DECONSTRUCTING HOWARD: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HEGEMONIC
IDEOLOGIES IN THE MOTION PICTURE IN & OUT

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Marla E. Carano

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DECONSTRUCTING HOWARD: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HEGEMONIC
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Marla E. Carano

Thesis

Approved:             Accepted

Advisor
Dr. Mary E. Triece

School Director
Dr. Carolyn M. Anderson

Committee Member
Dr. Carolyn M. Anderson

Dean of the College
Dr. James M. Lynn

Committee Member
Dr. N.J. Brown

Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. George R. Newkome

Date
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

“You know what your problem is, it’s that you haven’t seen enough movies…all of life’s riddles are answered in the movies.”

--Steve Martin in *Grand Canyon*

Throughout recorded history, dating back to ancient Greece, philosophers used entertainment as a means of education. As Plato constructed “Gorgias” using the friendly platform of the stage to spread his philosophical ideas and knowledge, so does our current media use its entertainment value as a means to construct particular realities of the human condition. Using fiction, it is possible to investigate outcomes to societal problems without the lasting ramifications of testing them in the real world. By taking the time and carefully constructing a fictional message using elements present in real society, a person can genuinely work through some of the world’s current dilemmas and expose the audience to possible solutions, or even worst case scenarios, without disrupting the flow of everyday life. At its core, the entertainment world is essentially a drawing board, allowing citizens to play out their solutions in a sort of pilot test. Through television and film we can get a feel of what it would be like to have a female president, be attacked by aliens, or even travel to outer space. But the story lines do not have to be so far fetched. Media can also be used to serve as a sort of mirror to our collective behavior, a kind of
checks and balances that force us to remain honest and ethical in our relationships with one another.

It is simply irresponsible to accept fiction as truth, but it is equally irresponsible to say that fiction bears no importance or affect on perceptions of reality. Several theories that have been developed over the years establish reliably and validly that mass mediated messages directly affect our view of the world. Both Cultivation Theory and Personal Construct (Constructivism) Theory posit that a person’s perception of reality and his/her attitude formation can be directly affected by both mass media and the specific circumstances that surround the individual (Clark & Delia, 1976; Gerbner, 1980). Even more recently, researchers have found that there is “evidence for a significant and positive effect on attitudes from media contact” (Riggle & Ellis, 1996, p. ix). It is beneficial to analyze media using a critical method to determine what role particular lifestyles and cultures play in the grander scheme.

It was determined for this study that it would be valuable to analyze a film that was released as a major motion picture, since those are the films that tend to reach the largest number of people and the widest cultural difference. Although there has been a myriad of rhetorical analyses published on gay characters in film and on television, there is a severe lack of research published on gay main characters in comedic film, mainly because there are so few to analyze. This study attempts to fill that gap by performing a rhetorical analysis on the motion picture, *In & Out*. Released in 1997, this film is the only film on wide theater release (2,000 theaters or more) that (1) is a comedy, (2) features a gay main character, and (3) has a plot revolving around the main character’s realization and revelation of his homosexuality. Although there are many films that have gay main
characters and plots dealing with their homosexual realizations, this film is the only one that is a comedy and was a major studio picture, rather than an independent film or queer cinema film. By selecting a film that reached a largely heterogeneous audience, the analysis can tell what messages Hollywood is sending to the masses about this particular minority group.

_In & Out’_s success has been attributed to many different areas. Steve Daly (1997) claims the film strikes a chord for a specific reason:

For the first time, a mainstream audience is embracing a film about a central gay character who isn’t dying of AIDS (a disease nowhere mentioned in the script), nor is he a broadly drawn, drag-enamored stereotype (as Nathan Lane and Robin Williams are in Birdcage). (Para. 3)

The lighthearted nature of the film along with its understated homosexuality provided an opportunity of exposure for people who would not normally expose themselves to such content. However, even more so now it is important to critically analyze this film for its underlying message. Now that Hollywood has found a way to get everyone’s attention, we must ask ourselves what messages are they sending? An analysis of the mediated message will tell what ideologies are being presented. Reflecting on the Steve Martin quote presented earlier, this analysis warns that it is not enough to just see more movies. It is important to ask which of life’s riddles is the movie answering, what answer is being put forth, and does it align with the experiences of gays in the United States? This study will attempt to answering the following research questions:

Research Questions:

R1: Which ideologies about the homosexual culture are _perpetuated_ in the motion picture _In & Out_?
R2: Which ideologies about the homosexual culture are *challenged* in the motion picture *In & Out*?

R3: In what way do the presented ideologies embody the social construction of gender?

Barry Brummett (2006) explained that “a critical method wants to know about meaning. It asks, what does a text, an experience, an object, an action, and so forth mean to different people? [It] seeks to evaluate that which it studies, to make some judgment” (p. 97). With rhetorical study, researchers can deconstruct a particular artifact or text to uncover messages that belie the topical message. Brummett (2006) explained this responsibility in the following excerpt:

As critics reveal the meanings of texts and artifacts, they are simultaneously doing two things: (1) critics are explaining the rhetoric of popular culture, since…what texts and artifacts mean are the ways in which they influence people, and (2) critics are showing how to experience life by demonstrating how texts and artifacts might be understood, the meanings that can be found in them. When we can see a different set of meanings in a conversation, or a film, or some music, we can experience that little part of life in a new way. (p. 99)

It is essential for critics to not only establish the messages that are being sent by a particular artifact, but to determine in what ways those messages perpetuate or challenge traditional ideologies. Perhaps the most crucial of all questions is that of power. Brummett (2006) elaborated on this idea by claiming that “critical studies examines what power is or what it has been understood to be, and how power is created, maintained, shared, lost, and acquired” (p. 101). Critics are assigned the task of assisting the world in understanding. By opening the eyes of others, critics may expose the population to possible manipulations and intervene in order to “change the world for the better” (Brummett, 2006, p. 99).
The author of the book *The Art of Watching Films*, Joseph Boggs (1985) argued that film is one place that critics should direct their attention. He stated that “no art form exists in a vacuum. The more popular an art is, and the wider its appeal to all segments of the population, the more closely it is tied to the social values, mores, and institutions of its audience” (p. 366). Boggs (1985) further explained that motion pictures do not necessarily need to portray the world the way it actually is, rather they can present a quasi “dreamscape” that represents “the hopes, the dreams, the fears, the inner needs of the people” (p. 366). He claimed that when the real world is disappointing, people can turn to film as a means of change. His belief in the power of film is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

The motion picture’s power as a social force comes from its ability to pick up, amplify, and spread currents which already exist in segments of the population to the society as a whole. Film also serves to accelerate popular acceptance of social change. The dramatically powerful presentation of new ways of thinking and behaving on screens twenty-feet-high in thousands of movie theaters across the country gives those ‘new ways’ a significant seal of approval. (Boggs, 1985, p. 366)

By simply watching a movie, someone living in the United States Midwest can get a taste of what it would be like to live on the West Coast. By allowing for some exposure to other cultures, a person may build on his/her understanding of people outside his/her inner circle. Film provides a remarkable opportunity for building tolerance and appreciation of other cultures by developing characters that are likeable, but may be fundamentally different from those in the audience.

