

Negotiated Viewing: Locating Queerness in Mid-Century American Cinema

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The viewing experience of the queer American film-goer has throughout film history been unique at best and exclusionary at worst. While watching films that exist within popular culture, the feeling that you and your community are not visible or supported is at times tangible for a queer audience member who looks for themselves in the media they consume. Moreover, the further one goes back in America's filmography, without the tools to properly locate queerness and community, the easier it is to feel like the films one is attempting to acquainting themselves with were not made for them; creating an estrangement between present-day queer audiences and mid-century American cinema. This inability to develop and maintain connections with mid-century American cinema is a particularly grievous loss for queer audience members considering the power of representation within media (within the mainstream) to validate experience and identities, leading queer viewers to believe they are owners of an incomplete, unimpressive history of visibility.

This project attempts to challenge mid-century American cinema's status as heterocentric by encouraging a different kind of relationship between this cinema and queer audiences through the use of a viewing practice I will refer to as negotiated viewing, or the act of locating queerness in the product and production of traditionally "straight" or heterosexual coded films. This project examines and demonstrates the process and purpose of this practice through the following written work as well as the cultivation of a companion, virtual exhibit that identifies two specific sites of queerness in mid-century films. The first, films starring actresses Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich from 1930-1936. The second, films produced by Metro Goldwyn Mayer's Arthur Freed unit between 1939-1962 (though this work focuses on the years 1943-1948). This project argues that the labor of queer creatives in the production of a film determines the presence of an inherent queerness, locatable by queer audiences in its final product. In specifying

these two groups of films in my work, I am looking to explore the ways queerness is constructed, embodied, and ultimately identified, interrogating the relationship between content and viewer and the value or role of representation in positively affirming the existence of sexual and gender variance.

Expanding on Michael Foucault's notion of the body as an inscribed surface that is altered by encounters with signs and signifiers that influence and determine identity; queer theorist Judith Butler writes in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, "[...] the body is always under siege, suffering destruction by [...] terms of history. And history is the creation of values and meanings by a signifying practice that requires the subjection of the body." One of the most important aspects of the body is its manifestation and apprehension of gender and sexuality. Here, identity is positioned as inherently subjective in nature, calling into question methods of one's construction of personal sexual and gender identity. As such, one contends that throughout the process of discerning one's own identity, realization can only occur in the presence and with the recognition of others with realized sexual and gendered identities.<sup>1</sup> The body's capacity for understanding through subjective experiences, namely viewing experiences, is integral to the assertion that gender and sexual identity is constructed and therefore learned, from repeated performances of observed and enforced behaviors, physical and stylistic expressions, and aural presentations that establish and maintain the distinction made between "man" and "woman" and "queer" and "straight." In his 2013 essay, "Compulsory Able-bodiedness and Queer/ Disabled Existence," Robert Mcruer considers queer theorists and feminists' critiques of the definition of heterosexuality as: "normal relations between sexes," and the definition's insistence that homosexuality is subordinate because of some standard of

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<sup>1</sup> Salamon, Gayle, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

normalcy. Here, understanding the positioning of cis/ heterosexual identity as a "base" or "norm" against which variant sexual/ gender identities can be compared reveals the hierarchically constructed nature of gender and sexuality in popular culture.

Considering the construction of gender and/or sexual identity as it is produced, we can identify where these distinctions are found, recognizing that societal understandings of gender and sexual identities are regulated by institutions such as educational systems, family structures, the free market, and of course, media. The effect narratives, characters, and themes in literature, theater, and paramountly, film and television, have on the development of sexual and gender identity is achieved through established iconography and symbolism that have traditionally maintained and promoted binary understandings of gender and sexuality, but which occasionally challenge them. Understanding the imposition heteronormative media has on emerging identities, reveals that variant gender and sexual identities are similarly learned, internalized, and subsequently performed. The understanding of identity as an "effect" that is produced or generated by everyday performances allows for endless possibilities of reconceptualization of identity categories away from their status as foundational or fixed. In this way, queer representations carry immense influential power, cutting through a sea of heteronormative narratives to reach queer audiences. The signification, performance, and embodiment of identity, everchanging, and inconsistent, is indicative of the incoherence of constructed identities. We may consider, as Butler argues, that there is no inherent or natural truth or essence to gender or sexual identity. Any proposed truth or essence is in fact an effect of previous performances of the everyday variety, considering that gender specifically is mimetic in nature. Here, film emerges as a framework through which one can contextualize representations of gender and sexuality, both

personal and witnessed, as traditional (acceptable) or variant, depending on the position of the media where the representation was located, in popular culture.

