on the Hispano-American household, the relationship dynamics that become “Cuarón’s gift to us [as] a chance to remember, or even experience for the first time, what it feels to be loved by someone that way” (Estaff). Moreover, Latino critics pointed out the tapestry-like aspect of the film, where “Cuarón parallels the struggle of Mexico with that of Cleo. There are thousands of women like her in Mexico, whose stories will never be told. In many ways, *Roma* honors the legacy of those women and what they do for Mexico. *Roma* is Mexico” (Luna). In particular, these Latino critics and writers brought attention to the powerful message of love and nostalgia the film brings and point towards the significance of it as a conversation starter around Latino representation in a time of political turmoil in America.

“In a time of so much animosity towards Latin American immigrants, here comes one of our industry’s preeminent artists to share a story that humanizes and radically empathizes with an indigenous Mexican woman. The result of Cuarón’s efforts is a unique vision that’s electrifying and moving, not unlike life itself” (Estaff)

The film enters the process of hypervisibility as these underrepresented Latino critics are able to discuss the film at a more personal level and engage in a conversation about what it means to be represented in such a captivating film. Their reviews become a particular starting point for non-Latino audiences to understand and participate in a more informed conversation around the representation of this race and ethnicity. More so, the presence of these critics could become conducive to more representation of Latinos off-screen, whether on writing roles as critics, or as directors like Cuarón himself.

Beyond the Latino and Hispanic critics, the film was received with immense praise by high-profile media outlets and critics, who deemed the film a poetic masterpiece of our generation. In particular, these critics made comments on Cuarón's clear intentions to make race more visible to the mainstream audience, as well as the film's overall sense of representation in a poetically visual way.

“What if, Cuarón asks, we invested individuals and moments usually ignored or relegated to invisibility with that same beauty and inherent worth? With *Roma*, one of our finest filmmakers has delved into an experience uniquely his own to create something that feels simultaneously sui generis and universal, deeply private and instantly recognizable beautiful style.” (Hornaday)

Media outlets were quick to point out the progressive nature of the film's depiction of Mexican life in a positive light. I propose that hypervisibility allows these critics to be able to recognize the positive imagery in its covert form of representation, and thus point out the sociocultural importance of the film. Hypervisibility engages them in the reflection of Cuarón's themes and images, providing a space for them to initiate a high-level conversation about representation on their own media platforms. Brian Tallerico, a critic for *Roger Ebert*, added a heartfelt reflection at the end of his 5 star-rated review of the film. He expressed how strongly he felt about the film and the need for him to wonder what Ebert himself would've thought about it:

“When it ended, I thought more than ever about how he would have written about it. I think that's because it so completely embodies what he considered the role of great cinema as an empathy machine. We should be thankful there are films like *Roma* keeping that machine humming” (Tallerico)

His comment goes beyond the analysis of the technical and emotional aspects of the film, but dives into its importance as a piece of cultural record of Hispanic representation, and the representation of race in film as a whole. We could argue that hypervisibility is then a driver for

these comments to serve as evidence for the Hollywood executive to produce more films with similar characteristics of personability and representation.

At a mainstream level, audiences engaged in conversations around the positive impact of the film. In particular, audiences appealed to the emotional and representational level of Cuarón's film, and shared thoughts and comments on their own personal relationship and reaction to the film's empowering imagery. Some expressed how the "film will tug hard at your heart" (@QueenCatia) and how "it was so real, so strong, so full of emotions and so touching" (@Kirkanart). But beyond the emotional responses, viewers expressed the importance of the film and its significance on the discourse of representation. One user expressed: "*Roma* reveals the magnitude of the insight that everyone, no matter his/her place in the social hierarchy nor skin color, has a right to his/her own story. Viva storytelling. Viva *Roma*" (@Cinematiculturas). Another emphasized its relevance to the dialogues of the intersectionality of race and gender: "In this moment of women rising up to the challenges and the potential of claiming our power together, *Roma* is a must-see movie for women from all walks of life" (@InStyle). As per my previous examples, we can see how hypervisibility allows for social media users to freely comment on the emotional and technical aspects of the film and engage in a dialogue that praises its active representation of race. Ultimately, these comments and conversations become the basis for the demand for further works of equal, or better, representation of diverse racial communities and identities.

As the award season approached, the film was a clear contender for both nominations and wins, with immense support from audiences, actors, critics, and filmmakers. I propose that hypervisibility plays a particular role in the process of nominations, where the positive reactions and overall engagements online make it a more visible and accessible choice for Academy

members to recognize. Moreover, as a film centered around diversity and minority representation, hypervisibility allows it to stand out as a particular choice that will help the Academy further the efforts of diversity in Hollywood. Although this could be argued as a passive form of selective tokenism, I believe that the process hypervisibility makes Academy members more conscious about their votes for nominations, ensuring they react properly to the criticism on homogenous film selections.

At the 91st Academy Awards, *Roma* was nominated in 10 different categories, including Best Director, Best Foreign Language Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress. The film was a clear top contender and fan-favorite for most of these awards, which I believed to have been caused by the process of hypervisibility; voters were engaged in the conversation of the film's representation of race and responded accordingly. Moreover, the film's nominations actually marked a few milestones for representation itself at a systemic level. Producer Gabriela Rodriguez became the very first Latina woman to be nominated for a Best Picture Award, while Yalitza Aparicio became the first indigenous Latina to ever be nominated for the awards, as well as for a Best Actress award. Aparicio's nomination came as a big point of conversation in the dialogue on representation, for which she commented that her hopeful takeaway for audiences to see her at the Awards was "That anyone can actually go after their dreams, that you're not limited by your race or your class or your ethnicity or your socioeconomic conditions...there is room for everybody" (@Participant). Her comments open up the arguments for further hypervisibility of both Hispanic American and indigenous communities, engaging in a dialogue around the importance of figures and imagery at every level of film, both on and off-screen. As for Cuarón's nominations, as both a director and the film itself, he dedicated the nomination to Mexico and to his culture, stating that "this is a Mexican

film in every front” (Ramos). Moreover, he directly addressed the significance of its nomination as a response to criticism on the lack of diversity at the Academy awards, thus engaging in the conversations that hypervisibility enables. He firmly stated that *Roma* “is not what you call ‘Oscar bait’” (Ramos), showing a particular awareness of the selective tokenism of the Academy as a result of hypervisibility. He continued: “So I’m thrilled this is happening. Most importantly, audiences are embracing a character who is a domestic character from an indigenous background” (Ramos).

On the night of the ceremony, the film won the awards for Best Cinematography, Best Director, and Best Foreign Language Picture, becoming the first Mexican feature to win the award. Upon receiving the award, Cuarón dedicated the accolade to the Mexican people and to the strong women that raised him. He used the platform as a moment to initiate the conversation around the importance of representation and the work that is yet to come. Per hypervisibility, the Academy’s response to claims of representation reflected itself on the celebration of this film as the Best Foreign Language Picture of the year, for which Cuarón commended them for it. He thanked the Academy “for recognizing a film centered around an indigenous woman” and stated that: “as artists, our job is to look where others don’t. This responsibility becomes much more important in times when we are being encouraged to look away” (Hollywood Reporter). I argue that this acceptance speech initiated another cycle of the hypervisibility process, wherein his call to action for filmmakers and gatekeepers in the Hollywood system will not only generate a larger conversation at both the audience and executive level, but will ultimately lead to a response from the Academy to recognize more films of such nature.

Controversy came as the winner of the Best Picture award was announced to be *Green Book*, despite its controversy and the fact *Roma* was the clear fan favorite. Audiences both at the awards and online were quick to show disappointment and criticize the decision of the academy.

“No. Unfair. *Roma* is out of this world. Not only for the emotional scenes but because the movie puts women and domestic workers at the center of the movie.
#AcademyAwards2019 #RomaCuaron” (@elenaariasortiz)

“#Roma didn't win for Best Picture (mass eye roll for Green Book's win) and @YalitzaAparicio didn't win Best Actress in a leading role, and yes I'm disappointed. But not hopeless” (@neaschulze)

Some users were bold to accuse and speculate on the reasoning behind *Green Book* beating *Roma* to the award, alluding to the notions of selective tokenism at a popular level of discussion. They exclaimed casual racism, and called out the Academy's weak efforts to appear more diverse:

“Every year I'm forced to hear the absolute brain rot reasons these voters come up w [sic] for not voting for a good movie. Reminds me how some judges last year explicitly didn't vote for *Get Out* because Oh No it's about racism” (@hervorin)

It is here I propose that hypervisibility becomes the most relevant as a process. We can see audiences, both mainstream and industry professionals, dialoguing about the disappointment about *Roma*'s 'Oscar snub'. The conversation did not relate to technical and professional proficiency, it did not look at *Roma* or *Green Book* in terms of the cinematographic skill or overall quality. It revolved around the cultural significance of each film, the themes, and its importance as pieces of representation. Audiences claimed that *Roma* was a much more important film for representation deserving of the award, while *Green Book* remained the same old tale of the white savior narrative. We can see here the idea behind Selective Tokenism and the Alternative, with *Green Book* being the Academy's selection of 'proper representation' that

appeases the demand for representation and diversity. As an alternative, *Roma* fails to come in as a film that can. In the past, films such as *12 Years a Slave* and *Moonlight* served as the Academy's token selection, given their representation of race in social and historical contexts - namely racism - and did not receive much backlash after they won their respective awards. Moreover, I argue that *Green Book's* immense criticism for 'snubbing' *Roma* is due to the hypervisibility process, in which audiences are able to scrutinize and recognize new aspects of *Green Book's* problematic representation and criticize it in dialogues. In the past, the concept of selective tokenism was called out by more educated critics and audiences, but through hypervisibility, *Green Book* is able to be recognized as the Academy's problematic response to criticism, and *Roma* as a positive alternative that is scrutinized as proper representation.