One particular minority that can benefit from the medium of film is the gay community. Researcher Griffin Hollis (2008) claimed that “over the last decade, television executives have identified people who are sympathetic to and somewhat
knowledgeable of gay people, their culture, and their history…” (p. 361). He developed this idea saying that gay-themed content has worked its way into television shows as a way of “courting” these knowledgeable viewers (p. 361). The motion picture industry seems to be following in the footsteps of this trend. There is an opportunity for film makers to court the same homosexual savvy audience. However, there are critics who argue that even though homosexual characters are making their way into mainstream media, it is coming with a high price. Westerfelhaus and Lacriox (2006) explained “while queers are now permitted access to the media mainstream, they are welcome there only as long as they observe certain limits imposed upon them by the conventions of the mainstream’s heterosexist sociosexual order” (p. 427). The authors argued that heteronormative values, values that establish heterosexuality as the norm, have been so prevalent and powerful that their presence is now being “taken for granted” (Westerfelhaus & Lacriox, 2006, p. 427). Furthermore, they claimed there is a “need for continued Queer critiques” of mediated messages to show the rampant misuse of heteronormativity (Westerfelhaus & Lacriox, 2006, p. 427).

This particular study will answer the call set forth by Westerfelhaus and Lacriox through a rhetorical analysis of a motion picture depicting homosexuality. Writer Paul Rudnick and Director Frank Oz set out to create a film that centered more on human nature, acceptance and comedy rather than just homosexuality with their film *In & Out*. However, it is difficult to look past the content in order to just enjoy a good comedy, something that concerned the two Hollywood moguls and their financial backer, Paramount. Nevertheless, after their extremely successful opening on September 19, 1997, and after months in the theater earning a domestic total gross of $63 million
(imdb.com), they realized they had success. Over time, the movie’s success continued. It was released in over 30 countries and was nominated for a multitude of awards, including an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress (Joan Cusack) and two Golden Globe awards for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture Comedy/Musical (Kevin Kline) and Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture Comedy/Musical (Joan Cusack) (statistics from imdb.com). Perhaps the most astounding proof of the film’s success is its coveted award from GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) for Outstanding Film on Wide Release. To receive an endorsement from an organization whose purpose is to encourage understanding and camaraderie for homosexuals speaks volumes to the film’s achievement. Even the younger generation demonstrated their acceptance of the film’s content by nominating Kevin Kline and Tom Selleck for Best Kiss in a Motion Picture at the MTV Movie Awards.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous descriptive and analytical research on lesbians and gays in mass media is both vast and exhaustive. Rather than attempt an all-encompassing literature review spanning hundreds of topics and authors, this analysis will review previous literature that focused on the timeline of gays in mass media entertainment, heteronormativity, and gays in comedy.

According to Larry Gross (2001), author of *Up from Invisibility*, “much of the early work of gay activist-scholars…focused on the delineation and analysis of the stereotypic portrayals of gay people in media” (p. 56). Gross (2001) explained that minorities are all treated similarly when it comes to exposure in media. Ultimately, “the roles they are permitted to play are generally limited to two categories: victim or villain” (Gross, 2001, p. 57). These distinctions permeated the gay characters in film and television throughout most of history. Before the 1960s, homosexuality was deemed unfit for television and film, and was rarely mentioned. Although some changes did occur in the 1960s, very little changed with regard to presenting homosexuals in a positive light. Gross explained this minor shift:

The Motion Picture Association of American was forced to accept that times had changed and issued a policy on October 3, 1961, stating that, ‘In keeping with the culture, the mores and the values of our time, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion and restraint.’ Discretion and
restraint meant, as the MPAA cautioned, that ‘sexual aberration could be suggested but not actually spelled out.’ It also still meant that lesbian and gay people would be depicted, in Vito Russo’s [author and expert in homosexual awareness in media] words, as ‘pathological, predatory and dangerous, villains and fools, but never heroes.’ (as cited in Gross, 2001, p. 59)

Although the 1960s provided for the depiction of cultural change and attempted more acceptance of sexuality in the media, Hollywood was still deeply restricted. Writers and directors were permitted to include homosexuals in their films, “but only as long as they were unhappy” (Gross, 2001, p. 60). These portrayals of depressed, unsatisfied homosexuals serve to reinforce the prevailing idea that homosexuality is wrong, and that anyone who “chooses” to be gay will ultimately be sad. Rather than promoting an understanding of gays and lesbians, cinema used the homosexual culture as a means of earning more respect and attachment to its heterosexual characters. By describing homosexuality as an aberration it demonstrated the MPAA’s categorization of homosexuality as abnormal or wrong.

The 1970s brought about a major shift in homosexual representation with the advent of independent documentaries and even some fiction films depicting homosexuality (Gross, 2001). With these films being shown in art theater districts throughout the United States, writers and directors were able to challenge the conventional wisdom of gays belonging to particular roles. Author and expert of homosexual depictions, Vito Russo, described this new genre claiming that “it neither concerns itself overtly with issues of gay politics nor does it present gay sexuality as society’s perennial dirty secret. The key to gay films…is that they do not view the existence of gay people as controversial” (as cited in Gross, p. 76). Gross (2001) elaborated on this point by stating “even more unusual, these films present gay characters
as the central characters with whom audiences are invited to identify” (p. 76). For the gay culture to use mass media for unification and identification was a difficult step, one that took nearly two decades to accomplish. As gay cinema started to take shape, more and more homosexuals felt comfortable expressing their personal lifestyle.

The 1980s became a time of exploration and androgyny. Portrayals of gays began moving out of film and into television and music videos, essentially addressing the younger audience (Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987). As teenagers and young adults in their early twenties became more exposed to gay characters, the more they seemed to accept homosexuality. However, Vito Russo, author of the 1987 ground-breaking book *The Celluloid Closet*, took a divisive tone between those who understand gay culture and its accurate depictions and those who only use it as a means of entertaining in a still heterosexual patriarchal society. Russo’s (1987) book provided an extensive survey of over 300 movies and their homosexual images (both explicit and implicit), and even tackled “traditional” canonized films by performing a gay perspective reading. Even when discussing films that are categorically comedic, Russo (1987) alleges that the gay characters demonstrate what are traditional homosexual characteristics only to support that of the straight characters rather than providing deeper understanding of the gay culture and why some of the stereotypical characteristics are the way they are, or why they even exist at all.

Once the younger generation from the 1980s came into adulthood in the 1990s, Hollywood had a primed audience ready to see some change in characters. Gross (2001) dedicated an entire section of his book to this phenomenon, calling it “Hollywood’s Gay Nineties.” Author Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001) contended that there were two
dominant patterns of gay visibility in the early 1990s. She argued that gays were either incorporated into the story and viewed just like straights or they were just “inserted into the film in order to exhibit a certain hipness but are insignificant as anything other than signs of hipness, and further, signs of hipness of the lead [straight] character” (Walters, 2001, p. 154).

