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« Kurzfilme, kurze Filme, kurzgeschlossene Filme. Eine Einführung. »

A Short Glimmer of Hope

The Portrayal of Queer Mental Health in Short Film

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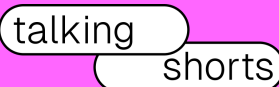

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1. Introduction

While feature films mostly comply with the mainstream and therefore only hesitantly include diverse casts and certain topics, the short film has the option of doing just that. Short films are less expensive and usually take up less time to shoot, and therefore do not have the same financial pressure. Short films can be distributed on the internet, where, if you look for them, even niche topics can be found. The short film can experiment with the medium of film and depict topics that are not so common in the feature film. Due to their brevity, short films can focus more intently on a specific aspect. In this paper I talk about two of those topics, namely queer stories and mental health.

Mental health issues do not stop short at straight cis people but there are certain aspects like gender dysphoria that exclusively apply to the queer community. Queer youths often suffer from depression like their straight peers, but the reasons might be different. Additionally, queer characters in the media are mostly portrayed with stereotypes and with tragic stories. Tropes like "Bury Your Gays", where queer characters always die at the end or experience some sort of a bad ending, are common in movies and suggest that being queer means suffering, undeserving of happiness, and it ends with death. However, it is important to talk about mental health issues while maintaining a positive outcome, suggesting that being queer does not equal eternal suffering and loneliness.

Mental health and the queer experience are complex topics involving various aspects, as you will see some of them discussed in this paper. Understandably, presenting this complexity is already a challenge, particularly when you have less time. Nonetheless, the short film's time limitation may be why those topics can be presented, as they focus on specific aspects and highlight them.

In this paper, I argue that short films can showcase the mental health aspects of queer people within their brevity while having a positive note for the future at the same time. For this reason, I intentionally focus on short films featuring white main characters, as the experiences of queer people of colour may include aspects and struggles that white queer people might not encounter. While bringing intersectionality into consideration is important, it would not receive the spotlight it deserves within the limited space of this paper. I believe this is neither my place nor the primary focus of this paper. Even with a lot of research, it is likely that I will not be able to understand all the important nuances that are needed for a critical discussion involving mental health in queer people of colour. For

this reason, this paper focuses on the white perspective, but researching other perspectives is equally important and needs to be discussed. The same applies to queer people with disabilities.

I chose five short films with queer main characters that contain mental health issues to some capacity, but also include a hopeful or somewhat positive aspect. When talking about a certain character, I will use the right term to describe them. Otherwise, I will mainly work with umbrella terms when talking about mental health issues within the queer community. The reason for this is that both sexuality and gender exist on a spectrum, and via umbrella terms, I want to make sure to include the whole spectrum. I will use the term "queer community" for all persons that identify with that group. When talking more specifically about transgender, I will use the term "trans*" to include the whole transgender spectrum, consisting of transgender, non-binary, gender-fluid, etc.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter gives you an introduction to the main topics of this paper. Chapter 2.1 will focus on the short film and the challenges and opportunities that its brevity brings along. Mental health and being queer are both complex topics that involve different aspects. Before discussing this, it is essential to address the brevity of short films, as they must convey the complexity of human emotions and experiences within a limited time frame.

Chapter 2.2 will focus on the mental health issues that queer individuals face. The information will be used as a foundation for the discussion in Chapter 3. Although anxiety disorder is not explicitly shown in the short movies, I still chose to include it since the stressors that lead to an anxiety disorder also lead to mental health struggles in general. Therefore, the information is still useful for the conversation. The word anxiety, in this case, is used as a placeholder for constantly living in stressful situations. Since negative portrayals of the queer community in movies contribute to the issues presented in the chapter, this aspect will also be examined. Chapter 2.3 then introduces the selected short films for a better understanding during the main discussion.

2.1 Short Film and Brevity

As mentioned in the beginning, the short film has a unique position in film. Short films are typically produced by independent directors with limited budgets, allowing artists to take more risks than in a feature film, which should appeal to a broader audience to break even (Felando 2015, 9). Additionally, short films consume less data than feature films and can therefore be uploaded online without requiring significant resources.