Having established media as an effective mode of signaling and subsequently regulating gender and sexuality, audiences can begin to examine traditionally heterocentric narratives in popular culture to identify and interrogate signaling and coding, through the practice of negotiated viewing, in an attempt to assuage feelings of erasure. Here, negotiated viewing establishes itself as a means for understanding and therefore vigorously deconstructing assertions of the binaries of gender and sexuality, which serve to police self-expression and the development of sexual and gender identity. Negotiated viewing provides queer audiences with the opportunity to discover or imagine queer narratives where they did not previously exist, allowing for a newfound connection to and a reclamation of American Cinema before queer expression in film was protected by law, and validation of variant identities by way of recovered visibility.

It is important to note that this essay uses the term 'queer' when referring to creatives and audiences to identify that the cultural value located in the act of classifying media produced and consumed by homosexual individuals as such can not be divorced from homosexuality. When addressing queer media, sexuality, the individual, and culture are historically inseparable. In this way, the products of queer labor as they are located and revealed in films, more specifically, in this case, films featuring bisexual actresses Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich and M-G-M musicals emerging from the Freed Unit, can not be separated from the queer performances, and labor of the gay creatives behind them. Additionally, we may acknowledge that while some queer creatives working within the time frames did not self or publicly identify as homosexual at the time of production, I argue that their contributions are relevant and should

not be dismissed within the practice of negotiated viewing when considering that determining and verbally identifying a social identity within the context of sexuality through the usage of homosexual language such as ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ is a relatively modern social phenomenon that emerged with the rise of the gay liberation movement, and queerness is not solely contingent on identification. This truth further illuminates the importance of how queerness manifested itself within codes and signifiers audiences can read through the lens of negotiated viewing.

The inextricable relationship between queer creatives, audience, and culture can be better understood within the framework of Alexander Doty’s “Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon,” in which Doty examines the cultural and erotic investments queer audiences make in mainstream texts and personalities. Doty argues that these investments allow for understandings of classic texts and figures that are more “queer-suggestive” than “openly” gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts considering that a text’s ambiguity can produce a variety of queer readings. This ambiguity liberates texts from categorical classifications of any and all erotic content, supporting various queer readings. Doty clarifies that this understanding of queer reading is not a practice that idealizes the closet or remonstrates “out” or explicitly queer media. Rather, it is a practice that validates queer viewers’ experiences with popular culture, emancipating queer media from its position as subordinate or “other” compared to dominant, mainstream media.

The potentiality of queerness to disrupt the performance of heterosexuality has historically led to expressions of variance being contained and regulated in popular culture. When represented in the “mainstream,” queerness is either presented as explicit, so that difference is easily identifiable and if necessary, dismissable, or as parodic, so that difference is laughable in the popular imagination. The practice of negotiated viewing provides a space in which these representations may be challenged by revealing the implicit queerness of a wide

range of texts, the exposure of which protests the heterocentric domination of popular culture. This approach to negotiated viewing positions queer reading practices as being adjacent rather than adjuvant to straight reading practices. In this way, queer viewing/ reading practices do not fabricate queerness within mainstream texts but discover and reveal inherent or natural queerness.

Here, we can consider the role actors' homosexuality and gender variance, rumored, assumed, or confirmed, plays in queering a film. Most notably, actresses Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich's. This approach to locating queerness is distinct because of the role visibility plays in its execution. The way this visibility allows reading of the actresses' queerness to evolve manifests in two notable ways. The first regards fandom surrounding the stars as it concerns their personal life and romantic relationships, and an examination of these relationships' influence on the actresses' personal as well as perceived, public identities. Especially their shared acquaintance and affairs with New York playwright and butch aristocrat Mercedes De Acosta, a connection newly examined after De Acosta's correspondence with both stars were published in 2000 at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, previously sealed until 10 years after Garbo's death in 1990.<sup>2</sup> The second, a reading of the actress's androgynous fashion as gender variance- a trend most pronounced in a series of films in the 1930s that De Acosta referred to as "Trouser Films," or films featuring the stars in pants. Garbo and Dietrich's appearances in these films encapsulate the style of "Lesbian Chic," a homoeroticism specific to a queer reading of Hollywood aesthetic in the 1930s as artsy, mysterious, and androgynous, notable aspects of the two stars' iconic images.<sup>3</sup> These films include (for Garbo): *Anna Christie* (Clarence Brown, 1930) *Queen*