Unlike the slow moving progression of the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s evolved much more rapidly. Gross (2001) explained that “in the late 1990s…the gay man-straight woman platonic romance suddenly seemed to be popping up all over” (p. 178). Films like Object of My Affection, My Best Friend’s Wedding and As Good As It Gets began describing gay men as the ultimate best girlfriend. Moreover, each of the gay best friends served as a moral compass for our heroine in these films, contradicting the long held belief that gays were morally inept. Steven Seidman (2002) addressed this change claiming that portrayals of gays have shifted from the “polluted” gay to the “normal” gay. Describing the new “normal gay,” Seidman (2002) affirmed:

> The ‘normal’ gay is presented as being fully human; as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual. The ‘normal’ gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. (p. 133)

These characters were likable and recognizable, paving the way for future characters to be written and more exposure of the gay lifestyle. Besides the obvious difference in sexual orientation, gays in these roles are otherwise completely identical to other “normal” people in society.

James Joseph Dean (2007) performed a study that showed, “although there has been an increase in gay images, these images continue to reinforce… stereotypical representations of gays and lesbians as inferior or hyper visible tokens…reduced to their
homosexuality” (p. 364). He warns that there are dangers to the normalizing of homosexuals in media, that by constantly using their sexuality as the defining characteristic, the audience is forced to make comparisons between the gay character’s sexual orientation and the other straight characters. Dean (2007) contends that there is a danger of making excuses for bad behavior. He notes:

…the norm of heterosexuality is not viewed as wrongly dominant. Rather, heterosexuality is viewed as the desire or identity of the majority of individuals, while homosexuality is the desire or identity of a mutually exclusive minority population. The conception allows mainstream films to confine homosexuality to isolated characters, while establishing heterosexuality as the identity of the majority and of the narrative context. (p. 368)

Dean (2007) revealed this excuse-making behavior in his analysis of the motion picture Philadelphia, a story about a gay attorney dying of AIDS who is suing his firm for unfair termination. Claiming that, although Philadelphia, “like all normalizing films, depicts homosexuals as self-accepting and good, and homophobic actions as unjust and bad, it still reproduces essentialist gay and straight identities” and reinforces a straight-cultured dominance (p. 369).

This particular issue is hard to conquer. Westerfelhaus and Lacriox (2006) coined this trend as the “strategic rhetoric of heteronormativity.” The authors established that even though writers, directors and actors may not intend to come across as patriarchal and domineering, the rhetoric of the scripts speaks for itself. Building on the difficulties that can arise from such an issue, Westerfelhaus and Lacriox (2006) explained:

The pervasiveness of this rhetoric enables it to shape how it is that we understand our own sexuality and that of others, and to influence which forms of sexuality are sanctioned and which are proscribed. In doing so, it benefits those whose sanctioned sexuality is embraced by the social mainstream and makes life difficult for those whose proscribed sexuality is not. (p. 428)
Westerfelhaus and Lacriox (2006) claimed that the hit television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was an offender of such distinctions. By deconstructing the show, the authors established that the heteronormative culture is so strong that there are only certain concessions that may be made to its disruption. The authors pointed out, through the show’s format and formula, *Queer Eye* showed “how, when and why Queers may enter the heteronormative mainstream” (p. 428). The overall lesson remains that in mass media, heterosexuals are still the dominating opinion to be won over. Ultimately and in general, heterosexual people still need to be convinced to consider homosexuality as legitimate. So, how is one supposed to accomplish this daunting task? Some researchers believe that it is through the avenue of humor.

According to researcher Joseph Newirth (2006), “clinically, jokes and humor present a means of interpreting, organizing, perceiving, and generating unconscious meanings and developing…affective connection and understanding” (p. 557). Essentially, when the world does not make sense, humor can serve as a way of reestablishing order from our cognitive chaos. Although drama and tragedy may also serve in this capacity, “humor and jokes have often been seen as a useful means of communicating painful insights within an affectively safer context” (p. 558). Without the fear of humiliation and embarrassment that can accompany drama, humor understands that rules are supposed to be broken because that is what creates the joke. Newirth (2006) further explained this point by stating “…comedy paradoxically provides us with the ability to faithfully symbolize the emotional, unconscious experience of the real, of the horrifying experiences that make us feel helpless, meaningless, empty and dumb” (p. 562).
Alexander Doty (2000) is one of the many researchers and authors that believe humor and jokes are a perfect fit for addressing homosexuality in mass mediated messages. Doty claimed that humor and homosexuality were essentially made for one another:

Let’s face it, as a genre comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions, and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms. Although you could argue that most comic gender and sexuality rule-breaking is ultimately contained or recuperated by traditional narrative closure (as it attempts to restore the straight status quo), or through the genre’s ‘it’s just a joke’ escape hatch, the fact remains that queerness is the source of many comic pleasures for audiences of all sexual identities. (p. 81)

Through specific analyses of comedies with portrayals of homosexuality, Doty (2000) exposed the popularity of films that center around experiences people have in the shoes of the opposite gender (i.e. *Tootsie, Victor Victoria, and Mrs. Doubtfire*). He asserted that there is a fundamental interest from people in understanding their opposite, and that humor allows people to both experience their opposite and laugh at the same time, creating a positive, memorable experience. Yvonne Tasker (1998) corroborates this perspective explaining that queer humor threatens heteronormative ideology by exposing and inverting its biases.

Griffin Hollis (2008) performed a detailed study on Comedy Central’s situation comedy Reno 911!, a show that features a main character that is a gay police detective. Hollis (2008) established that the show’s format, a parody combining elements from both police-themed reality shows and television police dramas, is itself a way of breaking convention. By using this combination format, Hollis recognized that Reno 911! directly challenges heteronormativity by using a domain that has long been associated with “television’s most manly men,” police officers (p. 355). Because the show is a comedy, it
allows for the acceptance of a gay detective because no one is really expected to take him seriously. But one aspect that Hollis (2008) is careful to point out is that for an audience to find this funny there has to be a sort of built in understanding of gay culture, a type of in-group humor that is required so the jokes do not fall flat. Lynne Joyrich (2001) described this concept by writing “comic texts may make no effort whatsoever to follow…sexual ‘clues’ to a conclusion; rather, by holding the question in permanent suspension, these texts encourage an epistemology of ‘knowing viewers’” (p. 453). By building on the audience’s previous knowledge, writers can use a person’s experiences and social construction to exploit stereotypes and judgment for the sake of humor.