The short (narrative) film tells a story, as the name suggests, within a short time. To tell the story, the director must provide specific clues for the viewer to understand. The director cannot expect the viewer to fall back on experiences from other movies. For this reason, those clues should be known in their everyday life so they can connect with the presented story (Heinrich 1997, 4). This is especially important for the short film, as the viewer needs to understand and connect with the story immediately. There is no time for an introduction; the viewer needs to be given the clues to get into the story. But "if camerawork, mise-en-scene, sound design, etc. are skillfully employed, the process of

empathy on the part of the spectator can be triggered almost immediately" (Brütsch 2008, 4).

It is important to note that the meaning of a narrative story does not come from the given cues; instead, it comes from the process of reception. In other words, it is not the movie itself that gives meaning; it is the viewer who detects the clues and connects them to get the meaning, as Katrin Heinrich explains (Heinrich 1997, 36).

When discussing short films, Heinrich uses the term "inner brevity"[1], meaning that not only does the short film have a short runtime, but its narrative is also condensed to a small time frame surrounding a story with a few characters and one storyline that is easy to follow. She argues that the use of inner brevity is not a stylistic device but instead a functional one since inner brevity and external brevity (therefore the run time of the short film) work together mutually. "Because the narration is so short, this reduction takes place, and because it takes place, the narration can be so short"[2] (ibid.). Heinrich explains further that brevity is a condensing of language and stylistic devices, and therefore more than just shortening something long to something shorter. This does not only apply to the short film, since this idea stems from the lyrics of the ancient Greek poets. The lyric is also condensed to its main points, prompting the reader to reflect on its meaning (ibid., 54-56).

While the story in a short film might not be complex, the narrative structure can be. The reason for this complexity is the use of condensing devices to create brevity. To name a few, brevity is characterised by a story that starts immediately, with no introduction or epilogue. The storytelling often includes a fragmented timespan. Heinrich names the title as another aspect, which, according to her, is often a puzzle. Lastly, the use of symbols adds to the complex narrative structure. All those devices are means to engage the viewer with what they see. Heinrich adds that inner brevity creates an impression on the viewer in a subtle way. It is because of this subtlety that the viewer needs to put their interpretation into the short film (ibid. 56f.). Another factor that comes into place when talking about the viewer's engagement is that short films are condensed on the main point they want to convey, therefore, there is not much background on where this story takes place or who exactly the characters are. This makes the narrative more universal and invites the viewer to project themselves onto the character (Brütsch 2008, 5).

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[1] see Heinrich, 1997, "innere Kürze", translation mine.
[2] see ibid., "Weil die Narration so kurz ist, findet diese Reduktion statt, und weil sie stattfindet, kann die Narration so kurz sein." Translation mine.

As mentioned earlier, a story that incorporates aspects familiar from everyday life is an essential part of connecting with the narrative. This trait is also essential for characterisation. To understand and empathise with the protagonist, there must be an immediate connection between the viewer and the main character, as there is no time to get to know them better. The viewer should be able to classify the character in their surroundings to create a "lifelike character" (Heinrich 1997, 83). Through the connection to the character, the viewer also becomes invested in the story. Having an immediate connection to the characters and understanding the story is especially crucial when the feelings and experiences of a character are the main topics of the short film. In addition, in the case of the selected short films, this is important for a viewer outside the queer community who might not relate to the presented experiences, but to better understand what queer people often go through.

2.2 Mental Health Issues within the Queer Community

The short films discussed in this paper present a range of mental health issues within the queer community. The following explained issues are based on this selection, but it should be mentioned that there are also other issues, like eating disorders, substance abuse, etc., that can occur.

While adolescence is already a challenging period in life, it is even more so for queer youth (Craig et al., 2015, p. 255). As will be explained in more detail later, one factor that comes into play is the stress of not fitting in. Society has certain expectations of how humans should look and behave. This stems from the heteronormative viewpoint, which is often seen as the standard.

> The social theorist Michael Warner, editor of the 1993 essay collection *Fear of a Queer Planet*, uses the term "heteronormativity" to describe "culture's assurance [*read*: insistence] that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous". His point is that, as long as heterosexuality and the male/female gender binary are understood as ahistorical, fixed characteristics of humanity, anyone who does not conform to that norm is seen as less than human. (Robertson 2019, 46)

As people realise their queerness, they are also aware that their feelings do not comply with heteronormativity and therefore the expectations society has on them. This can lead to people internalising the feeling of being different or being wrong for feeling and acting the way they do in comparison to their peers (see ibid., 49f.).