It is important to note that both *Roma* and *Green Book* were both produced by the same production company: Participant Media. Known for its political and social engagement, the company has a long history of promoting and financing films that have a deep sense of social responsibility and deal with complicated issues that require visibility such as racial dynamics. Hypervisibility allows us to raise the questions as to how the same studio could have produced two films that differ greatly in their efforts of representation and promotes space for discussion on this. I believe that this shines insight into how there must be a consciousness of diversity and proper representation at all levels of production: *Green Book* was composed of a predominantly white team of directors, writers, and producers, whereas *Roma* made the effort to have everyone involved, including the crew, be Latino. I propose that hypervisibility promoted Cuarón's efforts to insist on this Latino crew, which can serve as a visible example for not only Participant Media's future productions but for other studios to be more conscious about who they hire for these diverse projects.

Hypervisibility works as a process of response and action, for which the criticism the Academy received for its selective tokenism was responded by the results of the following year's Academy Awards. The clear favorite was *Parasite* (2019), a South Korean film by Bong-Joon Ho that was praised for its active representation of East Asian culture and society at a mainstream level. The film won both the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film and Best Picture, becoming the international film to do so. It can be said that its success functioned as the Academy's affirmation to the need for and accomplishments of diversity. Audiences were thrilled for its win and took to media platforms to not only show support for the film, but call it justice for *Roma*; a course correction by the Academy to promote diversity.

“Oscars 2019: Disappointed when *Roma*, another foreign-language film bagged Best International Feature & Best Director, but lost in the Best Picture race.

Oscars 2020: #Parasite, another foreign-language film I've been rooting for ever since I watched it has won the Best Picture!” (@VijayIsMyLife)

We can break down this particular dialogue into my proposed process of hypervisibility: audiences criticized the Academy as a response to *Green Book*'s token win against *Roma*, initiating a dialogue that encouraged the Academy to respond with new measures of diversity, thus granting the award to *Parasite* the following year as a reaction.

Hypervisibility, as a process, allows the representation of race in film to be scrutinized by audiences under a socio-critical lens, recognizing patterns and imagery that is conversed on questions of proper representation. *Parasite*'s win in 2020 marked a step further in the representation of more diverse races on and off-screen in mainstream Hollywood. Moreover, as a cyclical process, *Parasite*'s win has and will engage audiences in more conversations about the future of representation, begging the question: what's next? Will more diverse films by diverse filmmakers be recognized next year? There are still multiple racial identities that have not been

scrutinized or affirmed by hypervisibility, some which remain completely invisible to the Hollywood mainstream sphere. However, I propose that the process will allow for a slow, but somewhat steady growth in opportunities for underrepresented races to appear in film. And, although Selective Tokenism remains an issue, I believe hypervisibility will allow for the Alternatives to be scrutinized and recognized, brought to the spotlight through conversations that encourage the need for racial diversity in film.

Chapter 3: Sexuality

“The experience of going to a theater and seeing the audience cheer on that same-sex kiss at the end, what that meant to me as a gay person, I’m not sure I had any awareness even before the film, as much as I did after, and in some ways, it made me realize, there really needs to be more movies across the board that are doing this and that are giving audiences in theaters these experiences”-Greg Berlanti

Similar to the last two chapters, representation of diversity of sexuality in film has been a clear reflection of the sociopolitical attitudes of the real world towards Queer identities⁴. With the exponential rise of LGBTQ+ rights and civil movements post-Stonewall, there has been increased visibility of diverse sexual identities. The 2015 US Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage was a particular milestone that laid the groundwork for higher levels of acceptance and visibility. In film and media, this rise in social acceptance made for the increase in representation of LGBTQ+ identities possible in Hollywood and mainstream cinema on and off-screen.

Despite the developments in representation for other identities, there has been minimal visibility of sexual orientation, following a unique path of production. From the strict rules of the Hays Code to the hypersexualized female characters in modern Hollywood, sexuality has been navigated in film within very distinct heteronormative parameters. Imagery in film is inherently heterosexual, and there is a subconscious assumption that all characters and relationships follow the status quo. Whether the film is overtly exploring romance or sexuality, or neither, it remains visibly heterosexual and heteronormative. Every year, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) releases a thorough report that analyzes LGBTQ+ representation and

⁴ In this chapter, I will utilize the term Queer as simplifying umbrella label for non-heterosexual identities, grouping homosexuality, asexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, and all other identities that fit into the LGBTQ+ group together for the sake of simplicity.

visibility during the previous year's slate of film releases. Their latest report, released in 2019, found a particular increase in Queer visibility from previous years reporting that:

“Of the 110 films GLAAD counted from the major studios in 2018, 20 (18.2 percent) contained characters identified as LGBTQ. This is a significant increase of 5.4 percent, and up six films from the previous year's 12.8 percent (14 of 109 films). This is the second-highest percentage of inclusive films found in the seven-year history of this report, second to 18.4 percent of films (23 of 125) in 2016” (GLAAD).

It is interesting to point out that the highest percentage of films came about in 2016, the year after the major Hollywood scandals of diversity #OscarSoWhite and #TimesUp, and the start of what I call the process of hypervisibility. Thus, I propose that this significant increase was due to Hollywood's response to audiences' negative reactions to the lack of diversity as part of the process of hypervisibility. The 2018 report “tallied 45 total LGBTQ characters among all mainstream releases in 2018, up from 28 in 2017” (GLAAD). As exciting as this increase might seem, this is still an extremely low number of characters in a year's worth of high production films. Queer representation is still in its early stages of development, yet hypervisibility is a process that functions as a catalyzer to increase representation at a faster exponential rate.

The representation of sexual orientation and sexuality are quite different to navigate to that of gender and race. Sexuality is a more internal part of one's identity, meaning it is not necessarily expressed at a physical and physiognomic level the way race and gender tend to be. Although these can also be hard to clearly identify, their more external nature makes them usually faster to identify in comparison to sexuality. Thus, I believe that there are two unique aspects that hinder the representation of diverse sexual identities on and off-screen beyond the usual problems of representation explored throughout this work. The first one relates to off-screen representation, where filmmakers and actors' sexual orientation is usually kept secret and

private, avoiding the visibility of LGBTQ+ people in Hollywood until they choose, or are forced, to come out very publicly. This coming out process, scrutinized by the media and audiences online, can be both quite rough on the person receiving attention and perhaps hate, and inspiring for LGBTQ+ audiences who are moved by the visibility of these figures. The second aspect relates to the on-screen representation of sexuality, which is sometimes kept ambiguous and minimal in the story, making it hard to navigate and identify Queer characters. Mainstream cinema, even when presenting queer storylines, are more covert with the way they present queer sexual expression to avoid criticism from conservative audiences. Started by the Hays Code and the lack of LGBTQ+ acceptance in society, Queer sexuality is unjustly treated as a secondary area, repressed by ambiguity and covert codes, it fails to deliver a realistic, positive and identifiable representation of the Queer experience.

This third chapter will focus on the representation of LGBT+ and Queer identities in mainstream cinema, focusing on the portrayal of the Queer experience through hypervisibility. I will primarily be looking at the representation of male homosexual characters and storylines: their presence is not only idealized and fetishized by audiences through comments online, but also criticized because they are offering a filtered representation of the gay experience. I argue that Hollywood navigates queer identities with the goal of simultaneously pleasing audiences who demand diversity and those who are more comfortable with heteronormative imagery. This chapter will analyze the concept of Queer Filtering in mainstream Hollywood as a form of representation of Queer imagery that is seen as both harmless and progressive. Hypervisibility has encouraged Hollywood and mainstream cinema to include and produce Queer-centric films due to audience demand, but they take a very careful approach that attempts to not anger conservative audiences. Hollywood seeks to make LGBTQ+ identities more digestible for

mainstream audiences by simplifying and normalizing the Queer experience. I will briefly look at *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as a pre-hypervisibility era Queer film to examine the contrast in Hollywood's affirmative reaction through hypervisibility post-2015 and prior to it. Moreover, I will analyze the 2017 Academy Award winner for Best Picture, *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) as a complex example of representation during the hypervisibility era. This analysis will juxtapose the pre-hypervisibility era and its lack of awareness and conversational engagement, with *Moonlight's* high level of responses and reactions due to hypervisibility, looking at the way Queer filtering and Queer representation has evolved. I will then be closely analyzing the Academy Award-winning film *Call Me By Your Name* (Guadagnino, 2017) as a case study for Queer Filtering and its relationship to the process of hypervisibility. I propose that these two films maintain a level of Queerness that seeks to appease and affirm Queer audiences but is Queer filtered to make the film more digestible for general audiences. Similar to my previous case studies, I will examine the critics' and audience responses participating in the process of hypervisibility seeking to cause a reaction from Hollywood.