In another study, Bonds-Raacke and Cady (2007) discovered that comedy can actually lead to positive impression formation. First, participants were asked to recall memorable gay characters and complete a survey on their thoughts and perceptions of that character. The study showed that over two-thirds of the participants remembered Ellen Degeneres and the fictional character Will from the sitcom *Will & Grace*. Respondents also established on their survey that they had a favorable view of these individuals. Later, the researchers discovered that, overall, those participants who recalled positive homosexual portrayals showed a positive attitude toward gays in general. This particular study uncovers a situation that brings us back to traditional criticism of mass media. Now that we have the attention of the audience, an audience that by all accounts is as diverse as it is wide, what are we saying to them about the homosexual culture? Just because people, in general, seem to appreciate and like characters in sitcoms and talk shows does not mean they are getting an accurate depiction of the culture from which those characters derive.
Researchers Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch (2005) demonstrated this problem with their study on homosexuality in TV situation comedies. Setting out to conduct research on homosexual characters’ demographic diversity and characters’ comments about sexuality, they found that:

Homosexual characters made significantly more comments about sexual orientation than did heterosexual characters. This indicates that television script writers and producers present homosexual characters as being relatively preoccupied with sexual orientation and that sexual orientation is the central or focusing theme in the lives of homosexual individuals. This over-presentation of comments about sexual orientation by homosexual characters likely reinforces common stereotypes that emphasize differences rather than similarities between homosexual and heterosexual individuals. This may result in (a) the continuation of stereotypes that likely exacerbate homosexual viewers’ feelings of being different and out-of-the-mainstream, and (b) further their victimization by some heterosexuals who believe that homosexual individuals are sexually preoccupied, thereby responding in a defensive and/or discriminatory manner rather than responding on the basis of common humanity. (p. 41-42)

Although mainstream mass media is moving in the right direction by exposing its audience to more homosexual representations, there is still a lack of care in character development and dialogue creation. This gross negligence can directly sabotage the good work set forth by the writers and directors who are hoping to promote understanding and acceptance from their heterosexual audience.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

HEGEMONICIDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION AS RHETORICAL CRITICISM

“A movie star is not an artist, he is an art object”
---Richard Schickel, film scholar and *Time* critic

The motion picture industry has worked long and hard to become a respectable genre of art. However, once it had achieved that reputation, it opened itself up to the kinds of criticisms that had long been applied to other art forms like painting, sculpting and theater. Just as Schickel implied in his quote, once the movie star has performed and produced a work of art, that product becomes an object to be analyzed. To be considered part of the upper echelon of artistic impressions, all parts of a film must be open to interpretation and criticism, and those criticisms may be extremely useful in understanding the culture from which the film comes. Using film as a rhetorical text, several different tools will be used for criticism in this study of *In & Out*. This will include, but will not be limited to, ideology (with a specific operational definition), six detailed characteristics of ideology that serve a dominant power, ideographs as a social phenomenon and hegemony (specifically its use in perpetuating ideologies). Underlying the entire analysis will be the idea of comedy as a social motivator.
Popular Culture as Artifact

Barry Brummett (2006) explains in his book, *Rhetoric of Popular Culture*, that all forms of entertainment can be very telling about a people, and that the entertainment forms can be looked at as artifacts. Brummett was detailed in his description when he explained that “an artifact is (1) an action, event, or object perceived as a unified whole, (2) having widely shared meanings [that] (3) manifest group identifications to us” (Brummett, 2006, p. 14). He claimed that there are requirements to understanding the shared meanings and group identifications, that “others may understand something of what it means, but it is really the people ‘in the know,’ those who identify with the group (or groups) for which the artifact speaks, who find the richest meanings…” (Brummett, 2006, p. 19). When groups of artifacts come together in an “integrated set” or “system,” cultures are formed, and these cultures help us to neatly categorize people and their particular ideologies (Brummett, 2006, p. 26-27). More importantly, Brummett (2006) explained that it is essential to look at a group’s popular culture, meaning “those systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about [i.e., television and other technology],” because then we can get a sense of what most people within the particular culture consider relevant and important (p. 27).

Brummett (2006) not only advocated analyzing signs and artifacts from out-groups, but also people using them within-group for purposes of persuasion. He insisted that “as we go through life experiencing and enjoying music, clothing, architecture, food and so forth, we are also participating in rhetorical struggles over what kind of society we will live in and what sort of people we will be” (p. 5). Further, artifacts and signs that are a part of our daily lives serve as “sites of struggle among political and social forces”
By experiencing a culture, the population within is constantly receiving a barrage of messages from which they are to make decisions. By just being open to receiving these messages, people are able to influence one another on pertinent issues to the culture.

Although Brummett (2006) speculated that “we rarely or never experience the whole of a culture (the entire system of artifacts)” we could, and usually do, experience “smaller, interrelated sets of signs and artifacts” that he calls “texts” (p. 34-35).

To understand how a text functions and its powerful influence, it is helpful to ponder the following excerpt from Brummett (2006):

A text…is something that has meaning, a meaning grounded in the culture behind the text, a meaning that can be examined and understood…A text is a mouthpiece for a culture; it is a representative sampling of the overall system of meanings that constitute an ideology or consciousness that is linked to a group….texts wield rhetorical influence because of the meanings that they support…people make texts so as to influence others…because texts can mean different things, they are often sites of struggle over meaning…[and the] choices and actions that the public might adopt usually depend on meaning. (p. 91-92)

By reducing a culture to one manageable text, although it is not completely representative, it becomes possible for individuals to begin personalizing the larger more complex issues of society. Rather than overwhelm the individual with an onslaught of messages from every direction, simple texts provide a personal space where we can “translate vast and impersonal problems into smaller…images, stories and texts” (Brummett, 2006, p. 218). Therein lies the role of rhetorical critics. Since these texts hold potential power to influence those exposed to them, it is vital to determine what messages are being sent, and the critical scholar wants to know “what else is going on besides the obvious” (Brummett, 2006, p. 96). According to Brummett (2006), the critic “must be prepared to dig into texts, to think about the ways people are being influenced as well as entertained, informed and so forth…” (p. 96).
While all texts are useful for analysis, author Joseph Boggs (1985) insisted that film has a unique quality that allows for a different kind of understanding. This concept is explained in the following quote:

Film is unlimited not only in its choice of subject matter, but also in the scope of its approach to that material. A film’s mood and treatment can range anywhere between the lyric and the epic; in point of view, it can cover the full spectrum from the purely objective to the intensely subjective; in depth, it can focus on the surface realities and the purely sensual, or delve into the intellectual and philosophical. A film can look to the remote past, or probe the distant future; it can make a few seconds seem like hours, or compress a century into minutes. Finally, a film can run the gamut of feeling from the most fragile, tender and beautiful to the most brutal, violent and repulsive. (Boggs, 1985, p. 3)

With this outstanding opportunity comes great responsibility to use film wisely and respectfully. Because of its enduring popularity, and the fact that they can be viewed by collective audiences all receiving the same messages at the same time, film increasingly grows stronger in its ability to influence the masses. Even the overall tone of a film lends itself to achieving a purpose. Whether a film is a tragedy or comedy will directly influence the outcome of the story and, in turn, the message the audience receives.

Comedy versus Tragedy

Jeffrey Bineham (2005) elucidated the differences between comedy and tragedy by stating “the dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy describe two symbolic forms that people use to deal with wrong-doing and thus to repair a hierarchy” (p. 89). Essentially, a film’s plot usually revolves around some transgression perpetrated upon the norm, and how that transgression gets rectified is determined by the nature of the story. According to Bineham (2005), in a tragedy, the perpetrator (or main character) is an inherently evil person that is beyond saving. Because of this, “we attribute wrongdoing to an essential
character defect” and therefore the character must be punished by banishment or condemnation “both to protect society and to separate those whose evil nature we cannot redeem” (90). Because the penalties for the transgressions are so severe, tragedy ultimately serves as “maintenance of a fixed moral code” that cannot be questioned or changed (Bineham, 2005, p. 90). By resolving in agony and distress, the tragic theme makes clear that certain social mores are to be respected at all times and that violating these mores will have dire consequences.