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<sup>2</sup> White, Andrew. "Love, Marlene." *The Rosenbach*, <https://www.rosenbach.org/blog/love-marlene/>, 27 May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> White, Patricia, "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms." *Camera Obscura* 45, Volume 15, Number 3, January, 2001.

*Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936); and (for Dietrich): *Morocco* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1930), *Blonde Venus* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1933), *Desire* (Frank Borzage, 1936).

The actresses' developments in costume was a trend that paralleled the stars' personal style during their time offset, inspired by the stylings of De Acosta, who was visibly queer. De Acosta writes in her memoir *Here Lies the Heart: A Tale of My Life* in 1960: "When I had known Greta a little while I got her to exchange her sailor pants for slacks." A few chapters later she recalls having a similar conversation with Dietrich: "I told her she looked so well in *Morocco* in the sequence where she wore them that I thought she should wear them all the time. She was delighted at the suggestion. The next day I took her to my tailor in Hollywood and in true Dietrich fashion she ordered not one pair but many more, and jackets to go with them. Of course, she looked superb in all of them. When they were finished she appeared at the Paramount studio one day dressed in one of them. The following day newspapers throughout the whole country carried photographs of her. From that second on, women all over the world leapt into slacks."<sup>4</sup>

While this "leap into slacks" might have been personal to the actresses, the modernity of their fashion choices- and the influence they held on audiences- are indicative of a larger trend at the time. That of modern girl iconography, a gendered aesthetic that was visually represented in media via images of women that challenged mainstream audiences to contemplate conventions of race, sexuality, and gendered hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> This moment in fashion history represented a new kind of woman whose interests were expanding beyond the home to cultures and issues of communities beyond her own, a social and political position that encouraged dissent and

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<sup>4</sup> De Acosta, Mercedes, *Here Lies the Heart: A Tale of my Life*. New York, Reynal Press, 1960

<sup>5</sup> Petro, Patrice. "Cosmopolitan Women: Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong, and Leni Riefenstahl," in *Silent cinema and the politics of space*. Indiana University Press, 2014.



challenged understandings of gender and sexuality in popular culture. The stardom held by these actresses made their fashion decisions fashion trends. With fans celebrating their modernity and exotic status as foreigners, Hollywood surpassed Paris in the '30s for the first time as the greatest influencing site of emerging fashion.<sup>6</sup> This style, wherein Garbo's Swedish and Dietrich's German, mysterious, European aesthetics supported a modern girl iconography, was rooted in ethnic markers and indicative of a new frontier for women's sexual and gendered expressions (along with those of varying class and racial backgrounds) and, expanded the image/ idea of a desirable or stylish woman past previously agreed-upon standards of beauty and allure.

In addition to evolving expressions of gender and sexuality, this modernity reordered community and social contracts for the actors in their personal and professional lives. Dietrich often stepped out and was photographed with her female lovers, some of whom were similarly foreigners, or non-white Americans considered "modern girls," challenging previously accepted conventions of Hollywood glamour as white and distinctly heterosexual. In this company was Spanish-American De Acosta, Russian actresses Alla Nazimova and dancer Isadora Duncan, and Chinese-American Anna May Wong, to name a few. In Berlin, where she lived until 1930 when she left Germany to continue working with Josef Von Sternberg in America, a site of great sexual freedom, being openly lesbian or bisexual or gay was proof that one was modern, an idea she carried with her to America. Dietrich's modernity extended beyond her stylistic choices. She was one of the few Hollywood stars and German actors to publicly condemn the Nazi party and in 1933 when Adolf Hitler ordered German film artists abroad to return home to assist "in the great cultural upbuilding of Germany," by working exclusively for German film producers, she

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<sup>6</sup> Cornelia, Herzog, "'Puffed Sleeves before Tea-Time': Joan Crawford, Adrian and Women Audiences," in Gledhill, Christine, *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, London : Routledge, 1991, 75–78.

refused. Dietrich never returned to Germany following World War II, insisting “they don’t like me.”