Queer people, especially queer youth, experience pressure from the outside. They often feel the need to participate in gendered behaviour, which is linked to the idea of heteronormativity. "Sexuality is so seamlessly attached to gender and buoyed by heteronormativity that those who come off as genderqueer in behaviour, appearance, or affect are quickly policed by family and peers for being *sexually* deviant" (ibid., 53). As Mary Robertson explains, there are some differences in how society views the queer community. She argues that "[s]ociety is more comfortable with the notion that women's sexuality is more fluid than men's, or at least that homosexual conduct among women does not, in all cases, make them gay" (ibid., 65). Society's pressure is therefore not evenly distributed, which then leads to different results when it comes to mental health issues.

One of the most common disorders is anxiety disorder. While around thirty percent of adults in the United States live with anxiety the rates are even higher for queer people. Data from a survey shows that queer people were more than twice as likely to experience an anxiety disorder than their heterosexual peers (see Weiss/Raymond 2020, 1f.), while the trans* community even has an almost threefold risk (see ibid., 5). The so-called minority stress theory postulates that anxiety within the queer community stems from chronic distress. As already mentioned in Robertson's arguments, the stress of being prejudiced and discriminated against often gets internalised, which then manifests as an anxiety disorder. Because of stress and fear, people from the queer community often tend to conceal their sexual orientation; this is linked with depressive symptoms and internalised homophobia (see ibid., 3). The relationship between anxiety symptoms and minority stress, particularly the expectation of rejection, makes studying anxiety an important field of research (see Fish et al. 2020, 7). Another issue queer people often deal with is gender dysphoria, which is described as follows:

> According to the American Psychiatric Association, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* describes gender dysphoria as «a difference between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, and significant distress or problems functioning». A formal gender dysphoria diagnosis from a doctor is often necessary for health insurance plans to cover medical and surgical procedures that would otherwise be determined elective. (Robertson 2019, 76f.)

The term gender dysphoria indicates that there is not a problem with the identity itself, but there is a discomfort that is caused by the discrepancy between anatomy and identity (Wedding/Niemic 2014, 157). As Robertson explains further, genderqueer people

live in ambiguity. Trans* people share a wide variety of different experiences. Some of them are still on their transition journey, while others are fully transitioned, and some are somewhere in between. This leads to additional pressure on trans* people since their gender ambiguity does not fit into society's viewpoint of heteronormativity. They are misunderstood and are labeled "disruptive", "learning disabled", "mentally ill", "delinquent", or, in hate language, "freak" (Robertson 2019, 85). Trans* people not only get verbally abused but are also very likely to experience violence in some capacity. Bullying, harassment, and even murder are likely possibilities. Attackers often justify their actions by "accusing their victims of deception" (ibid., 88).

But queer people do not only struggle in real life. Even in mainstream media, they are not safe from being misunderstood. Until the mid-1990s the queer community was mostly ignored in movies, and when they appeared, only with negative stereotypes (see Gilad 2008, 58). Robertson, another author, talks about those stereotypes and how they are incorporated a bit more:

> LGBTQ characters were portrayed as dangerous serial killers, […] or as damaged individuals whose lives end in tragedy. […] When gay/trans people weren't represented as pathological, they often filled the role of comic relief. Even though the gay rights movement was in full swing and various industries were paying attention to what they saw as a new market, the film industry continued to rely on old tropes. This legacy continues to this day, where LGBTQ-identified characters have proliferated, but those storylines are still commonly written as tragic, dysfunctional, and outside the norm. (Robertson 2019, 101f.)

While mainstream media often still employs those harmful tropes, alternative media, such as short films, can be helpful. Most of the short films used for this paper are accessible on *YouTube*. Through easy access, the short film can reach a broad audience.

Movies, and therefore short films too, play a significant role in influencing how the general public views mental illness since the issues affecting those suffering from mental disorders are largely under-represented in mainstream media. By combining both visual and auditory aspects, the film can convey information and evoke emotions (Wedding and Niemic 2014, p. 2).