Queer Filtering: Sexual Ambiguity in *Brokeback Mountain*, *Moonlight* and *Call Me By Your*

Name

As we deconstruct the way LGBTQ+ identities are and have been represented on screen, we can see that they frequently participate in covert forms of representation. Much like real life Queer people, Queer characters have always been present in cinema, but used to remain hidden and invisible to audiences due to the heteronormative industry ruled by the lack of LGBTQ+ acceptance. However, there are sometimes small and specific codes for attributes that can be read through a Queer lens, and still be ignored by the larger audience. These attributes are what have

been called Queer Coding: a subtle way of including queering attributes on-screen while avoiding any kind of specific backlash from the conservative norms of Hollywood. They are easily ignored and easily dismissed to avoid trouble with any production codes or the social discomfort to homosexuality from conservative audiences. Queer Coding is defined as the inclusion of specific codes that implicitly and covertly allude to a Queer identity within characters and storylines. These codes can be as subtle as glances, clothing and mannerisms, or as obvious as stereotypically queer characterizations. Whether intentional or accidental, Queer coding can be both work against and for the LGBTQ+ community. Some particular possible examples lie in the Queer coding of characters that have been claimed by the Queer community, decoding them as explicitly Queer and turning them into Queer role model, icon, and positive figure.

“Take, for example, Xena, a character who was not, necessarily, canonically queer, but whose more masculine interests and demeanor, coupled with her general disinterest in the company of men (or anyone, really) and her intensely close relationship with her sidekick Gabrielle, turned her into one of the preeminent queer female heroes of the '90s. Despite not being, inherently, a lesbian, Xena has been claimed by the queer community.” (Ennis)

These positive Queer codes encourage audiences, specifically Queer ones, to react with encouragement for the inclusion of queerer imagery, and are potentially prompted to dialogue online about the positive effect of these iconic characters. Nevertheless, there are also negative uses of Queer coding; conscious or unconscious, some characters are particularly queered to portray strange and deviant attitudes to accentuate character attributes, usually villains.

“Consider villains from Disney movies, for example, who tend to fall into stereotypes on either side of the dichotomy. Male villains tend to be more effeminate than their hyper-masculine heroic counterparts (think Scar vs. Simba or Hades vs. Hercules), while female villains are devious and corrupting in comparison to their sweet, wholesome heroines

(Maleficent, Ursula, the Wicked Stepmother, Mother Gothel, etc.). These villainous depictions are direct holdouts from the days when creators were encouraged to present queer women as corrupting influences and queer men as less than manly.” (Ennis)

The Queer coding of villainous characters becomes a problematic source of subconscious recognition, where audiences equate the coded queer attributes to negative traits they must distrust, further enhancing preconceived notions against the queer community. I believe that the most important part of Queer Coding is that regardless of how subtle or obvious these codes are to the audience, there are no explicit mentions, confirmations, or acknowledgements of the coded character or situation as actually and undoubtably Queer. This covert form of representation is meant to hint at a vague form of Queer imagery that in a way, actually mirrors the Queer reality of concealing one’s identity in fear of being recognized, scrutinized, and in the worst case, discriminated against. Nevertheless, I believe that in this era of hypervisibility, Queer coding is easily and more prominently identified by audiences, who are encouraged to initiate dialogues online that both help identify queer codes in characters and stories as well as encouraging discussions on the impact these have. We can see for example a variety of social media users who have tweeted discussion on the issue:

“Queercoding characters that are solely meant to be viewed satirically is subtle homophobia but y’all aren’t ready for that conversation” (@desticls)

“(Thinking) maybe i am simply tired of being a queer and only seeing myself in coding. Maybe I want more people to say what they mean instead of putting up barriers that can be interpreted as plausible deniability.” (@wrenwhite_)

“Tbh i appreciate new characters that are lgbt+, i prefer them over ones that were preciously written as cishet because that just feeds the ppl who say lgbt+ rep is forced, but yeah queer-coding in characters should definitely be addressed” (@kidlcki)

“I’ve seen talks about queer coding of villains for years, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen popular discourse explicitly mention how the flamboyant mannerisms are a deliberate choice of a queer filmmaker. Maybe I just didn’t notice but like. Holy shit.”

(@DiniHartArt)

Driven by the hypervisibility of sexual orientation, these examples all point towards what the conversation around Queer representation and Queer coding is like online: audiences seem to have specific elements of Queer coding they want to highlight to other users (its intentionality, effect on audiences, prevalence), but they all agree that Queer coding must be addressed and discussed productively. As an example of the process of hypervisibility, these audiences are interacting around seeking an answer to the question as to what Queer representation should look like. Hypervisibility encourages the recognition of the issues with queer coding and representation on and off-screen for audiences to comment on and seek an affirmative response from Hollywood.

According to how hypervisibility functions, the aforementioned dialogues on Queer Coding were essential in prompting a corrective reaction from Hollywood. The market for Queer imagery became clear to them as profitable through these comments, but the constraints of the socio-political nature of the topic makes it harder for these mainstream studios to navigate without angering other markets. Their reaction to appease audience responses, and to tap into this growing market, becomes either the explicit affirmation of a character’s queer nature or a slight increase in overtness of the queer codes to ensure they can be read as queer more easily. However, these queer moments are still somewhat removed from the general narrative, not acted on, or unconfirmed through the narrative of the film. In particular, the queerness of the film or character is hinted at and discussed outside of the film, but is subtle and small in the actual images. It becomes easy to dismiss if conservative audiences were to reject the imagery and

criticize it, and easy to confirm to queer audiences who applaud it. This concept is known as Queerbaiting: a marketing tactic that Hollywood uses to advertise Queer representation and imagery in film to attract and ‘bait’ queer audiences, but failing to deliver meaningful images that portray queer culture explicitly or as central to the narrative. Professor Julia Himberg from Arizona State University described Queerbaiting as “targeting multiple audience demographics where you're not offending a conservative audience and you're also signaling to an LGBTQ audience that you want them as well” (Honderich). It’s interesting to break Queerbaiting down in terms of the process of hypervisibility: it becomes apparent that Hollywood is seeking to affirm and react to public dialogue on the necessity of queer representation as part of the cyclical process, but has to navigate the imagery in a careful way that does not offend others and thus produce a very passive form of representation that does not quite advance the efforts of diversity as much as intended.

“It’s queerbaiting because they knew exactly who they were reeling in and why, but still decided to leave out the main attraction for all the fans they hooked. Instead they, like so many others, set up the gay romance, hint at it constantly, make it believable and deep and perfect, and then force it out of the story.” (Mitchell)

The marketing and writing efforts are incredibly conscious and careful to frame the queering aspect of the images. Moreover, it is somewhat harmful to LGBTQ+ audiences who are drawn to believe they will see representation on screen, only to be disappointed by the result. Some examples of Queerbaiting include:

“The live-action *Beauty and the Beast* adaptation which gave the LGBTQ community hope by announcing Lefou as the ‘first openly gay Disney character,’ with an ‘exclusively gay moment’. It didn’t exactly live up to expectations. The *Power Rangers* reboot was supposed to feature a lesbian Yellow Ranger too, but her sexuality barely got more than a mention.” (Mitchell)

Both these films are part of big franchises and studios where the risk of controversy over an LGBTQ+ character is immense, facing backlash by conservative financiers and audiences. Thus, as a marketing tactic, Queer baiting seems to be a sustainable model to introduce Queer representation on screen in a non-offensive way, yet only in the short-term. The problem lies in the long-term effect it has: once the film releases and both Queer and Ally audiences see the lack of imagery and feel deceived. The process of hypervisibility tells us that audiences are thus drawn to respond to these films and comment online on their disappointment, initiating a discussion around the effect of Queer baiting on audiences, particularly Queer ones.

“Theres 10 million movies that have uncomfortable unnecessary drawn out hetero sex scenes but if a queer character even exists in any media god forbid they kiss or something then its forced! Shoving it down the viewers throat! Queerbaiting yet again! this shit sucks Im So Tired” (@aimkidblast)

“LGBT CHARACTERS SHOULD BE WRITTEN BY LGBT SCREENWRITERS. I’m so sick of seeing queerbaiting, regurgitated stereotypes/storylines, and LGBT characters that exist solely for the creators to pat themselves on the back like ‘yay we did it’ (looking at you on that one Disney)”(@chris_b_creme)

“Straight privilege is taking for granted being represented in the media. You don't have to worry about queerbaiting, or tokenism, or the ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope, or networks boycotting your very existence, because it’s a guaranteed luxury for you.”(@kzabrekker)

Users online approach the topic as a harmful marketing technique that ultimately roots itself in systemic Queerphobia that fails to advance the efforts of representation and diversity.