Dietrich was a globalist by all measures, a cosmopolitan woman whose politics, cultural interests, and of course fashion, extended beyond the borders of whichever city she was living in at any given time. The actress’s gender and sexual variance, cosmopolitanism, and foreign status lent themselves to her codification as “exotic,” so that she was cast in a number of roles by frequent collaborator Von Sternberg, who had a distinct interest in seeing her in peregrine costumes in beautiful lighting, in similarly “exotic” settings. Dietrich and Von Sternberg were influenced by other performances Hollywood deemed “exotic,” that they occasionally reproduced in problematic ways. Dietrich’s first performance as Helen Faraday in *Blonde Venus* (1933), the infamous “Hot Voodoo,” number features Dietrich in an ape suit, performing with a chorus line of anonymous black performers, displays a troubling fascination with an imaginary African American primitivism present in Weimar Germany the director and actress carried with them to Hollywood. This performance and Dietrich’s costumes are unmistakably influenced by the work of Josephine Baker, also known as “The Black Venus,” a queer creative herself. Other examples of Dietrich positioned to perform against an “exotic” background include Dietrich’s performances *The Shanghai Express* (1932) alongside rumored lover Anna May Wong, *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil Is A Woman* (1935).

Cultural spaces emerged in Hollywood surrounding globalist ideals that allowed for a community of queer creatives to exist and flourish with the arrival of modernism interjected by these “exotic,” cosmopolitan women. At her home, “The Garden of Alla,” Alla Nazimova founded a community for lqueer creatives operating within Hollywood that she referred to as her

“sewing circle.”<sup>7</sup> Despite being positioned in the media as natural rivals of one another within their prospective studios, MGM (Garbo) and Paramount (Dietrich), the two operated within similar social circles. Garbo and Dietrich and their lovers frequented Nazimova’s Garden of Alla politely if not genially. Nazimova’s Sewing Circle included a number of Hollywood queer creatives of the ’30s who operated within the actresses’ professional as well as personal society. This includes Salka Viertel, Garbo’s lover and collaborator who wrote the screenplay for Garbo’s passion project- the first of her explicitly queer films in which she is referred to as a “king” and kisses a woman, *Queen Christina* (1933); Garbo was an uncredited producer on this film and structured the production through a radical inclusion of her personal and romantic community on set, including the hiring of her ex-fiancee, whom she jilted the night before their wedding, falling star John Gilbert, as her love interest.<sup>8</sup> Also in attendance of Nazimova’s gatherings were gay costume designers Adrian, who worked closely with Nazimova and costumed Garbo in her Trouser films, and Travis Banton, responsible for Dietrich’s iconic tuxedos in *Morocco* and *Blonde Venus*. Dietrich notoriously worked closely alongside Banton on her wardrobe, suggesting her *Morocco* costume needed a white tie and tails.<sup>9</sup> Adrian said of Banton “I consider Travis Banton to really be the greatest costume designer. His work for Marlene Dietrich alone merits this, introducing the male tuxedo for women.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Researcher, The History. “Alla Nazimova and The Garden of Allah Hotel.” *The Hidden History Blog*, <https://chrissyhamlin.blogspot.com/2018/04/alla-nazimova-and-garden-of-allah-hotel.html>, 10 Apr. 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Meyers, Jeffrey. “Salka Viertel and the Hollywood Exiles.” *TheArticle*, TheArticle, 15 Mar.