Besides queer representation, movies are well suited to portraying mental health and psychological states. "The combination of images, dialogue, sound effects, and music in a movie mimics and parallels the thoughts and feelings that occur in our stream of consciousness" (ibid., 6). It is thanks to those methods that the viewer can understand what the characters are going through and how they feel about it. "Unlike traditional

media, the audience is not presented with a point of view or given a solution to a social problem; rather, they are encouraged through mood, tone, and affect to start a conversation and support each other" (Ellis 2012, 195). This argument can be combined with the structure of short films that invite to start conversations about not only what, but also how something was shown.

2.3 Summary of Selected Short Films

To discuss the above-stated mental health issues within the queer community I will use six short films from different creators. In the following, I will summarise the short films for the upcoming main discussion. Three of the selected short films feature trans* characters who use both their birth name and their chosen name. When discussing these characters, I will use their chosen name and preferred pronouns.

Birthday Boy (Leo LeBeau, UK 2021) is about a transgender boy called Alex who wants to celebrate his birthday online in a video game. Although his parents support him, he still must attend a girls' school and gets bullied there. On his birthday, things escalate, and his life takes a turn.

Masked (Jay Beckerleg/Michael Hardinge, AUS 2019) tells the story of Zach, who struggles to come out as transgender. Being misunderstood by his parents, he attempts suicide.

Still Me (Michael Harding/Jay Beckerleg/Sam Jelley, AUS 2021) can be seen as a sequel to *Masked*. In this short film, Bailey identifies as non-binary. After struggling to be accepted for who they are, they receive some help from Zach, who seems more comfortable since his outing.

Thanks to Her (Sam McCoy, Sam Orlowski, USA 2020) is about Millie and Andy, who get sentenced to do community work together after fighting. While working there, Millie starts bonding with Andy, a lesbian who is already out, and starts to realise some things about herself.

Vertical Lines (Kyle Reaume, CDN 2018) is an intimate talk between Dave and Andrew about their self-harm scars and past suicide attempts.

3. Mental Health in Queer Short Films

With the help of the basics presented so far, this chapter focuses on discussing the thesis that short films, within their brevity, can convey certain aspects of mental health among queer people in a positive light. Each subchapter is dedicated to a specific mental health issue depicted in the selected short films. As I discuss the mental health aspects in the short films, I will also highlight the positive aspects that are included.

Mental health is a complex topic with often overlapping aspects. This will also occur during the discussions, as it is not easy to separate each issue from the others. As an example, Bailey's panic attack, which would fit into the chapter discussing anxiety, will instead be discussed in the chapter about gender dysphoria since they are linked with one another. Some aspects concerning both brevity and mental health in the queer community come up repetitively. To avoid those repetitions, I will not address them again in detail.

3.1 Gender Dysphoria

The short film *Still Me* mainly deals with Bailey's gender dysphoria, a character who identifies as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns. The film starts with a close-up of Bailey's face. We see them taking a shaking breath, and although we only see their head, their facial expressions reveal that they are uncomfortable. As Danny Wedding writes about close-ups in movies, the face is fully isolated, and the viewer starts to notice all the nuances of emotion (Wedding/Niemic 2014, 5).

The next shot shows them standing in front of both the girls' and the boys' bathrooms. With those two shots, the short film characterises the protagonist and shows that they don't fit into the binary system. With this, you get immediately introduced to the topic of the short film. As already shown in the theoretical framework, those who belong to the queer community must deal with various external stressors that have a negative impact on their mental health. Trans* people often deal with those and other stressors like access to safe public spaces (like bathrooms, as seen in *Still Me*), refusal of medical treatment, and gender non-affirmation, often shown through misgendering (Weiss/Raymond 2020, 5f.).

Bailey then looks into the mirror, facing the viewer, and explains with a shaky voice their chosen name and their pronouns. Wedding mentions that mirrors are a symbol that is often used in movies. "When a character is filmed looking in the mirror, it often represents

self-reflection, insight, a new identity emerging or changing, […]" (Wedding/Niemic 2014, 7). In class, it becomes clear that Bailey has chosen to dress differently than before, as the students seem to have uniforms designated by gender. As Robertson explains, trans* people have different ways to express their gender. "They are more likely to understand gender as fluid rather than immutable. They potentially have access to new technologies in the form of clothing, makeup, wigs, hair removal, hormones, and surgeries that make it easier than ever to physically transform the embodied aspects of one's gender" (Robertson 2019, 85). While Bailey tries to reveal their true identity with a new school uniform, a beanie, and requests to be addressed by their chosen name, the teacher and classmates seem to be ignoring them. As Dickey writes, nonbinary people often feel like being invisible to their peers, meaning others neither see nor respect their gender (Dickey 2020a).