Specifically, the last example points to a particular discussion on tokenism and privilege that translates into the inherently covert nature of queer imagery and navigating its socio-political relevance as I discussed earlier in the chapter. The dialogue seeks to call out Hollywood’s queerphobic modus operandi for presenting Queer imagery: it remains subtle and implicit, where

an explicit image can be detrimental and controversial for the public. The hypervisibility of queer representation then allows for the notions of Queer baiting and Queer coding to be discussed and scrutinized for their effect on Queer imagery and its perception. When Disney announced the inclusion of the brief Lefou moment in *Beauty and the Beast* (2018), the media was quick to comment on it and call the “‘moment’ itself either hilariously brief or insultingly fleeting, depending on how you feel about how Director Bill Condon hyped it up and then quickly walked it back” (Canfield), scrutinizing its significance as the first queer moment in Disney’s history. Pixar’s *Finding Dory* (2016) featured what some deemed was a lesbian couple in a 3 second shot, where audiences and the media called this brief shot “ironic but also sadly fitting that their appearance in the film ended up being brief and ambiguous after so much internet speculation” (Allen). Once again, both these concepts of Queer representation seek to remove themselves from any claims of political stances on LGBTQ+ rights to navigate audiences, but still maintain a level of covert representation to please the queer community. Hollywood’s answer to the previous claims on Queer coding and the need for representation, per hypervisibility, becomes these subtle moments that producers claim to be “whatever you want them to be. There’s no right or wrong answer” (Allen). As a cycle, hypervisibility ignites these new conversations that seek to further call out the ambiguity and try to incite a change.

As we continue to breakdown the hypervisibility of Queer imagery, we encounter new forms of representation that Hollywood begins to employ as a reaction to audience’s claim for explicit Queer imagery. The reactionary solution becomes the presentation of Queer images and ideas that are ‘toned down’; filtered to take away particular Queer characteristics or attributes that could be deemed as ‘offensive’ by conservative audiences. Moreover, this filtering allows for the imagery and the overall Queer experience to be more relatable for the larger audience, in

particular heterosexual audiences that would have trouble understanding or relating to the characters and themes as a way to make the film more inclusive to all audience markets. I call this concept Queer Filtering, the conscious effort to filter out Queer imagery and expression deemed too overt to make the film more digestible for audiences. It becomes a unique balance of overt representation while maintaining a level of covertness that allows the studio to avoid too much controversy and allows non-queer audiences to be able to relate and understand the film at a mainstream level. It is important to note that Queer Filtering is not necessarily the removal of sexually explicit scenes or images, as simple as two men kissing, as these are easily relatable and digestible. Rather, it is the toning down of particular Queer experiences that could be hard to navigate, such as eliminating queer-specific language, the toning down of ‘coming out’ to a more positive and outward experience, or sexual exploration as more driven by romance. Queer Filtering seeks to simplify the complexities of the multifaceted Queer community, creating archetypes such as the ‘everyday gay man’, the ‘loud lesbian, and the ‘outcast non-binary kid’ to categorize the Queer community into a more understandable identity for those outside of it.

The concept of Queer Filtering has become more prevalent through hypervisibility, however, I believe that there are particular examples of Queer representation in mainstream cinema that underwent Queer Filtering prior to the era of hypervisibility. Some examples include *Milk* (2008), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *Carol* (2015), and in particular, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). One of the main areas of Queer filtering comes with the decision to cast exclusively heterosexual actors for all the main roles, if not all. The likes of Matthew McConaughey, Cate Blanchett, Rooney Mara, Jared Leto, and Heath Ledger all portray these main queer characters, which could be seen as a conscious decision to use a high-profile, heterosexual and recognizable face to make the queer content more digestible for mainstream audiences. It could be said that

the presence of a straight actor adds to the psyche of fantasy; a removal from the reality of queerness by reminding the audience that what is being seen on screen is not necessarily real, and it is just an act put on by familiar actors. This form of Queer filtering is probably the most prominent off-screen, with most on-screen queer roles being played by straight actors. However, as I propose the process of hypervisibility, actors and filmmakers are beginning to be more conscious about this issue, and initiate a particular dialogue on who should get to play queer characters and storylines, and who should get to write and direct them. Actor Darren Criss, who earned a Golden Globe for Best Actor by playing Gianni Versace's killer Andrew Cunanan in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2017) and stated it would be the last gay man role he ever played. "Far from being homophobic, this was his attempt to open up opportunities for colleagues. Having played several LGBT characters, he was keen to make sure he wouldn't be another straight boy taking a gay man's role" (Gilbey). It becomes a discussion about opportunity and representation off-screen, but sheds onto the notions of proper portrayal, where a queer actor is more capable of delivering a queer performance. Nevertheless, hypervisibility opens up the stage for dialogue and dissensus, for which there is particular debate that claims any actor should be able to portray any character regardless of their sexuality. Actor Dan Krikler agreed with this latter claim and stated in an interview:

"As with any form of acting, you substitute the things that aren't familiar with those that are. It's the kind of research you'd do with any role that doesn't fit you exactly. It seems ridiculous to only play parts within your own experience. That would go against everything anyone's ever learned about acting." (Gilbey)

His comments carve deeper into the believe that casting straight actors is not necessarily a form of Queer Filtering, but rather a normal measure that seeks to cast the best fit for the character.

Other famous people such as Cate Blanchett and Bob Dylan have supported this, reducing the

argument to a matter of skill and the portrayal of a character's experiences beyond the actor's own. The issue lies on the lack of queer roles available and the overall reception to an actor playing a character with a different sexual identity:

“It's another cause of frustration for LGBT actors: if you are a straight actor you are often applauded for playing gay, congratulated on your bravery, commended on your skill to pull off such a tricky feat. You rarely see a gay actor applauded for playing straight. And if a gay actor does play gay, there is often the assumption that no acting was really required in the first place.” (Gilbey)

This perception of an actor's skills based on the character's sexuality nods to the archetypal construction of queer roles developed by Queer Filtering. The queer label or attribute that the character holds becomes a defining factor in the character's construction, somewhat of a burden or feat that can only be achieved by a particular actor. The question then becomes: should this be a queer or straight actor? As seen, hypervisibility encourages these types of debates to take place, furthering the dialogue on diversity and representation of queer identities off screen.

Brokeback Mountain is likely the most high-profile example of Queer Filtering, especially prior to the hypervisibility era. The film, directed by Ang Lee, depicts the forbidden romance between two men in Wyoming in the 1960s, exploring a daring explicitly queer narrative that navigates the struggles of a repressed sexual identity in an oppressive environment. The film was nominated for a series of awards, including the Academy Award for Best Picture, being one of the top contenders for it, though it lost to *Crash* (2005). Lee's film caused a particular amount of controversy and stir around audiences, where conservative media declared it a capitalist push for the gay agenda, and an overall disruption to the values of American film; deeming it inappropriate for mainstream audiences and families. Film critic Gene Shalit from *The Today Show* described Jack, the main character, as a “sexual predator” that should not be

romanticized in film (Advocate). Several movie theaters and critics refused to screen or review the film as it did not align with their Christian values. It is interesting to note that discussion around these incidents and controversies at the time followed a top-down approach due to the absence of social media; organizations such as GLAAD and the studio itself reported disappointment towards these negative comments through think-pieces and press releases, but the conversation did not reach as big of a mainstream dialogue about inclusion without the immediacy of social platforms. Only Queer audiences and those already involved in the fight for visibility were part of these conversations, while the larger audience was left aside since they would not read or interact with these explicitly Queer media outlets. For audiences, the film came to be known as “that gay cowboy movie” and was mostly discussed around its performances and the depiction of love and tragedy:

“On one hand, the picture didn't make it into Cannes or the New York Film Festival. On the other, response at early preview screenings has been positive, if notably damp. After one, Mr. Schamus said, ‘my wife came out of the ladies' room and said, ‘There are 15 women in there, and they're all crying.’ I said, ‘You ought to see the mens' room.’ There's a private feeling to the movie, an intimate feeling. I think eventually everybody has a *Brokeback Mountain* in them. Someone you want to come back to. And of course, some people don't come back.” (Durbin)

Audiences loved the film, but there was a particular removal of the queer aspect by reducing it to “the gay cowboy movie” and focusing on the universality of the love narrative instead of the actual images. Queer filtering shifted the focus of the film from a queer love story of self-acceptance and internalized homophobia, to a grander universal theme of forbidden lost love. The film itself only has one scene that depicts a sexual encounter, while the rest imply it ambiguously or feature as little as a kiss between the two men. Audiences are drawn to separate the two as exclusive, and center around the overall narrative. Even director Ang Lee described it

mostly as a “love story” more than anything, and dismissed most comments about the nature of the homosexual relationship, Queer filtering the specific notions of internalized homophobia turning it into the universal theme of forbidden love. The universality becomes the particular choice to Queer filter the romance into a more relatable and digestible narrative. It is here that the Queer Filtering of *Brokeback Mountain* becomes more nuanced and specific. When discussing the relationship between the two men, it is left ambiguous and to a larger debate around their sexual orientation. As mentioned, audiences only acknowledged it as a primary label for the movie: “the gay cowboy film”, while others reduced it to a fetishistic desire “to see Mr. Ledger and Mr. Gyllenhaal make-out” (Durbin). Critics, and even the director and actors themselves, dismissed the characters’ sexuality by opening up a debate around its ambiguity. The lovers are both married to women and lead heteronormative lives away from each other, which became a Queer filtered excuse to claim the ambiguity of their sexual orientation as straight, gay, bisexual, or just ‘souls in love’. Roger Ebert wrote in his review:

“It is the story of a time and place where two men are forced to deny the only great passion either one will ever feel. Their tragedy is universal. It could be about two women, or lovers from different religious or ethnic groups -- any "forbidden" love. The movie wisely never steps back to look at the larger picture, or deliver the "message." It is specifically the story of these men, this love. It stays in closeup.” (Ebert)

Ebert emphasized the lack of delivery on the overall message of homosexuality and queer romance, criticizing the ambiguity of the film’s narrative. He describes the Queer filtering of the relationship to the specificity of the love between the characters themselves as people, rather than the larger picture: a queer love story between two queer men. He goes to mention it as a universal tragedy and places it among many other archetypal circumstances, pointing out the filtered queerness of the narrative. Even more interestingly, protagonists Heath Ledger and Jake

Gyllenhaal were skeptical about their characters' sexual orientation and nature as well. In several interviews, the actors expressed disbelief to their characters' Queer sexuality, thus further Queer Filtering the specific nature of the film. In an interview with *Details*, Gyllenhaal stated: "I approached the story believing that these are actually two straight guys who fall in love. These are two straight guys who develop this love, this bond" (Lee), specifically labeling the characters' sexuality as heterosexual, and filtering out the queerness. Similarly, Ledger stated: "I don't think Ennis could be labeled as gay. Without Jack Twist, I don't know that he ever would have come out. I think the whole point was that it was two souls that fell in love with each other" (Lee). Queer filtering separates the queer and the romance and ultimately dismisses and invalidates the overall queer identity. To the public, the film becomes but a tale of romance, and fails to deliver actions of representation by negating the obviously queer imagery.

The most interesting aspect about this film, and the controversies and Queer Filtering around it, comes with the effect it had on the industry and for queer representation. *Brokeback Mountain* was seen as a milestone in Queer film, reaching the mainstream and becoming a staple in the fight for diversity in 2005. The problem lies with the fact that there was little to no discussion about its Queer filtered nature or about how to improve representation. The film was celebrated by the likes of GLAAD and other queer industry professionals, but there was no subsequent dialogue or advancement in queer representation on a large scale. We did not see a queer-centric film at the Academy Awards until 2008 with *Milk*, and then again until 2013 with *Dallas Buyers Club*. There was no significant increase in queer imagery as a result of *Brokeback Mountain*'s success. I believe this is for two particular reasons, among others: first, the absence of social media channels that would serve as an accessible platform for immediate dialogue; and second, the context in which social consciousness on the importance of queer representation was

taking place, namely being in exclusively Queer spaces and journals such as *Out* and *Advocate*. After all, the film was released in 2005, where social media was barely being developed, and mainstream audiences were not worried as much about representation at a higher level compared to nowadays. I find this to be the perfect example to contrast and compare the effect of a film that features diversity, in this case queer representation, prior and during the age of hypervisibility. I believe that, had the film been released after 2015, hypervisibility would have allowed audiences to scrutinize the presentation of this homosexual couple, and would have been able to both call out the Queer Filtered nature of the film, and navigated the topics of internalized homophobia and queer romance as specific rather than universal. Undoubtedly, *Brokeback Mountain* would have generated a debate and conversation around its depiction of homosexual romance which would have incited a reaction from Hollywood to produce more films with equal or better representation of homosexuality. The fact it did not generate these scrutinizing responses and debates, and a subsequent reaction from Hollywood, becomes proof that hypervisibility is a unique process that advances representation through dialogue and engagement.

As we move into the era of hypervisibility, Queer representation in mainstream film is now scrutinized under the questions of proper representation that we discussed. As we explored, Queer coding and baiting have been debated as harmful tactics, resulting in a rise in more explicit queer images beyond the one or two mainstream, high-budget films like when *Brokeback Mountain* came out. Although there was a particular movement of independent Queer cinema, these remained exclusive to Queer spaces and did not reach the mainstream. In particular, Queer Filtering became more prominent to become the most active form of representation, but is now recognized and called out by audiences and critics who question the decisions Hollywood makes

to represent Queer imagery to the mainstream public. We can see this shift in representation and Queer filtering with a film like *Moonlight* (2016), which portrayed the beautiful coming-of-age tale of a socially repressed, black, gay man growing up in an environment that is out to destroy him. A story of survival, the film navigates the complexities of blackness and queerness through the main character's attitude towards life. The film, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2016 amidst the beginning of the era of hypervisibility, was quickly celebrated by popular audiences who named it "the perfect gay black movie" for its intersectional depiction of black queer youth. Per hypervisibility, audiences commented on the beautiful cinematography and performances, but particularly on its portrayal of the black, queer experience. One Twitter user expressed: "This is the only queer movie that feels like it was perfectly crafted for me and people like me. No other queer movie can compete to be honest" (@literalpotatoe), expressing its significance as a source of representation. Another commented: "*Moonlight* is my favorite depiction of Black love PERIOD. So many positive examples of love and also the complications of it. There's heartache, redemption, forgiveness, etc." (@gracieanne), focusing on the film's multidimensional exploration of intersectionality, but following a similar ambiguity as with *Brokeback Mountain*'s comments that negate its Queerness. The film was received with a lot of praise, especially at the height of the Academy Awards scandals of diversity. On a particular level, I believe this film is a good example of how hypervisibility caused a reaction from Hollywood, where the initial scandals of 2015 and 2016 had caused controversy and dialogue for the push of representation, and thus the Academy promoted and selected *Moonlight* as its Best Picture winner. Justified by the raving reviews and the popular support, the film's win became a proper push for representation. It is worth noting that the subsequent winners, *The Shape of*

Water (2017) and *Green Book* (2018) faced controversy for reversing the efforts of *Moonlight*'s win.

When we deconstruct *Moonlight*'s depiction of Queer imagery, we can see that the film is subject to particular levels of conscious Queer Filtering. The film's themes themselves are incredibly complex, navigating the notions of intersectionality carefully. Thus, when the film was advertised and promoted, the studio chose to focus more on the aspects of racial representation and coming-of-age, rather than the queerness of the film, as a way of marketing it without casting any controversy or backlash from conservative audiences. The promotions were Queer Filtered to shift the overall narrative: without hiding the Queer themes in the film, the advertising frames a bigger focus on other themes as more relevant to the story. Analyzing the trailer, it teases a beautiful montage to the tune of a high-pitched violin weaving together a series of moments in the main character's life along the three chapters of his life. It is hard to make up a general narrative, but the shift between diegetic and asynchronous dialogue glimpse into the themes of isolation, repression, and social hardships that compound to the coming-of-age experience we assume to be central to the narrative. There is one short shot with Kevin and Chiron that ambiguously teases a queer romance between the two. We can see the trailer remains dubious and shies away from explicitly promoting the queerness, thus Queer Filtering to avoid overtly promoting the queer imagery as the most important aspect to the story. I believe hypervisibility allows for this moment to be recognized and to potentially incite a conversation around its meaning as a marketing technique. On the one side, we could say that the lack of specificity to its queerness is a disservice to the efforts of diversity and representation, while we could also say that its ambiguity adds into the complexity of the story and the character's multidimensionality.

Moonlight's biggest feat and ambition was to navigate the complexities of life and identity through the eyes of a repressed black boy. It seeks to deconstruct the intersectional nuances of being queer, being black, and being a man in an oppressive, patriarchal society. I believe that this analytical breakdown becomes apparent and visible to audiences through hypervisibility, as engaged audiences initiate conversations about the meaning of these images and further discover these particular nuances. But it is this complexity that incites a certain level of Queer Filtering. The intersectionality presented in the film needs to be packed together into one coming-of-age narrative that will struggle to portray every specific details of each identity. The fact that the film pairs up queerness, blackness, and masculinity together inherently filters out bigger parts of the Queer experience to be able to pack in the notions of black patriarchal standards, repressive societies, economic status, etc. However, if we focus on the specificities of the Queer moments, when the film actually turns its attention to this particular identity, it remains somewhat ambiguous, and thus, Queer Filtered:

“It can be agreed upon that these representations of intimacy and ambiguity in attraction, sexuality, masculinity, and how emotional competency plays a key role in all of it are strong aspects of this film. To think that these kinds of experiences construct the story of a black homosexual man is just as fallacious as equating them strictly to a bisexual or trans person. *Moonlight* is, more appropriately, a ‘Queer Interest’ film... [meaning an interest in] the deviation from the normative” (Davis)

Moonlight's ambiguity becomes an effort to develop the overall exploration of repression and struggle with the normative society, in particular, the black heteronormative patriarchy the character faces. On the one side, it becomes a conscious choice to Queer Filter in order to emphasize the power of the film's main themes, but its ambiguity also affects the development of explicit and positive queer imagery. It could be argued that the film's ambiguous Queer nature is but a supporting aspect to the exploration of manliness and black patriarchal expectations:

“*Moonlight* is an all-black world, devoid of respectability politics. While it tells the story of ambiguous sexuality, it does so with unambiguous blackness and without shame. *Moonlight* is not a call to abandon black masculinity as insufficient to cope with black homosexuality, but to wrestle with the reality of black gay men in its totality.” (Thrasher)

The socio-political focus of the film becomes a complex tapestry of themes that facilitates the filtering of queer overtness into an ambiguity that elaborates Chiron’s repressive reality.