<sup>9</sup> “Travis Banton - When Fashion Made Hollywood.” *Glamour Daze*, <https://glamourdaze.com/2018/07/travis-banton-when-fashion-made-hollywood.html>, 12 Sept. 2019

<sup>10</sup> Noh, David. “Movie Costume Designers Get No Respect.” *Gay City News*, <https://www.gaycitynews.com/movie-costume-designers-get-no-respect/>, 26 Feb. 2020

These queer creatives were in tune with the queer sensibility of the world and representations created in making the actresses' variant relationships with gendered clothing visible. At the time, Dietrich was regularly traveling in menswear. A year after performing in a dazzling white tux in *Blonde Venus* (1933), Dietrich wore a similarly striking white suit while aboard the *SS Europa* traveling to Paris from Cherbourg. Hearing of her attire, Paris's Chief of Police warned that should Dietrich disembark from the ocean liner in her mannish attire in the city, where it was technically illegal for women to wear pants until 2013, the actress would be arrested. Dietrich defiantly arrived in the City of Lights in her suit, her hair slicked back under a beret, and her signature dark sunglasses. She was not arrested, and during her stay attended a Parisian police charity ball, where she was gifted a bracelet by the Chief of Police's wife for her contributions to the event.

Both Garbo and Dietrich's gender presentation as it manifested through dress interrogates the conflict that existed between the actresses' public images and personal identities/presentation. Here, we may consider the ways deviant femininity was read in Garbo and Dietrich and used to signify and indicate their supposed homosexuality, as the two were perceived as butch and therefore containing an inherent, variant gender, their style contributing to a form of gender authenticity. The stars' visibility constructed a type of lesbianism queer women have been compared to for decades to come. If they resemble this type, they are deemed queer. If not, they are deemed straight. It is the performance of this defined lesbianism that is at the core of what Patricia White refers to in her work "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms", as "the Garbo myth," or the idea that if she wasn't explicitly a lesbian, she could easily be one,<sup>11</sup> and if a woman resembled or embodied the style of either actress, she too could

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<sup>11</sup> White, Patricia. "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms." *Camera Obscura* 45, Volume 15, Number 3, 2001.

be gay. Garbo and Dietrich- they might easily be lesbians- in our dreams, a queer reading straddling both the want for queer representation and the very “real” lesbian culture and style both participated in.

While Garbo and Dietrich’s queerness is somewhat visible and arguably readily locatable by queer audiences through their performances and personal presentations, there are opportunities, moving into the next chapter of this study, for the practice of negotiated viewing to locate queerness beyond physical embodiment- addressing an issue with queer readings of “mainstream” texts that exists for some queer audiences noted by Doty in “Flaming.” This is the issue of the effects of “dominant culture colonization”, or the heterocentric impositions of mainstream media which erase embodied queer codes so that they are unidentifiable by even queer-identifying audiences. Here, Doty encourages queer viewers to challenge the instinct to dismiss a “mainstream” text as being void of queerness when characters’ sexuality or identity has been left undisclosed, a self-imposed, internalized, homophobic assumption that positions “straight” as default and “queer” as other, asserting “silence and gaps in information can be as telling and meaningful as which is said or shown.” Doty warns that audiences should be careful to avoid reading “queer” or for that matter “straight” through exclusively visual signifiers, a practice that would undoubtedly serve to reinforce derisive stereotypes. Our interest in the queer labor emerging from M-G-M’s Freed Unit allows us the opportunity to move beyond classifying films as queer solely through the presence of homosexual acts, queer performances, or characters and actors with gender non-conforming presentations. While witnessing performances by Garbo and Dietrich is valuable to the practice of negotiated viewing, moving beyond them allows the practice to include a somewhat more material embodiment of queerness in film as it is located in production via craft, honed by queer creatives whose presence and work canonizes queer style.

Musicals emerging from the Freed Unit often establish the embodiment of this canonized style with the presence of camp. Alternative production methods of queer creatives in the Freed Unit serve here as an opportunity to consider the ways camp masks the erotic significance of queer labor and economic practices at M-G-M which regulated the circumstances under which their labor existed. This labor's manifestation in camp is essential to understanding the markings of "stylistic anomalies," the result of stylistic choices made at individual craft levels by queer creatives that can classify musicals emerging from the Freed Unit as queer inflected productions, recognizing camp as a form of gay subjectivity that exists within and despite the dynamics of heterocentrism and capitalism present in Hollywood studios.