A montage then shows how Bailey changes over time, back to a more feminine presenting look. This device is used to show within inner brevity how the ignorance of their peers affects them and their confidence in their gender expression. As Dickey explains, nonbinary people are likely to suffer from mental health issues, even when they get supported (ibid., 5). Throughout the short film, it is evident that Bailey's mother sends them encouraging text messages, but their support system is insufficient to prevent them from spiraling deeper into their negative experiences.

Thinking and feeling are processes that are not visible. Nonetheless, with the methods that movies use, it is possible to suggest these processes and make them more accessible to the viewer (Wedding/Niemic 2014, 7). In *Still Me*, this is especially the case when it comes to the climax of Bailey's distress. There are muffled voices; meanwhile, the scratching of pens and the noise of tapping fingers are unnaturally loud. When the students get asked to separate into groups of boys and girls, the camera focuses on Bailey, who stands in the middle. The sound makes the impending panic attack more accessible. You can hear their beating heart and the whistling that gets louder and louder. Bailey's distress is made visible additionally by the tears in their eyes and the sweat on their face. When they run away, the camera focuses on what is on the wall. Like the students standing on each side of the room, there are two pictures of the female and male anatomy on each side, while Bailey, who does not identify with this binary system, stood in between. Like the bathroom scene, the short film employs symbols to enhance understanding of the topic.

Bailey, who has a panic attack, is then found by Zach, the protagonist of the short film *Masked*, which will be discussed later. Zach helps them calm down with a breathing technique. The short film takes its time to show Zach's support. While Bailey's mother sends encouraging messages, Zach is the first on-screen support system we see.

After Bailey calms down, they ask, "Why does my gender matter?". With this question alone, the short film illustrates the significance of the binary in society. Since our society is centered around a binary system, it is difficult for nonbinary and trans* people to get help. Structures such as restrooms, clothing, and pronouns are defined through the binary (Dickey 2020a, 6). Those who do not fit into this concept and see themselves outside of it or on a spectrum often suffer from mental health problems. "*Gender* is a social construct in which roles and rules for behavior are assumed based on the sex one is believed to be. […] Gender role transgressions are a common source of bullying behavior. For nonbinary people, this mistreatment can have lasting traumatic effects" (ibid., 1f.).

Zach then states the fact that there are ignorant people, but there are also people who will love them for who they are. He offers Bailey to join a support group for queer people. Bailey changes back into the school uniform they feel more comfortable in and goes to that group session. Zach introduces them, using the correct pronouns, and before he leaves to talk to the others, he makes sure that they are okay. At the end of the short film, Bailey takes a deep breath, and all the tension visibly leaves their body.

Still Me can give viewers an insight into how distressing gender dysphoria and living in a binary system can be. Using a montage of several negative instances and employing sound to visualise emotions, the short film utilises inner brevity to focus on its topic. While addressing Bailey's mental health, the short film can also encourage queer people to find a supportive group of people.

In *Birthday Boy*, which gets discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.3, there is also a scene linked to gender dysphoria. While this specific issue is not addressed again later in the short film, it is important to me to highlight that the way Alex binds his chest to look flatter is an unsafe practice and highlights how much distress gender dysphoria can cause. Since he does not safely bind, he is in pain[3], but he accepts this to feel more comfortable in his body.

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[3] Even though you can see that Alex is in pain, I still find it problematic for the short film to not address this again or to not include a side note during the credits, since it could lead to imitation and risk one's health. There are safer ways to bind your chest that can help with gender dysphoria.

3.2 Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicidal Ideation

Like anxiety, suicidal ideation and self-harm are more common in the queer community than within the straight heterosexual youth (Fish et al. 2020, 7). Unlike the other short films used in this paper, where the positive aspects come at the end, *Vertical Lines* starts with a couple that is already in a relationship, which is in a state where they can be comfortable with each other. They can both simply hang out, work on their own tasks, and engage in casual conversations.