Conversely, as was previously noted in the literature review, comedy also sets out to rectify a social transgression, but does so using a clown rather than a scapegoat. Bineham (2005) explained this when he stated “comedy is a matter of ridicule…and it thus requires an object for society to ridicule rather than a victim for society to sacrifice” (p. 92). In a comedy, the main character is not an inherently evil person; rather his/her flaws are due more to ignorance and naiveté. At the end, the clown is still part of the society, but is a better version of him/herself for having brought a social issue to the forefront (Bineham, 2005). Essentially, the main difference between tragedy and comedy lie in one fact: “tragedy features excommunication, while comedy features communication. At worst, that communication shames the clown into conciliation (hence the emphasis on ridicule), but it never condemns the clown as an outcast” (Bineham, 2005, p. 93).

Given this particular emphasis, it is no surprise that comedy is the symbolic form most conducive to social improvement. Toker (2002) substantiated this claim with the following excerpt:

Comic strategies are tools through which individuals can point out the failings in the present system….Identification between the comic rhetor and all parties is
essential for the performance of the comic frame because community members must sense a feeling of shared interest and trust between themselves and the comic clown who will lead them in the exploration and ridicule of a social issue. (p. 55 & 63)

Both Brummett (2006) and Toker (2002) emphasized the importance of group identification for the message to be successful. It is essential for groups to have a previous understanding of the rules because, in order for comedy to achieve its purpose of creative, humorous rule-breaking, there must be a general understanding of the rules to know that they are being broken.

Comedy also has the ability to investigate situations that are typically uncomfortable in everyday life. Richard Dyer (2002) pointed out that “comedy is an area of expression that is licensed to explore aspects of life that are difficult, contradictory, and distressing…[because] comedy can get away with making fun of things that other genres with a more straight-faced attitude cannot” (p. 92). Bineham (2005) supported this point claiming that comedy provides hope where there typically is none. That comedy allows for people to make mistakes and that “all should be open to the possibility for reconciliation and for the creation of harmonious relationships” that would otherwise not have been possible (p. 94).

Ideology Defined

Now that it has been established that film is a popular, enduring form that may serve as a catalyst for social reform, and that humor can do so in a relatively painless manner, it is important to learn methods of recognizing what ideologies are being transmitted to the audience and what consequences will come as a result of those ideologies. Terry Eagleton (1991) explained the mysterious effects of ideas by claiming:
What persuades men and women to mistake each other from time to time for gods or vermin is ideology. One can understand well enough how human beings may struggle and murder for good material reasons—reasons connected, for instance, with their physical survival. It is much harder to grasp how they may come to do so in the name of something as apparently abstract as ideas. Yet ideas are what men and women live by, and will occasionally die for. (p. xiii)

It is difficult to put a definition to something that is not concrete or visible; however, there are several definitions presented by Eagleton (1991) that serve to operationalize ideology for purposes of analysis. Although there is an exhaustive list that shows the definition’s metamorphosis over time, two of the definitions pertain specifically this particular analysis of the film *In & Out*:

1. A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;
2. False ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power


These two definitions will support each other with definition one establishing which ideologies exist in the culture portrayed in the film, and the second definition showing how those ideologies work to support heteronormativity.

Because one of the definitions specifically mentions dominant powers and their use of ideologies to maintain control, it is vital to establish that ideologies are more than just belief systems, but are also weapons to be used for control. Eagleton (1991) addressed this issue of control, stating that the use of false ideas to dominate “is objectionable not only because it contributes to shoring up a dominant power, but because it is contrary to the dignity of somewhat rational creatures to live in a permanent state of delusion” (p. 43). Further, the author also delineates six specific characteristics of ideologies that serve to operationalize the definitions even further. According to his
explanation, ideologies are often thought to be “unifying, action-oriented, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing, and naturalizing” (p. 45).

While applying these concepts of ideology to a text, one important issue to remember is that it is describing groups of people, rather than an individual. It is difficult to maintain that ideologies exist because of a collective consciousness that connects individual to individual, and are not simply misinterpretations of the world inside one’s head. Michael McGee (2005) explained by stating “human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation. The collectivity is said to have a mind of its own, distinct from the individual qua individual” (p. 452). When considering this issue, the question becomes one of what is real and what is not in a more literal sense, or as McGee put it, “the essential question posed…is one of locating precise descriptions of the dialectical tensions between a ‘true’ and a ‘false’ consciousness, between reality and ideology” (p. 452).

In addition to this description, McGee (2005) cautioned that a collective belief left to its own freedoms will eventually grow beyond its purpose. When a word or phrase begins to represent so much more than its usual referent, it can potentially develop a power that was never intended. McGee (2005) calls this phenomenon an “ideograph:”

Ideographs… ‘contain’ a unique ideological commitment; further, they presumptuously suggest that each member of a community will see as a gestalt every complex nuance in them….Ideographs are one-term sums of an orientation, the species of ‘God’ or ‘Ultimatum’ term that will be used to symbolize the line of argument the meanest sort of individual would pursue, if that individual had the dialectical skills of philosophers, as a defense of a personal stake in and commitment to the society. (p. 455-456)

McGee (1991) was clear in pointing out that ideographs are a part of everyday real life and exist as a part of our culture in a natural ever-flowing pattern. What is so
overwhelming about this concept is that ideographs are used so liberally that their meanings are accepted without refutation and are accompanied by a whole set of assumptions that are frequently taken for granted. Using examples such as <freedom> and <patriotism> (arrow brackets used to insinuate ideograph), McGee (1991) explained that words can become so loaded with meaning that over time they posses a power far beyond that of logic.

In due course, these ideographs come to be used as a weapon in the arsenal of ideologies. Unfortunately, those that the terms serve to oppress do not realize that it is doing so and ultimately encourage the continued use of the terms not comprehending the damaging effects to their personal lives. This concept, the ignorance of the oppressed and their unwitting support of their oppression, is detailed in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* and is known as hegemony. Raymond Williams (1977) effectively outlined Gramsci’s philosophies explaining:

…hegemony is a concept which at once includes and goes beyond two powerful concepts: that of ‘culture’ as a ‘whole social process,’ in which men define and shape their whole lives; and that of ‘ideology’….Hegemony goes beyond culture…in its insistence of relating the ‘whole social process’ to specific distributions of power and influence. (p. 108)

When certain concepts and ideas become the norm and the standard by which all behavior and lifestyles are compared, the question of power and checks and balances takes on new meaning. How can one ever be freed if s/he is unwilling to question tyrannical authority? On an even grander scale, how are societies supposed to evolve if perpetuated ideas are continued to rule without question?
One way to safely begin the questioning process is through popular culture. As previously mentioned, popular culture is a place for public discourse that allows for idea-generation and investigation without disruption to the flow of everyday life. Using film as the medium, Boggs (1985) suggested that one could look analytically at a motion picture as a moral, philosophical or social statement. With this approach, “we focus our attention on the statement a film makes… [and] determine if the acting and the characters have significance or meaning beyond the context of the film itself” (p. 282). By establishing whether or not these characters serve a larger purpose, it can be determined how effectively the film “moves us to a different belief or action that will somehow influence our lives for the better” (Boggs, 1985, p. 282).