This labor can be divided into two major sectors: the visible (an extension of what has been examined within the Garbo/ Dietrich portion of this work)- the stars of the films, and the supportive; queer creatives at the helm of production. (I refrain from labeling the latter sector as "the unseen" to argue that while queer creatives themselves are not readily visible, the efforts of their labor are.) While gendered and sexual difference within actors employed by M-G-M was portrayed physically; queer creatives relied on artistic expressions manifested in various aspects of mise-en-scene to express themselves. Actors employed by M-G-M suffered heightened levels of ridicule at the hands of the press at an aggressively disproportionate rate than their behind-the-scenes counterparts. And though there was a kind of glamour occasionally gleaned from an ambiguity of sexuality, such as in the camp masculinity of Gene Kelly, or the fierce felineity of Lucille Ball, they did not enjoy the kind of protection queer creatives gained from their anonymity. This split in protection via visibility meant that queer creatives planted firmly in the production side of film making could use alternative devices for signaling their queerness to audiences that were more explicit than devices employed by their visible co-creatives.

The labor of queer creatives is most readily visible in those crafts which are represented on-screen via mise-en-scene. Most notably, these are professions of creative means such as set decoration, art design, musical arrangement and composition, and costume design. While it is duly noted that queerness can not be signaled in any singular mode, the collaborative efforts of these aspects of production create a representation of queerness that is nameless, faceless, and shared, a rare example in which means product reflects means of production in that this aural queerness is representational of the queer community existing behind the scenes.

The Freed Unit employed queer creatives within these areas of expertise who worked almost exclusively within M-G-M, and whose names can be seen in the credits of multiple productions. These workers were called Freed's "Fairies", and their regular employment created a consistency of style that was insular, establishing a distinct cinematic language that referenced other M-G-M films and made them easily identifiable as such. The most prolific of Freed's Fairies existed at the top of a hierarchy working within the unit in a group called "The Royal Family."<sup>12</sup> Within this family were queer creatives regularly associated with Freed such as costume designers Irene Sharaff and Walter Plunkett whose work on *An American in Paris* (1951) won the Unit an Academy Award for best costume design, directors Charles Walters, Vincente Minelli, and Stanley Donen, choreographer Robert Alton, set designer Edwin B. Willis and his various assistants including Arthur Krams who designed the excessive sets for *Easter Parade* (1948), and composer and lyricist Roger Edens who worked with Freed from the conception of the unit, becoming its first major player, responsible for the music behind genre-defining films including *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945), *On the Town* (1949), and *Funny Face* (1957). Describing these queer creatives as existing within a family calls into focus notions of

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<sup>12</sup> Cohan, Steven. *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*. Duke University Press, 2005.

the queer, radical reordering of community, and the ways queer communities are founded and maintained through shared sensibilities, in this case through the aesthetics of an invented queer public.

Outside of this “Royal Family” were additional queer creatives whose contributions added to the camp of the productions, such as costume designer Gile Steele who designed Lucille Ball’s extravagant, 17th century, Marie Antoinette-esque wardrobe in *Du Barry Was a Lady* (1943), director Edward Buzzell (*Best Foot Forward*, 1943) who engaged in a “lavender marriage” with actress Oma Musson, a member of Nazimova’s previously mentioned infamous “Sewing circle”, partners Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, composers of music numbers for *Best Foot Forward* (1943) and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), producing genre standard “The Trolley Song”, for which the pair was nominated for an Academy Award, and art director Cedric Gibbons, who would win the unit an academy award for his work on *American in Paris* (1951). While audience members were not necessarily attending screenings of these films knowing the names of the costume or set designers, the community behind their production created a standard of aurally unique and recognizable films that could only exist within the cinematic universe of M-G-M so that “Freed Unit” was read as one would read a credited crew member’s name.

Queer audiences have an affection for that which is visionary or emerges from the imagination. These musicals, similar to films within the melodramatic genre, held in comparison to other popular genres of the time like noir, exist within a realm that is not entirely rooted in reality, a form of escapism, manufactured by queer creatives, enjoyed by queer audiences for a break from mainstream film and popular culture that does not reflect their interests, stylistic sensibilities, or desires. Here, studios and sound stages exist as alternative worlds wherein queer visions might be prioritized. These stylistic anomalies are a currency of queer creativity and can



be credited with challenging dominant culture's regulation of popular culture and are essential to the reputation M-G-M and its musicals have garnered. We reevaluate this reputation now to reveal the cultural value of the queer creatives' labor in the creation of a world of camp.