Later, Dave and Andrew have an intimate talk about their self-harm scars and the suicide attempts they both had in the past. Dave explains that his suicide attempt at seventeen was not necessarily about ending his life, but about changing things. But because of his attempt, he was hospitalised and dropped out of high school. Within a few sentences, the short film effectively highlights the significant impact that mental health can have on a person's life. Andrew then talks about his own suicide attempt at sixteen, explaining he was tired of pretending to be "normal," as he says, and wanted to come out to his parents as gay. His parents did not believe him at first when he told them, and then his mother started hitting him, while his father wordlessly left the room.

Studies show that "among many forms of support (family, friend, and community), family support appears to be the most strongly associated with positive well-being" (ibid., 9). With this information in mind, it becomes clear that Andrew must have endured considerable stress when his parents did not accept him. Nonetheless, the positive outcome is already presented at the beginning. As already mentioned, they are in a relationship and seem comfortable with each other. Retrospectively, they both survived their suicide attempts, started getting better with their mental health, and additionally found love in each other. This short film shows from the beginning that queer people can indeed have a happy ending and do not have to suffer.

As mentioned in Chapter 3.1, the protagonist of the short film *Masked* is Zach, who identifies as transgender. The short film begins with Zach looking in the mirror, with the same intention as already discussed in the mirror scene from *Still Me*. Zach then sits at a table with his parents, talking about the upcoming birthday party. They also talk about Zach's friends who are coming, one of them being Thalia, who brings her partner with her. Thalia's partner identifies as non-binary, and after hearing this, Zach's mother calls them "complicated". As discussed in the theoretical framework, this opinion likely stems from the heteronormative viewpoint (see Chapter 2.2).

At the birthday party, the short film incorporates numerous pink items and presents typically associated with femininity from a societal perspective to reinforce the heteronormative viewpoint through everyday symbols. During the party, we can see Thalia looking out for Zach, as his body language indicates that he is not happy at that moment. Later, when she gives her present to Zach, the camera focuses on his wrist, where a band-aid is visible, indicating that he is self-harming.

In the next scene, you can see Zach watching a video by Ash Hardell. Hardell is trans-masculine non-binary and uses any pronouns interchangeably. He is a YouTuber and author, and together with their spouse, he talks about trans* issues, mental health[4], and their life. The video used in the short film is Hardell's real coming-out video.

YouTube and other platforms make it easy to access a wide range of self-produced videos and short films. This also provides a straightforward way to initiate discussions through comments. As you can see in the short film, there are numerous hateful comments under the video. As Katie Ellis points out, "these comments represent a variety of opinion[s], [but] they most clearly reflect the social stigma attached to people with mental health conditions […]" (Ellis 2012, 185). The same applies to the queer community, as shown by the example.

Although the comments under the video give Zach more stress due to the hate it generates, there is a short moment of joy to be seen, which I want to highlight to connect it with the opportunities that are possible due to access to not only YouTube videos but also short films. While watching the video, Zach smiles, which indicates that seeing another trans* person helps him overcome the previous stress from the birthday party, even though Zach does not know this person in real life. Research suggests that positive media representations can help form resilience within the queer community and potentially buffer against negative experiences (Craig et al., 2015, p. 256).

> Something happened around the mid-1990s and into the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century that forever changed the tide in favor of the queer: the internet. For the first time, people across the globe had simultaneous, instant access to cultural alternatives outside the mainstream. The internet and its access to global queer community and alternative culture is probably the most significant factor in the shifting norms around same-sex desire and LGBTQ culture for young people of this generation. (Robertson 2019, 93)

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[4] After a 2.5-year-long break, Ash Hardell returned in 2022 with a video titled *Trauma. Transphobia. And the Internet. (why I left for 2.5 years)*. It is a detailed video about their mental health experience as a nonbinary YouTuber, which I recommend for more information on the topics that are mentioned in this paper.

The internet not only provides a platform for alternative media alongside mainstream media, but it also offers people a way to self-produce content that represents the queer community (ibid., 96). "Social media plays an important part in the shifting norms around gender as people across the globe are having real-time discussions and debates about gender, trans* issues, and queer sexualities on forums like Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook" (ibid., 72). Studies support this argument, as it has been shown that the internet provides queer people with an opportunity to access information, explore their identities, and potentially connect with others (Fish et al., 2020, p. 14). At the same time, the queer community is at risk of cyberbullying, which is also shown in the short film.