I characterize *Moonlight* as a particularly positive use of overt representation of queer imagery, yet they are still affected by the notions of Queer filtering. The film’s triptic structure tries to navigate Chiron’s identity through the three stages of his life as a seemingly Queer man, but as I mentioned before, the film remains ambiguous in confirming his sexuality or sexual desire, and remains over the notions of inadequacy, beyond the normative, and repression that code for Chiron’s queerness. We can see this in the first chapter when Little asks Juan ‘what does faggot mean?’ after Paula calls him that and alludes to some Juan’s effeminate attributes. Juan pauses and sighs, a simple response to the child explaining the slur as “a negative thing to make gay people feel bad”. Little stares back and looks down at the table wondering out loud if he is one, to which he is told that he should not worry about that just yet and quickly shifts the subject to asking Juan if he sells drugs to his mother, Paula. The interaction holds weight in the explanation of a discriminatory slur to a child who has grown up repressed and isolated; he already feels different and he seeks for a word that can describe him, a term that will give meaning to his identity. In no way does the film ever confirm his sexuality, the aforementioned interaction is short and ambiguous, Queer filtering the explanation of understanding identity. As we move to the second chapter, Chiron is bullied for being quiet and different, there is no alluding imagery to his sexuality, rather he is beaten and called the same slurs he questioned before. He is portrayed as weak, an outcast and a recluse, once again blurring the lines between

homosexual queerness and normative queerness. When he finally kisses Kevin, sitting at the beach under the moonlight, we finally get a more explicit image that portrays homosexuality. The scene is short, but reads under the lines of curiosity and questioning, as Kevin asks Chiron if there is anything he ever wanted to do but was afraid of. The overtly queer scene is overshadowed by the lack of any acknowledgement or further development of Chiron's sexuality for the rest of the film. It feels like a small window within the tryptic, and thus is victim to Queer Filtering by its separation from the following scenes, remaining ambiguous. This all changes in the very last scene, as Black reveals to Kevin that he "hasn't touched anyone" since, embracing him in a side hug that closes the film. The scene can be read under a multitude of lenses, the use of the noun "anyone" raises an ambiguity of pronouns and thus of gender attraction, and the embrace can be read as a familial gesture of childhood best friends as much as it can be read as a romantic one. The scene maintains a beautiful, yet agonizing, ambiguity that Queer filters Black's own identity, leaving it open to the audience to interpret his life as that of a man deviant from the normative black patriarchy.

Hypervisibility becomes the key aspect that allows us to separate these codes. In the past, I believe the film could have been read similarly to *Brokeback Mountain*, where the explicitly Queer moments were acknowledged and read as such, but dismissed through the universal topics by Queer Filtering. In *Moonlight's* case, the film is in fact Queer Filtered, but a larger mainstream audience is able to read between the lines and bring forward the ambiguity to both recognize it and to scrutinize them as explicitly Queer. Although these codes and filters could have been read the same way in 2005, the lack of immediate feedback through social media made it harder for a mainstream audience to engage in this dialogue and to cause a reaction from Hollywood. Per the cycle of hypervisibility, *Moonlight's* Academy Award win for Best Picture

set up the stage for further development of Queer imagery, intersectionality, and the exploration of the Queer experience through ambiguity due to the positive dialogues that audiences underwent that encouraged the film's depiction of unapologetic queerness and blackness. As a result, we encounter new mainstream Queer films that although dwell in Queer filtering and ambiguity, are still progressively portraying Queer stories and images.

Directed by Luca Guadagnino, Academy Award nominated film *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) became an iconic film for queer representation, depicting an idealized romance between a boy and his father's assistant during the summer of 1983 in Italy. Praised for its beautiful cinematography framing the warmth of an Italian summer through a poetically driven montage of long and close shots, the film was regarded as a "queer masterpiece". Guadagnino's film garnered a lot of attention for its depiction of queer romance, for which it sparked, through hypervisibility, large debates around its representation of queer imagery. In particular, the film deals with the notions of uncertainty, curiosity, and exploration, where a young Elio is fascinated and infatuated by Oliver, mirroring the experience of sexual awakening and exploration hidden by the restrictions of a heteronormative environment. The film:

"Progresses through evasions and encounters, with Elio advancing, Oliver receding and their circling narrowing. The two don't (can't, won't) always say what they mean. So Mr. Guadagnino speaks for them by eroticizing their world, making desire visible in the luxuriousness of the setting, in the green enveloping the villa, the gushing waters of a pool and the graceful lines of male statues." (Dargis)

Critics were quick to point out the playful dynamism of the film that invites the audience into a teasing game of 'will they, when will they' that excites the viewer to stay captured in the erotic world Guadagnino constructs. In itself, this carefully tailored environment of romanticism and eroticism contains a particularly inherent Queer Filtered nature. It is ambiguous in its intentions;

it plays around an unspoken desire that is never explicitly labeled as queer. Nonetheless, the inclusion of an actual sexual encounter and the overt imagery that depicts the two men engaging romantically develops a level of queerness that satisfies the need for explicit representation. Still, similarly to *Moonlight*, it fails to deliver any kind of confirmation of their sexual intimacy as a tale of two Queer men, rather than “presenting a sort of country house fairy tale in which the two leads just happen to be men”(Ratskoff). The film maintains that ambiguous portrayal that filters out a stable and succinct, explicitly Queer representation that does not deviate onto the idealization of desire in its universality rather than its specificity. I propose that hypervisibility makes this ambiguity apparent to audiences, who decode the Queerness and look for both the impact of the overt queer images and the covert forms of representation of the queer experience, such as Elio’s sexual awakening moments. Moreover, hypervisibility allowed critics to recognize the film’s desire to advance representation:

“Reflecting our genuine hunger for queer representation in mainstream, commercial film, this affair on the silver screen has garnered lavish praise from gay audiences and critics. In an *Out* piece that labeled the film “Movie of the Year,” Bret Easton Ellis described *Call Me by Your Name* as ‘the movie generations of gay men have been waiting for: the fullest, least condescending expression of gay desire yet brought to mainstream film.’”
(Ratskoff)

The film was praised for its powerful depiction of queer romance that did not revolve around tragedy, homophobia, struggle, or the AIDS crisis, but rather a beautiful tale of romance and desire that is as heartbreaking as it is exciting.

Mainstream audiences, especially Queer ones, were quick to celebrate the film and its actions towards representation. Hypervisibility allowed them to participate in a dialogue that

praised the portrayal of queer romance and imagery at a mainstream level, and express opinions on their significance. Users on Twitter shared their responses to the film:

“I finally got to see *Call Me By Your Name*. My expectations were super high and still they were exceeded. It's fucking stunning. My favorite film of the year so far and I'd be surprised if anything surpassed it.” (@erikaheidewald)

“I can't get *Call Me By Your Name* out of my mind. I can't remember the last time a movie affected me like this. Go see it.” (@grizzlybear)

“This movie made me feel a deep happiness and pain all in one sitting. I am absolutely in love with *Call me by your name* definitely resonates with any gay man in the world. I'm so obsessed.” (@DakotaBremner)

Users online focused on their emotional responses to the film and expressed their gratitude for the presentation of heartwarming romantic imagery. The dialogue geared towards the beauty of the film and its powerful narrative as a love story, resonating universally with the themes of sexual awakening and heartbreak. Hypervisibility allows for audiences to converse on both the overt and covert aspects of the film, reading between the presented queer images beyond its ambiguity and filtered queerness.

“If this isn't THE best way to describe what makes *CMBYN* a great and essential entry in the queer canon: ‘It's not that the external forces that haunt gay cinema don't exist in *Call Me By Your Name*. It's that for this one summer, for this one couple, they don't draw blood.’”(@bwestcineaste)

As mentioned before, one of the most exciting parts about the film for audiences was its very romanticized nature. It draws away from the usual tragedy that is often tied to Queer Cinema seeking to portray the hardships and struggles of the Queer community. *Call Me By Your Name*

is drawn isolated from these haunting struggles, unlike *Moonlight and Brokeback Mountain* who deal with this sense of internalized repression. The film becomes a poetic ode to Queer romance in a warm light that mirrors the Italian summer mise-en-scene. It's rejection of the Queer tragedy becomes an effort to normalize queerness, and place it in a romantic setting that feels normative and universal.