The reputation of M-G-M's musicals- while being what may connect modern queer audiences to them- has in some ways made these films inaccessible to these viewers, as the films are held in a nostalgic collective memory that plants them solidly in the past of entertainment. Many of the musicals emerging from the Freed Unit are now canonized within what has come to be considered the "golden age of M-G-M", reserving them as relics of remembrance of a Hollywood exclusive to older generations of film-goers, a phenomenon that prevents younger queer audiences from gaining access to these musicals to identify the queer cultural value they contain. In this way, within the realm of entertainment, a distinct line between past and present is drawn, planting the M-G-M musical firmly in the past. But queer audiences are offered an opportunity to gain access to and reevaluate the cultural value of the M-G-M musical by celebrating queer creatives in the Freed Unit for their labor; stylistic anomalies that operate as communicative tools by queer creatives for queer audiences- so they may be enjoyed by both those who viewed these films in the theaters they premiered in, and today via streaming platforms, the gift of rereleases/ restorations, DVDs, and cable television's investment in "classics" with channels such as Turner Classic Movies and Retroplex- further blurring the line between past and present, extending the life expectancy of the cultural value of the M-G-M musical, allowing for a newfound connection between modern audiences and a genre of film considered by some to be passe. When M-G-M musicals and their stylistic anomalies are read through the lens of negotiated viewing, a conversation between queer creatives and audiences that began decades ago is reanimated.

The role of archives- especially in their regenerative form on the internet- emerges here as a tool of celebratory remembrance adopted by communities to create space for a conversation surrounding aspects of popular culture that are of a newfound interest. As M-G-M musicals underwent a renaissance due to the proliferation of audiences' interest in "the classics", an interest in the studio's stars was similarly revitalized, deploying a fandom invested in figures of the campy musicals queer contemporaries were being reacquainted with. Stars such as Lucille Ball, Carmen Miranda, and most notably, Judy Garland, emerged in the modern public imaginations of queer communities as iconic figures worthy of cult status. Gay men's interest in adopting Judy Garland as an icon of queerness exists as an exemplary embodiment of negotiated viewing's possibilities. Garland's intrigue lies not in her status as a star, but in the contradictions that exist between this star image and her personal life.<sup>13</sup> Her stardom- and more importantly, glamour- is read as a perseverance against a life and career that would prove to be fatal. Her glamour is queer in its radical existence, against unattractive odds. This radical existence allowed her to live outside of the confines of normalcy, married to queer creative and member of the Freed Unit Royal Family, Vincente Minelli. Investments in Garland's proximity to queerness and camp readings of her glamour mirror those of queer audiences looking for representations as outlined by this work. Here, fan-run websites such as "The Judy Room"<sup>14</sup> and sister site "Judy Garland News & Events"<sup>15</sup> operate similarly to my own virtual exhibit in creating space to celebrate and engage with the interests of queer audiences.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohan, Steven. *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*. Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> "The Judy Room Archives." *The Judy Room*, <https://www.thejudyroom.com/>, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> *Judy Garland News & Events*. <https://www.judygarlandnews.com/>, 8 Feb. 2021.

While we have successfully assuaged issues of temporal divide, revealing they may be managed through the practice of negotiated viewing. Another issue that makes these films inaccessible to modern audiences emerges. When considering the imaginative queer public of M-G-M's Freed Unit, concerns of representation past that of white queer creatives/ aesthetics are not so easily resolved. While the aesthetic difference that exists within the cinematic universe of M-G-M musicals is rooted in the social difference belonging to queer communities, there is a limit to that which audiences can locate through the lens of negotiated viewing. Here, we must admit that readings of camp are not inherently radical, as they can not absolve these films of their lack of inclusion past gendered/ sexual variance. Modern audiences of color may not find the practice of negotiated viewing valuable when considering films emerging from the Freed Unit due to the practice's inability to locate diversity where it does not exist. Camp is ultimately preoccupied with elevating certain aspects of cultural value over others, making distinctions about what is made visible vs. nonvisible. In the case of the Freed Unit, white queer creatives invested most readily in vexed images of whiteness, pleasure from which may only be derived by like-minded white audiences, queer or not, devoting their creative powers to establishing a hallucinatory public wherein beauty and glamour are locatable only in white middle-class families, students, or entertainers. Decidedly- camp and negotiated readings can not absolve texts of antiquated, occasionally pejorative cultural conditions created by the time in which they were produced.