Due to the structure of a short film, several stressful situations can occur within a single day. After a day of pretending to like feminine connotations, being constantly misgendered, and seeing hateful comments, Zach's mother enters the room to talk with him. Although she can see that Zach is unhappy, she does not understand the real problem and even tells Zach that the problem he is experiencing now is not real and that he should stress less. All those things that happen within those few minutes of the short film lead to the climax, where Zach attempts suicide. But even after the attempt, when Zach's mother picks him up, she does not listen to him. While Zach's parents fail to be the support system he needs, Thalia seems to see his struggles. As previously mentioned, Thalia looked out for Zach during the party and even addressed the fact that the presents were not Zach's style. On the night of the attempt, Thalia was on her way to visit Zach because she felt something was wrong. Then, when Zach was back home, she came by again and brought some clothes with her. The clothes and the makeover she suggested were a way to make Zach more comfortable and to show her support at the same time. The short film highlights friendship as a support system.

3.3 Violence and Physical Abuse

In *Birthday Boy* we see another struggle the queer community must deal with. Alex is transgender, but he still needs to wear the girl's uniform of his school, which makes him a visible target. According to research, trans* people experience a high amount "of violence, harassment, rejection, discrimination, and social stigma" (Weiss/Raymond 2020, 5). While in *Masked,* the social stigma happens at home and within the family, *Birthday Boy* shows what can happen at school. By putting the short film in a school environment, the viewer can connect with the familiar setting. As the short film shows, understanding school climate and experiences of rejection, discrimination, and bullying are important to

comprehend the effects on mental health since studies show that those negative experiences are strongly linked with mental health symptoms (Fish et al. 2020, 8). While having a safe place in an online game, Alex must endure bullying at school, from which he cannot escape.

The short film begins with screams and a close-up of Alex's face, immediately delving into the movie's topic and building to its climax. By starting with the scene that appears later, the viewer keeps it in mind while seeing how it led to this attack, and sets the tone.

In a chat conversation, Alex explains that he can go to a gender clinic, but his parents are afraid that the school would find out. Based on this information, it is assumed that the school does not know that Alex is transgender. Because of this, Alex has to endure the constant stress of being misgendered and deadnamed, therefore being referred to with his female birth name, by teachers and classmates. He even gets detention for not wearing a mandatory ribbon, which is part of the uniform. On top of that, Alex is insulted when he finds his violin destroyed in the case, and his sketchbook is stolen. In the bathroom, when it comes to the confrontation that leads to his hospitalisation, he gets physically abused and is even told to kill himself. Alex then reveals that he knows about his bully's father. We learn that Alex's bully has her own struggles, including her father's imprisonment, but the film still focuses on Alex. The fact that we learn something about bullies in movies explains Wedding as follows: "Every act of violence or abuse has both a perpetrator and a victim. Both are depicted in films, but for emphasis of story, character development, or artistic integrity, one is often emphasized over the other" (Wedding/Niemic 2014, 292). The reveal then leads to her slamming Alex's head against the mirror, sending him to the hospital.

While this short film is the most graphic compared to the rest used for discussion, it still has its positive moments throughout the story. Henry, a classmate of Alex, is seen talking to him or watching after him throughout the short film. In addition, the chat conversations in the online game support the arguments already made concerning the internet and its potential as a safe space for the queer community (see Chapter 3.2).

The short film then concludes with Alex standing up to his parents, stating that he will no longer play the violin and instead wants to create games, and Henry visiting him in the hospital. It is then revealed that the online player Alex felt comfortable with is Henry, who likes Alex in real life, too. He found the sketchbook and brought it, along with a muffin

and a candle, to celebrate Alex's birthday. Once again, the short film ends on a positive note, highlighting the support found online.

3.4 Anxiety

As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2, anxiety disorder, as such, is not depicted in the short films. But constant worry and stress, as shown throughout the paper do not only lead to an anxiety disorder specifically but also mental health struggles in general.

As shown with *Birthday Boy*, Alex must endure a great deal of stress by attending a girls' school, despite being a boy. Most of it was discussed in the previous chapter, but I have left one scene out to discuss it in this chapter. The online friend, later revealed to be Henry, suggests in a chat conversation that they use TeamSpeak to celebrate Alex's birthday. Following this suggestion, you see Alex practicing and training his voice to sound deeper. You can argue that the thought of having to speak with his online friend for the first time might scare him, which prompts him to practice his voice to fit into what society considers a manly voice.