Although a film is limited in time, it is a continuous streaming story without clear boundaries. This quality makes analysis and deconstruction of a film an intimidating task. In order to answer these questions, and for the sake of convenience, it is helpful to break the film into distinct themes (with the understanding that analyzing them in isolation does not affect the overall message of the text as a whole).

Boggs (1985) explained several possible themes for analysis, two of which will assist in the analysis of *In & Out*:

Character as theme: [which includes] a brief description of the central character, with emphasis on the unusual aspects of the individual’s personality—[and]—

Idea as theme: [which includes a] focus on exposing the vices and follies of people as social beings or criticizing the social institutions they have established. (Boggs, 1985, p. 14 & 19)

When considering methodology for this ideological critical analysis of the text *In & Out*, several components will be used in conjunction with one another to effectively answer
the research questions put forth in the introduction. Using the “character” and “idea” as theme schema presented by Boggs (1985) and the six characteristics of ideologies presented by Eagleton (1991), this study will determine which, if any, ideologies are presented in the film *In & Out* pertaining to the homosexual culture. The aforementioned concepts of ideographs and hegemony will serve as supporting points within the six characteristics of ideologies.
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

“Howard teaches fiction, and he lives a fiction….He’s totally disconnected himself from his body to convince himself he’s not gay”

--Kevin Kline reflecting on his character from *In & Out*

*In & Out* Synopsis

In 1994, a retired high school drama teacher by the name of Rawley Farnsworth received a phone call from actor Tom Hanks (Daly, 1997). Hanks, who at the time was up for an Academy Award for his portrayal of a gay lawyer with AIDS in the film *Philadelphia*, was calling his former drama teacher to ask permission to mention him in his acceptance speech should he win the Oscar. Receiving Farnsworth’s blessing, Hanks praised him as “one of the finest gay Americans…that I had the good fortune to be associated with” (Daly, 1997, para. 2). As Hanks was delivering his acceptance speech, longtime friends producer Scott Rudin and theater-director Lori Steinberg were on the phone discussing the content of the speech. Rudin recalled “there’s Tom Hanks saying I want to thank a great gay teacher,” and Lori Steinberg comically added to the end of Hanks’ speech “whose job I just lost” (Daly, 1997, para 2). From Steinberg’s haphazard comment came the inspiration for the film *In & Out*. 
In & Out takes place in Greenleaf, Indiana, a small, conservative town where every citizen is actively involved in the community and tradition is the coveted way of life. The film begins with Howard Brackett attempting to teach his high school students classic literature; but one of the school’s alumni is up for an Academy Award, and all the students are entirely too excited to concentrate. On the morning of the Academy Awards, Howard and his fiancée celebrate their impending marriage with the community at a brunch, where Howard makes a toast joking that he said he would only get married when Cameron Drake, his former student, was nominated for an Academy Award. “I thought I was safe,” Howard laughingly remarks, knowing that everyone is thrilled he is finally marrying Emily, his fiancée of three years. That evening, with everyone glued to their television sets, Cameron Drake accepts his Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal as a gay soldier. During his acceptance speech, he dedicates his win to his former English teacher, “Howard Brackett from Greenleaf, Indiana.” Howard’s excitement is short-lived, because quickly thereafter, Cameron exclaims to the world “…and he’s gay.” As the film takes us through everyone’s stunned reaction, Cameron finishes his acceptance speech pleading for understanding from his audience for the gay culture. At the end, he emphatically exclaims “Mr. Bracket, we won!”

Since everyone Howard knows was watching that speech, it was virtually impossible for him to escape the flurry of questions that ensued. His fiancée, sitting at his side, asked “what is he talking about?” Howard’s equally shocked reaction causes him to immediately shut off his television and throw his remote out the window. Almost instantly, his parents arrive at his home asking him if there is “something” he would like to tell them. Howard is sent into a whirlwind of denial. He receives no relief the next day
at school where reporters are eagerly awaiting his arrival so that they may get a glimpse of the man who inspired the latest Academy Award winning actor. Howard’s students are similarly curious, and force Howard into a full explanation of why Cameron thought he was gay. Several of the students were kind enough to offer their opinions about how Howard can come across “kind of prissy” and “decent,” which makes Cameron’s misunderstanding completely explicable.

Howard manages to elude most of the reporters, but one decides to dedicate an entire week to the story. Peter Malloy, an openly gay TV reporter, is convinced that Howard is in fact gay, and that he will not go through with his marriage to fellow English teacher, Emily Montgomery. Throughout the rest of the film, Howard is forced into an introspective look at his life and sexuality. Knowing his love of Barbra Streisand, his friends attempt to throw Howard a bachelor party featuring all his favorite Streisand hits. Howard begins to realize that almost everything about himself would be characterized as gay. How he dresses, how he moves, and how he speaks could all be used in support of Peter Malloy’s gay suspicions. Howard endeavors to become more masculine and enlists the assistance of a self-help tape. After failing miserably to follow the instructions on the tape, the audience can see Howard’s increasing concern for his image.

On the day of his wedding to Emily, Howard is a nervous wreck. He is fidgety, irritable, and cannot seem to calm down. Once Emily makes it down the aisle and passionately proclaims “I do” to Howard, all that is needed is for him to say “I do” in return; but Howard is unable to do so. Rather than go through with the marriage, Howard proclaims to the world from the alter, “I’m gay.” Howard is forced to repeat it several times, once to Emily and again to his parents who briefly try to deflect the outburst by
claiming he meant to say “He’s having a wonderful day.” The ramifications of Howard’s coming out begin almost immediately. When Howard’s father finds him in quiet contemplation at home, Howard explains that the principal of his school had called and fired him. Howard also explains that he has no intention of attending the graduation ceremony for the seniors that he had taught, even though he was up for the “teacher of the year” award.

After his father appeals to Howard’s sense of responsibility to his students, Howard decides to attend the graduation ceremony. While another teacher is in the middle of his acceptance speech for “teacher of the year,” Cameron Drake comes to Howard’s aid and makes a surprise appearance at the graduation. Cameron takes center stage and forces the principal to explain why Howard was let go from his job. The principal, embarrassed by the turn of events, explained that the community was concerned about Howard’s ability to influence the children. Cameron mockingly puts the question to the students asking “you’ve had Mr. Brackett all year, is that how it works?” While an argument breaks out between the principal and Cameron, Jack, one of Howard’s prized students, shouts from the audience “excuse me, I’m gay!” With all attention on him, Jack explains that he had Mr. Brackett for senior English and that he helped him get into college, and that if what the principal was saying is true, it must have rubbed off, and so now he is gay. The young lady sitting next to Jack bursts into a dramatic flailing and exclaims that it must be happening to her too, since she also had Mr. Brackett in class. Once everyone realized how silly the notion was, the entire town in a show of support begins, one by one, to declare that they are gay because they too had
come in contact with Howard. Cameron Drake presents Howard with his Academy Award to take the place of what should have been the teacher of the year award.

The film ends with a wedding, not Howard’s and Emily’s, rather a vow-renewal of Howard’s parents. At the reception, everyone is dancing together in blissful happiness of their newfound tolerance. Howard is now free to be who he wants to be, and the community is willing to accept him.