Call Me By Your Name seeks to play with a combination of overt and covert forms of queer representations to accentuate the playful and romantically tempting nature of the film. We can see particularly overt moments such as Elio and Oliver's first sexual encounter, spanning over several days that portray the development of their intimate relationship on a sexual and emotional level. The scenes show overt intimacy, with embraces and kisses framed by close ups and accompanied by the soft soundtrack, the film poetically romanticizes their relationship on a powerful note that becomes inspiring and moving to the audience. It is interesting to note how it differs from the intimate scenes of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Moonlight*, not only by the vast number of scenes that depict the relationship overtly, but by the tone: the scenes are heartwarming and exciting, framed in the warmer tones and taking place in the open, whereas the former films are driven more by curiosity and a certain repressed nature followed by shame, and framed by darker tones. There is a sexual frankness to the film, an unapologetic fairytale where "the queer lovers are refreshingly unstunted. In fact, they're unusually untouched by almost all of the gay-movie setbacks" (Nowalk) of tragedy. I attribute these notions of sexual freedom and representation to the efforts of the process of hypervisibility, where audiences had seen the need for more positive and less tragic queer images being presented on screen. Nevertheless, it is important to point out the covert forms of representation, which are ultimately Queer Filtered. The film's overall dynamic, as mentioned before, relies on the ambiguity in Elio and Oliver's

attachment to one another, covertly portraying Queer attraction between the characters that is coded through glances and subtle movements. We can see for example during the volleyball game when Elio stares blankly at Oliver playing, carefully watching his every move that seem calculated as Oliver glances back and smirks flirtatiously yet ambiguously. This exchange is recurring throughout the film to emphasize the sexually ambiguous attraction that draws back to the themes of self-discovery and coming-of-age. Moreover, the viewer themselves becomes a voyeur in the film, as the camera frames a fetishized image that playfully pans with the romantic elements of the scene: Elio's small-framed body under the sun, Oliver's muscular sun-kissed skin closely analyzed by the camera. We are drawn onto the point-of-view of the protagonists to immerse into their sexual discovery with them. The imagery remains subtle and covert, which could be read in a variety of ways, thus being Queer filtered. However, I propose hypervisibility has allowed dialogues to uncover these covert images to decode the sexual ambiguity and read it as Queer; merging the notions of covert and overt forms of representation as an advancement in how we scrutinize these films. The implicit sexuality is deconstructed via hypervisibility to solidify the queer commentary the film is trying to explore.

The film's Queer Filtering goes beyond just the covert forms of representation and follow a similar trend to its predecessors *Brokeback Mountain* and *Moonlight*. The main actors of the film, Timothee Chalamet and Armie Hammer, are heterosexual men themselves, falling back into the debate we previously presented around straight actors playing gay roles. Hypervisibility allows us to scrutinize their portrayal in a dialogue that questions its effort to represent queer men off-screen. Moreover, celebrated and iconic drag queen, Miz Cracker called out on *Slate* the film and its actors for its Queer Filtering attitude that somewhat mocks homosexuality. She stated that the film's "leading lovers are played by straight actors who have been winking and

giggling on the press circuit about having to pretend to (sort of) fuck” (Cracker), expressing anger about the outward portrayal of the topic off-screen. She alludes to the idea that these actors discussing the film’s queerness in such a light way illegitimizes and fantasizes the identity itself as just an interesting fictional narrative. She goes on to say:

“We love this sort of playful teasing from straight guys—the grinning suggestion that we might get a swat on the butt or a drunken cuddle as long as we don’t push it too far. So when we consume this film, we’re willing to call it a gay masterpiece without any of the usual demands, such as real gay actors playing realistic gay characters in some sort of gay cultural or historical context” (Cracker)

It is interesting she generalizes and groups the Queer community together as part of the issue, for which she is engaging in the process of hypervisibility by recognizing the fault queer consumer audiences have when they embrace Queer Filtering. It points towards the effect audience response has on future films, as she notes the celebration of ambiguous yet ‘cheeky’ and playful filtered queerness becomes an excuse for Hollywood mainstream to keep producing Queer Filtered films. Furthermore, the biggest source of Queer Filtering comes with the actual depiction of sex in the film: as we discussed before, Guadagnino does not shy away from the overt sexualization of the characters and their chemistry. However, the actual sex scene between Elio and Oliver is never shown; the camera drives us through the initial encounter and then pivots to pan away from them and into a window. Reminiscent of the Hays Code era, the scene is kept away and only left to our imagination, while the scene depicting Elio having intercourse with Marzia during his heterosexual denial is kept completely on screen and overtly depicted. Although sex scenes are not usually explicitly depicted in the average mainstream film, the problem lies in the choice to depict the heterosexual encounter over the homosexual one. It could be argued that the film deliberately keeps this first passionate gay encounter private to continue

the playful dynamic that teases the audience with their ambiguous courting, yet, this is still a form of conscious Queer Filtering that leaves out a crucial scene for queer imagery to appeal to larger audiences. Moreover, Queer critics were drawn to criticize this decision and, through hypervisibility, discuss the effect such filtering has on Queer audiences:

“This is why I say this film is a queer movie for straight people. What then would be the reason for not depicting both the same? To appeal to the mostly heterosexual academy and not necessarily give a true depiction of a blossoming gay relationship. Choosing to skirt around such a pivotal point with the characters' relationship puts a damper on the film as a whole. Furthermore, it shows how heteronormativity still invades queer spaces.” (Grootboom)

Queer Filtering is thus a harmful tactic that allows heteronormativity affect the depiction of Queer imagery, reflecting on the real world attitudes the normative has on queerness. To question the depiction of the heterosexual seen overtly and not the homosexual one becomes a standing ground for criticism that the film is in fact dedicated to the larger, predominantly heterosexual audience, rather than to a specific Queer one.

As I propose, hypervisibility opens up the space for dissenting dialogue, where *Call Me By Your Name* was also contended by audiences that recognized the Queer Filters and initiated a conversation on why these make the film an ineffective representation of queer identities. For example, a lot of them questioned and tried to decipher the ambiguous sexuality, seeking to define whether Elio and Oliver were gay, curious, or bisexual. Famous social media personality Tyler Oakley questioned: “weren’t both main characters in *CMBYN* bi?? why does everyone keep calling them gay?? this has been a pet peeve of mine since the movie came out??” (@tyleroakley), to which a multitude of followers and audience members debated on this statement:

“I think people consider them gay because they ARE in a gay relationship, but yes both oliver and elio are bi so they should be considered their true sexuality instead of reducing them to what the common eye would first think” (@fazedme)

“I think Oliver was Bi and saw it as more of a short term thing. I think Elio was in the process of realizing he was gay. Because with the girl it was more lust than anything. With Oliver, there was actual emotion, falling in love, etc. Just my thoughts” (@TommyTadeo)

Hypervisibility allowed for these exchanges to occur and try to seek out an answer that ultimately boils down to the arguments on ‘what does queer representation look like?’. The debate on the sexuality tries to decode the Queer Filters to understand a covert conceptualization of queerness and scrutinize its representation. Hypervisibility encourages us to break down these arguments to expose Queer Filtering in the hope of causing a reaction by Hollywood that would help normalize explicit Queer images.

Other audiences used these kinds of debates to raise bigger questions about representation itself, where they recall that a dissensus on whether or not *Call Me By Your Name* had proper representation was necessary. One Twitter user expressed: “Don’t say you want gay representation, just say you want YOU representation. *CMBYN* isn’t *my* story either but I fucking trumpet its mainstream success because one day maybe my story WILL be told” (@RussellFalcon). He points out the very answer to the question of proper representation: there is a multitude of stories and different experiences, and it is a matter of time for them to be presented on a mainstream screen. At this stage of hypervisibility, Queer representation is still subject to Queer Filtering, but audiences are currently discussing and deconstructing these filtered images to find representation in these queer moments. I propose that the process will indeed allow for the development of newer mainstream films that learn the lessons of *BrokeBack*

Mountain, Moonlight, and Call Me By Your Name to Queer Filter less and less as audiences react and discuss: what does it mean to be queer on screen?

Conclusion

Since the scandals on the lack of diversity at the Academy Awards in 2015 and 2016, representation in film has reached a new stage of scrutiny and development guided by the audience responses to the need for diverse identities. In this thesis, I proposed the process of hypervisibility as an overarching theory that explains the sudden shift that has exponentially increased and changed the efforts of representation. As a cycle, hypervisibility makes audiences more aware of covert and overt forms of representation in film, allowing them to scrutinize the imagery of ‘invisible’ minorities by initiating dialogues through media platforms to discuss the efficacy of these representations in specific films. Moreover, these responses and dialogues become necessary to incentivize a reaction from Hollywood in the form of affirmative and corrective measures that seek to improve representation. The cycle repeats itself as audiences respond to the affirmative changes to representation, where the dissensus raises new questions and arguments that help Hollywood understand how to better handle representation. Throughout this thesis, I firmly argue that regardless of the imagery of minorities presented in film, hypervisibility makes people more conscious about them and it is the work of their productive conversations that produce a positive change in representation.