In *Thanks to Her,* we have two protagonists. Andy, who is already out as queer, and Millie, who probably deals with internalised homophobia which stems from the chronic stress and anxiety that is put on her from society's view and her parents- they assume that she would go with a boy to the homecoming dance.

While Millie and Andy work at a community center, they slowly befriend each other and get to meet two of the inhabitants, learning that they left their hometown to be together as a couple. Those two are an example of how queer couples have to fight to be happy, but that it can work out in the end. They give Millie and Andy the advice to never be afraid to be themselves and to be happy. Seeing an elderly and happy queer couple on screen can have a positive effect on viewers, since it shows that you can have a future and grow old with your loved one, same as society would expect from straight couples.

After this conversation, the two of them have an intimate discussion. Millie thinks it is easy for Andy to be open about her sexuality, while Andy explains to her that it is, in fact, not easy. She explains how it is a constant debate on who you are, and that it can be hard to figure out your sexuality. She goes further by saying that before she knew that she was an asexual lesbian, there was only pain and frustration. After this, Millie stands quietly there, opens, and closes her mouth again, indicating that she is struggling with what she is about to say. In the end, Millie comes out as a lesbian to Andy, even repeating it out of

relief. As Lore Dickey writes, coming out is an act of resilience (Dickey 2020b, 9). Szymanski et al. explains further which positive aspects come with coming out to other queer people:

> Studies, that want to highlight the positive psychological outcomes, show that some of those positive qualities include "belonging to a community, commitment to social justice, self-awareness, authenticity, and increased intimacy in romantic relationships. […] LGB persons may reach out to the LGB community as a source of support, validation, safety, acceptance, strength, and empowerment" (Szymanski et al. 2017, 295).

This is probably the reason why Millie reaches out to Andy first, rather than to her parents, although she seems to have a closer relationship with them, or at least with her father. By reaching out to someone Millie knows who is part of the queer community, she will likely receive support and acceptance. With this, the short film highlights the support that can be found within the queer community.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, queer people struggle with different mental health issues, which can be made visible through short films. Those can be a starting point for discussions. Due to its brevity, the filmmaker chooses a specific aspect to highlight, making it easier for the viewer to understand the presented topics in the short film. The short film provides filmmakers from the queer community with a space to express themselves and create a source of support. The internet makes the short film more accessible and provides the queer community with a safe space to express themselves, connect, and build resilience.

The discussion on the short films chosen for this paper demonstrates how brevity is employed to focus on a specific aspect, making it more accessible to the viewer. Additionally, despite the short runtime, there is still time to incorporate positive motifs that convey hope and subvert stereotypes.

As explained in the introduction, this paper focuses on white protagonists without disabilities and therefore only represents a small portion of a much broader spectrum. For further research, I would suggest delving into short films depicting mental health issues among queer people of color and queer people with disabilities to include more experiences. Additionally, I would suggest researching other mental health issues not included in this paper, such as eating disorders, substance abuse, or others, and how they potentially differ from the cis heterosexual experience.

Short films are a way to diversify your media consumption, as filmmakers have more freedom in creating them, and viewers can easily access them when they are available on the internet. Through their complex structure, they invite the viewer to engage with the medium.

Discussing mental health is crucial for bringing visibility to this topic, informing people, and making them feel seen. It is crucial to include positive aspects to help overcome harmful stereotypes. This is especially true in connection with queer protagonists since there are already more than enough stories that end tragically.

5. Filmography

Birthday Boy

Leo LeBeau, UK 2021

Masked

Jay Beckerleg/Michael Hardinge, AUS 2019

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLk8Dxf1xFk (last accessed on 31.12.2022)

Still Me

Michael Harding/Jay Beckerleg/Sam Jelley, AUS 2021

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NtrKCmQRTM (last accessed on 31.12.2022)

Thanks to Her

Sam McCoy, Sam Orlowski, USA 2020

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0pr3gzO_Tk (last accessed on 31.12.2022)

Vertical Lines

Kyle Reaume, CDN 2018

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0toaMuQO6c&t=1s (last accessed on 31.12.2022)

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