There was some concern about the movie’s content and its ability to be a blockbuster. Director Frank Oz recalled his initial concern about the film when he claimed that “there was some question about the sheer accumulation of homosexual subject matter- instead of a movie about accepting who you are, it seemed like a movie about homosexuality, period” (Daly, 1997, para. 12). The movie’s distributor, Paramount, initially kept the movie out of approximately 250 “smaller markets” in the hopes that “word of mouth would convince those audiences that In & Out is just a good comedy- not a gay movie” (Daly, 1997, para. 17). An even bigger concern was the possibility of turning off one of the highest grossing ticket-buying demographics, males ages 20 and under. Paramount’s Vice President at the time, Rob Friedman, made it clear that this would not typically test well with young males because “it’s a touchy feely movie…nobody’s killed, there’s no action, no cars, and no hot young girl” (Daly, 1997, para. 18). Regardless, executives plowed on and created, in the words of the famous critic Roger Ebert, “one of the jollier comedies of [1997], a movie so mainstream that you can almost watch it backing away from confrontation, a film aimed primarily at a middle-American heterosexual audience” (Ebert, 1997, para. 2).
Identifying Current Ideologies and Stereotypes

Before attempting to address the research questions at hand, this study will determine the current state of existing ideologies and stereotypes about homosexuals to provide a foundation for analysis. Author Richard Dyer (2002) pointed out that “a major fact about being gay is that it doesn’t show. There is nothing about gay people’s physiognomy that declares them gay, no equivalents to the biological markers of sex and race” (p. 19). Based on this unique characteristic of the minority, deconstructing stereotypes can become difficult, because it forces the question of how people come to be prejudiced toward something they cannot even see. Empirical research has been conducted to determine why people hold particular negative attitudes towards homosexuals and which adopted traditional values hold homosexuality in contempt. One quantified study comparing stereotypes about and attitudes toward homosexuals determined six characteristics that typically lead to a negative opinion:

Investigations have shown that negative attitudes toward lesbians and gays are associated with traditional views regarding the roles and behavior of women; conservative, nonpermissive attitudes toward sex; the belief that homosexuality is ‘caused’ by social or environmental factors; negative interpersonal experiences with lesbians and gays, or a lack of homosexual acquaintances or friends; religiosity factors such as membership in traditionally conservative religions and frequent attendance in religious services; and being older and having relatively little education. (Simon, 1998, pg. 62)

Essentially, without exposure to homosexuals that can potentially challenge negative stereotypes, discrimination can be routinely legitimized by like-minded individuals.

Simon’s (1998) study insisted that popular culture is also responsible for validating certain stereotypes with its portrayal of homosexuals, claiming that the minority is regularly perceived as “promiscuous recruiters and corrupters of children,
who cannot have committed relationships,” and have simply not yet found the right opposite-sex partner to cure the homosexuality (p. 63). Since the problem exists of not having physical indicators of homosexuality, popular culture needs to find other ways of insinuating the character’s sexual preference, and the only way to do so is to rely upon a collective understanding or ideology upon which the character can be built. Simon (1998) determined that the stereotypes found in popular culture correlated highly with those found in empirical research:

Gay men are stereotyped to be interested in sex, to be emotional, to have a need for security, to be neat, to enjoy art and music, to be significantly different from the ‘normal, healthy adult,’ to be positive toward males, to be feminine, to have high-pitched voices, to wear jewelry, to be creative, and to be complicated. (p. 67)

These characteristics depicted in television and film were nearly identical to the lists developed by participants in Simon’s (1998) study outlining the positive and negative traits associated with homosexuality. The quantitative study was performed to determine if a relationship existed between a person’s attitude toward homosexuals and his/her stereotypical viewpoints of homosexuals. Through a questionnaire administered to the heterosexual participants, 38 descriptors of homosexuality emerged. Of the 38 descriptors, “17 were judged to be positive stereotypes of homosexuals and 21 were judged to be negative stereotypes” (p. 71). The generated positive and negative stereotypes are listed below in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2:
Table 4.1 Positive Descriptors of Homosexuals

- Has a good sense of humor
- Is a loving romantic partner
- Is self-confident
- Is sensitive
- Is nice
- Is creative
- Is willing to stand up for self
- Is caring
- Is gentle
- Is compassionate
- Is intelligent
- Is loving toward all people
- Is understanding
- Is independent
- Is open-minded
- Is friendly
- Is happy

Table 4.2 Negative Descriptors of Homosexuals

- Feels ashamed of self
- Thinks of self as better than heterosexuals
- Is extremely politically liberal
- Is lonely
- Takes on the roles of the opposite sex in romantic relationships
- Is confused
- Is bitter
- Is rebellious
- Is psychologically sick
- Publicly displays affection for romantic partner
- Lacks self-control
- Attempts to come on to heterosexuals
- Is a scary/threatening individual
- Is self-centered
- Want special political rights
- Attempts to convert children to homosexuality
- Is not a Christian
- Spreads AIDS
- Is too open about his or her sexuality
- Has no morals
- Had a bad experience with someone of the opposite sex

Along with the aforementioned stereotypes regularly appearing in popular culture, these 38 descriptors will be used as the referents to determine which ideologies and stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged in *In & Out*.

Perpetuated Ideologies and Stereotypes in *In & Out*

Of the 38 determined descriptors of homosexuals, 19 of them are perpetuated in the film. Of the 19 perpetuated descriptors, 16 are from the positive list and 3 are from the negative (see Table 4.3). Several times throughout the film, Howard demonstrates his wonderful sense of humor. At the beginning of the movie, he breaks into laughter after
his students gather around him, spraying him with carbonated beverages simulating champagne in celebration of his upcoming nuptials. He also jokes with his students that Cameron Drake was not as good looking in high school, claiming that he had massive plastic surgery.

Table 4.3 Perpetuated Descriptors in the film *In & Out*

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<th>Positive Descriptors</th>
<th>Negative Descriptors</th>
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<td>• Has a good sense of humor</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is a loving romantic partner</td>
<td>• Is gentle</td>
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<td>• Takes on the roles of the opposite sex</td>
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<td>• in romantic relationships</td>
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<td>• Is confused</td>
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As a romantic partner, Howard is extremely affectionate. He is always hugging and kissing his fiancée, Emily, and repeatedly comments on her beauty and kindness. He is insistent that she have a beautiful wedding, and is willing to do whatever it takes to make her happy. Howard’s loving nature spreads to those in his family and throughout the entire community as well. He realizes that his mother is obsessed with his wedding, and is eternally grateful for all her help and support. At the end of the film, we learn through the series of citizens who come to his aid that Howard has always been a decent, supportive, kind man who is always there when someone is in need.

Howard’s intelligence, creativity and understanding are all demonstrated in his teaching. He is passionate about literature and writing, and he is patient and tolerant of his students. Because Howard is forced to constantly defend and explain himself
throughout the entire movie, we are routinely made aware of his thriving self-confidence and ability to remain true to himself, even when others attack him. He is sensitive to the needs of others and cannot imagine causing pain to anyone, especially to those he loves most in the world. Howard’s integrity is never called into question, and he is regarded as one of the most respected people in town.