Here, we must consider what is being "negotiated" within the practice of negotiated viewing. To participate in this method of reading is to acknowledge that one who makes attachments to media that lends itself to being viewed through the lens of negotiated viewing is engaging with media that does not explicitly include readily visible representations of oneself

despite- and only after- noting one's exclusion from said media. Such a relationship with attachments to media is explored by Lauren Berlant in her essay "Cruel Optimism." Berlant describes the title of her work as a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.<sup>16</sup> These attachments are cruel, not merely burdensome because viewers who make them are subject to representations that are undeniably harmful to an emerging or even developed identity rather than just offensive in nature. Still, the attachment is maintained- in this case, one's investment in a film previously considered void of the kind of representation they sought- for the possibility of gratification through the process of discovery and newfangled representation. Here, viewers make bargains, usually unconscious in nature, with the material that prevents that which is offensive or exclusionary from complicating the process of reclamation. In these cases, the loss of the material would be considered more devastating than the endurance of its failings. Subsequently, negotiation occurs within viewers. Optimism becomes a bargaining tool used to hold viewers to their attachments and displace doubts about less favorable aspects of a film so that queerness can be located and representation can be claimed, transferring the power of autonomy from the text itself to the queer viewer. The practice of negotiated viewing also emerges here as a tool not only useful for recontextualization, but also for accountability, wherein negotiating with a film's failings is to acknowledge them, a slightly more productive approach than ignorance.

We must ask ourselves here: is this practice a detachment from the heterocentric conditions of American cinema, or a result of existing with them? Here we may reconsider negotiated viewing as a defense mechanism, in which viewers suspend traditional viewing

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<sup>16</sup> Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism." *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, 2010, 93–117.

practices to engage in a fantasy that may liberate queer audiences from the tyranny of heterocentric cinema. In this way, negotiated viewing, performed, reveals itself to be the latest iteration of queer labor that can be identified in this act of participating in negotiated viewing. The cyclical nature of negotiated viewing mirrors the structure of a conversation, across generations, mediums, and between creatives and audiences, revealing the possibilities of the practice. This practice is one that is generative, inspiring archives (The Judy Room), blogs (Oh The Sewing Circle) on popular platforms like Tumblr, fan magazines, fiction, artwork such as video artist Cecelia Barriga's 1991 work *Encuentro entre dos reinas* (Meeting of Two Queens) and now, a virtual exhibit.

The construction of this project and the curation of its virtual exhibit, the Garbo/Dietrich Archive and The Freed Unit Archive, examinations of the products of queer labor, are a result of my own queer labor albeit academic and technological (though in the design of the exhibit, artistic). My engagement with this project's materials affirms the communicative relationship queer creatives and audience members participate in so that one can be either or both at any given time. In making this project I was a queer audience member locating queerness in films I had previously viewed in an academic setting in introductory cinema studies classes, contextualizing them by genre, mise-en-scene, and auteur theory. Then, in my work on this project, I became a queer creative, curating an exhibit with the goal of personal reintroduction to the films I had viewed and to create a space for this reintroduction to be enjoyed beyond my personal experience, accessible to modern queer audiences, my peers. In my work, I reject the understanding of these films I had previously held as a film student. I dismiss the auteur theory through a celebration of the radical reordering of community by queer creatives during production, valuing the labor of crew above its directorial style. When a queer audience member

utilizes the practice of negotiated viewing, the process is revealed to be inherent or natural to queer viewers, as every viewer, queer or otherwise, naturally looks for representation in the films they watch. Here, identification of queerness through the practice of negotiated viewing comes as naturally as expressing it, in any way one does so, as every expression and representation of queerness; aesthetic, aural, laborious, or otherwise is valuable in challenging heterocentric domination of film and popular culture.

Readers can find the virtual exhibit, *Negotiated Viewing*, reference in Negotiated Viewing: Locating Queerness in Mid-Century American Cinema that includes *Garbo & Dietrich* and *The Freed Unit* archives at the link attached below:

<https://www.negotiated-viewing.com>

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