Despite the fact that representation has been discussed both popularly and theoretically throughout the history of film, the reason hypervisibility arose in the past years was due to the catalyzing effect social media and digital platforms have served through their immediate and accessible nature. As soon as films are released or promoted, audiences can immediately share their opinions on social media responding to the film’s efforts on representation. Throughout this thesis, I utilized a variety of popular digital news sources and social media platforms to analyze the way people talk about these films, and how their followers engage in a dialogue with them.

Each film analyzed in this thesis had a significant amount of responses that often dissented from each other; audiences were divided into those who celebrated the film's sense of diversity, while others criticized it. This plethora of opinions allowed for a productive dialogue that sought to answer the question: what does proper representation look like?

Representation of gender in film has evolved into conversations around the inclusion of female directors, writers, producers, and more active characters on and off-screen. The different movements such as the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns engaged the representation of women in the process of hypervisibility, seeking to bring women to the forefront of cinema. In the first chapter, I explored the intersection between Femininity and Superheroes, analyzing the depiction of headlining female superhero protagonists in the age of superhero Cinematic Universes. I argued that female superheroes took a new role that steered away from their usual passive role, and focused more on their strength and power by balancing their sense of femininity without sexualizing them. With the release of the first two female-centric, female-directed superhero films, *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, I proposed that hypervisibility allowed for them to be scrutinized to set a new standard for the representation of strong female protagonists. *Wonder Woman*, being the first film to release, was celebrated for its depiction of the Amazons and of a female superhero who was not fetishized. The overt forms of representation portrayed in the highly choreographed fight scenes and Diana's independent actions throughout the story marveled at the creation of a superheroine that challenged and redefined the dichotomy of gender representation in film. After its release, audiences and fans reacted positively, sharing moments of inspiration such as little girls dressing up as Wonder Woman and playing together as Amazons. *Captain Marvel* followed a similar trend, becoming the first MCU film to feature a female title hero after 20 films in the series. She redefined the Marvel formula that, although

portrayed female characters as strong and powerful, it utilized them more in a romantic or supportive setting. Similarly, audiences celebrated the film's portrayal of the hero, with girls and women expressing their emotional response to the film. I noted that both films received particular criticism and backlash that was deeply rooted in sexism and misogyny, where the negative comments only noted the characters' lack of a smile or the believability of their stories. Hypervisibility allowed for other audiences to tackle these arguments in a debate that uncovered their sexist nature and produced a conversation that proposed better forms of female representation than the standard. As a result of all these dialogues, new female-centric superhero films are being increasingly developed and released in the next few years. Some audiences shared opinions on which characters they would like to see on screen and why, sharing stories of their inspiration connection to them. Hollywood's corrective measure guided itself to produce new female superhero protagonists that portray an inspiring intersection between femininity, the female experience, and empowerment that give rise to a new archetypal hero: the ultimate female protagonist.

In the second chapter, I analyzed the representation of race in the hypervisibility era. The very campaign that began the scandals of diversity in Hollywood, #OscarsSoWhite, pertained to racial representation during the awards and raised conversations on the inclusion of non-white led films that positively portrayed other racial identities. I explored the concept of Selective Tokenism, where the Academy and Hollywood champions a particular film that they believe to be a good form of representation, tokenizing it as a front that demonstrates the studios care about diversity. These token films are usually stories that navigate racism, slavery, social and racial dynamics, or the civil rights movements which incentivize studios to scrutinize them as proper efforts of diversity while ignoring alternative films that do in fact have a better sense of

representation. For this chapter, I analyzed *Green Book* as the token film the Academy selected as their pick for representation, awarding it the Best Picture Award and celebrating its exploration of racial dynamics between a Black jazz singer and his white Italian driver. The film overtly presents the friendship that develops between the two but frames Tony as a white savior that humanizes Don Shirley. As the film won the Academy Award, hypervisibility allowed audiences to call out the selective tokenism and demand better accounts of representation, focusing on the alternative: *Roma*. Cuarón's film worked on the representation of Latin American culture, exploring the microcosmic social dynamics within the Hispanic household. The overt forms of representation of both an Oaxacan protagonist, and the dynamics of space incited viewers to comment on the intimacy of the film. As the fan-favorite, audiences were disappointed it lost the Academy Award for Best Picture to *Green Book*. I proposed that hypervisibility allowed these two films to be scrutinized and analyzed for their forms of representation and efforts to promote diversity. Dialoguing on the problems of tokenism and problematic depictions of racially driven storylines, hypervisibility made the Academy more conscious about the need to celebrate films that do not follow token formulas of diversity. As a result, at the 2020 Academy Awards, *Parasite* won the Best Foreign Film and Best Picture awards, becoming the first film to do so after audiences scrutinized it through hypervisibility to praise its depiction of East Asian culture. Hollywood's reaction to audience responses to their exploitation of racial tokenism allowed them to understand the issues with it, and affirm the concerns by promoting alternative films that celebrate other races and the specificities that make them grant them unique experiences.

Finally, as I explored how hypervisibility has scrutinized the representation of diverse sexualities, I focused on the manipulation of Queer images to make them more digestible for a

larger market. I deconstructed the history of Queer Coding and Queer Baiting, as measures taken by studios to covertly represent Queer characters and storylines that are only hinted at implicitly, but never confirmed. Hypervisibility allowed for these measures to be called out via dialogues online that criticized the harmful nature they have of reducing Queer identities to small nuances and gestures. Thus, I proposed that these criticisms increased the amount of explicit Queer images on screen, and engaged in a new form of representation I named Queer Filtering; the use of ambiguity and toned down imagery to please Queer audiences while simultaneously avoiding criticism from conservative audiences. I first analyzed the Academy Award-nominated film *Brokeback Mountain*, as a first instance of Queer filtering prior to the era of hypervisibility. The film was praised for its depiction of a positive sexual relationship between two men at a mainstream level. However, I proposed that the film's ambiguity on the men's sexuality and their relationship, including the ambiguous commentary around it, was a form of Queer Filtering that avoided depicting the men as undoubtedly Queer. Moreover, since it was released before hypervisibility, I propose that there was no subsequent immediate change. Moreover, I analyzed Academy Award-winning film, *Moonlight*, as a hypervisible example that is still subject to Queer Filtering. Chiron's sexuality and navigation of sexual repression remain ambiguous and shaded within the tapestry of a complex intersectional identity; his Queerness is never confirmed or isolated through specificity but rather portrayed as a chapter within a larger complicated coming-of-age story. I proposed that not only did hypervisibility allowed the film to be scrutinized to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, but it also created a subsequent dialogue on intersectionality that opened the room for depictions of more positive Queer representations that revolve away from tragedy. Enter *Call Me By Your Name*, a romantic coming-of-age tale that narrates the love story between a boy and his father's assistant in the summer of 1983 in

Italy, depicting sexual desire and romance without the troubles of the Queer canon. Nevertheless, I explored the use of Queer Filtering to create a playful ambiguity that seeks to fetishize and idealize the atmosphere and the character's relationship, teasing the audience and keeping the film both overtly Queer but covertly homosexual. I proposed that hypervisibility allowed audiences to comment on their reactions to the film as a tale of romance and happiness, expressing the need for more positive depictions of Queerness. Other audiences initiated conversations on the clear Queer Filtering of the film and its harmful effects on romanticizing the Queer experience. Regardless, I argued that these debates created consciousness on the notions of Queer filtering and the need for more realistic overt forms of representation, where hypervisibility will allow for a corrective increase in Queer films.

These three specific identities are but just a few select examples of a wide array of underrepresented identities that still remain invisible to the film screen. The goal of hypervisibility is to work as an expanding effect in a cyclical motion, where the increase in visibility and affirmative improvements shines light onto the need for representation of other identities. As we have seen, the concept of intersectionality is even made more visible through the conversations that carefully dissect hypervisible films and call for the change to overt forms of representation, rather than covert codes. Hollywood, and the Academy, keep reacting and affirming the concerns of audiences; they become more conscious about not only the importance of representing diversity, but also on the market potential this brings. Audiences scrutinize and reflect on the past and current forms of representation, and raise new questions that ponder onto how identities should be represented: What does it mean to be a strong woman? How do we represent active feminist values? What does a powerful female lead look like? How do we understand racial dynamics beyond historical racism? What films should we promote as elevated

forms of racial diversity? How should we navigate foreign films at the Academy Awards? How should we present different cultures on screen? Why should we hire underrepresented minorities to helm a big-budget production? What does intersectionality truly look like? How do we portray a complex intersectional character? How do we normalize Queer spaces within heteronormative ones? Should we change the Queer canon? How do we change it? How do we depict normalized positive Queer images without offending conservative audiences and not filtering overtly Queer imagery? All of these questions make this topic extremely important as we navigate the creation of a more inclusive industry and a more inclusive screen. I believe that as we move forward through the era of hypervisibility, this cyclical process will change representation in film and will continue to make more identities visible, and be more active in the way they are all presented.

Representation matters; so what does proper representation look like?

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