Howard is not the only homosexual in the movie. Peter Malloy, the openly gay TV reporter played by the usually over-masculine Tom Selleck, provides yet another glimpse into some gay stereotypes. The audience initially expects Peter to be a selfish, overly ambitious piranha who intends to use Howard strictly for his show’s ratings. But throughout the film, Peter becomes the voice of reason for Howard. Over time, the audience gets to see a character that cares more about Howard’s emotional state than his own career. Like Howard, Peter displays most of the positive stereotypical descriptors, among them being humor, self-confidence, compassion, understanding and gentility. Although the movie never outwardly admits to the relationship, it strongly eludes to the eventual romantic pairing of Howard and Peter. This in and of itself is a perpetuated ideology. Many heterosexuals make the mistake of assuming that two people will find each other attractive and will immediately start dating just because both of them are gay.

There are a few negative descriptors that appear in the movie regarding homosexuals. In the attitude study, heterosexuals claimed that taking the role of the opposite sex in relationships is considered a negative characteristic of gays. Dyer (2002) explains that, with dialogue, there are some “conventional ways of indicating…that a character is gay: certain topics of conversation often function as the trigger for discussion…for example, childlessness, loneliness, a man’s interest in the arts and
domestic crafts…” (p. 22). Howard absolutely takes on the role of what would traditionally belong to a woman. He loves to cook and arrange the food in appetizing ways, his home is impeccably decorated and is always tidy, and he is deeply interested in fashion. Howard is even responsible for selecting his fiancée’s wedding dress. At the end, we learned that he suggested Emily get highlights in her hair because it would give her “shimmer.” Howard is also devastated when he realizes his tuxedo for the wedding has a “shine” and that his shirt does not have enough starch. All of these character traits would traditionally be seen as a woman’s role.

Building on the assumption that gay men love the arts, the characters in the movie chronically refer to Howard’s love of Barbra Streisand, a stereotypical gay demigod. It begins with Howard’s friends “insulting” Howard by throwing him a Streisand-themed bachelor party. Howard attempts to explain to his friends that he wanted a more traditional bachelor party thrown by “studs,” chock full of naked women and pornography; but, he loses credibility when he physically attacks one of his friends who had the audacity to suggest that Streisand was “too old for Yentl.” Streisand makes another appearance when Peter Malloy tests Howard’s sexuality by asking him which of Streisand’s albums was her eighth. When Howard answered “Color Me Barbra” without a second thought, and claimed that “everyone knows that,” Peter responded with “everyone where, the little gay bar on the prairie?” Streisand’s final appearance comes when Emily, after finding out that her fiancée is gay, screams to her wedding guests “does anyone know how many times I’ve had to watch Funny Lady?”

The script also addresses head on the difficult task of a homosexual’s coming out. It comes as quite a shock to Howard that he is actually gay, but more importantly, he is
agonizing over what the news could do to his parents, specifically his mother. Daly (1997), when interviewing the movie’s writers, discovered that the confession scene with the priest was designed “to help explain why people don’t come out feel they can’t come out. They’re afraid everyone will hate them” (para. 21). Savin-Williams (2001) explains this real life dilemma in the following excerpt:

Slightly over 10% of nondisclosing youths recognize that eventually they must come out, but delay telling because they believe it will cause irreparable harm to the mother-son relationship. To hurt his mother is to cause pain to the most beloved person in the son’s life. (p. 146)

The author outlines three basic, yet practical explanations of how the mother-gay son relationship progresses after the coming out. Essentially, the relationship can improve, it can just continue as usual, or it can deteriorate (p. 162-166). Since In & Out is a feel good comedy shooting for a lighthearted mood, it was only natural that Howard and his relationship with his mother grew out of the experience. To provide some comic relief in what could have been an intensely emotional segment of the movie, Howard’s mother is explaining to her friends that she can understand that Howard is gay, but she cannot understand “as long as she lives how he cannot want a wedding.”

Similarly, the father-gay son relationship does not usually come with the violence that society presumes. Savin-Williams (2001) posits that “fathers generally do not react with violence or abuse. Far more fathers respond positively…few want to lose their son, although many do not know what to say or how to offer support” (p. 191). Like that of the mother-gay son relationship, the possibilities with the father run the gamut. If the father-gay son relationship is lucky enough to improve after the coming out, the “enhancement of their relationship can result from a father’s misperception about the son’s future sexuality” (Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 193). Howard’s father certainly fits this
description. His initial reaction was to immediately start inquiring about Howard’s future. Of course, in a comic fashion, Howard’s father asks if he will be “having an operation” or if he will be “going into show business.” Once Howard sarcastically answers “absolutely-Vegas,” his father explains that he is trying and that he is “a farmer,” suggesting that he is truly ignorant to what real homosexuals are actually like.

To Howard and his family, homosexuality is something that is reserved for extremely liberal, big city folk who would never live in a traditional setting like Greenleaf, Indiana. At the beginning of the film, in an attempt to explain how Cameron could have made such a “mistake,” Howard and his parents used the fact that he has been in Los Angeles all this time and that his mind may have been perverted by drugs. The people in Howard’s hometown possess similar traditional views to those people who were studied in the previously mentioned attitude analysis. They have very specific opinions toward the traditional roles of women, the belief that homosexuality is “caused” by social or experimental factors, and have limited to no contact with homosexuals with whom they may build an actual understanding.

Eagleton (1991) explains that these characteristics are typical of those who follow the ideologies:

The ideas in question may be true or false; if they are false, they may be considered to be contingently so, or their falsehood may be seen as the effect of the functional work they have to do in promoting shady interests, or as a kind of buckling they undergo in straining to rationalize shabby social motives. (p. 44)

Ideologies, although not always intended to serve a sinister purpose, can get in the way of truth in order to carry on a particular dominant way of life. This can apply to the citizens of Greenleaf, Indiana, and their perception of Howard’s sexuality. For these people, heterosexuality is not only the norm, it is the only way of life. Eagleton (1991) claims
that, for an ideology to rule so extensively, it must possess six characteristics: it must be *unifying, action-oriented, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing & naturalizing* (p. 45).

To explain the concept of *unifying*, Eagleton (1991) claims that “ideologies are often thought to lend coherence to the groups or classes which hold them, welding them into a unitary...identity, and perhaps thereby allowing them to impose a certain unity upon society as a whole” (p. 45). The people of Greenleaf are, for all intents and purposes, carbon copies of one another. They march together under the banner of their ideologies which, on one hand, will give a sense of identity and belonging, but on the other hand, can create a sense of overwhelming loneliness for someone who may be different. When Howard starts to realize that he does not fit the mold, the audience can see his discomfort begin to take hold.

For an ideology to be *action-oriented*, it must work in both practice and theory. “It must extend from an elaborated system of thought to the minutiae of everyday life, from a scholarly treatise to a shout in the street” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 48). It is easy to see when someone acts in a way that is in opposition to the accepted ideology. The concept of heteronormativity easily feeds off the idea of action-orientation. It is effortless to establish a man-woman relationship as the normal way of life, and to put it into action by supporting it with laws and the institution of marriage. *In & Out* demonstrates the action-oriented side of ideology by not only showing it as socially acceptable for Howard and Emily to marry, but showing it as *expected* that they will marry, because that is just what people do.
The *rationalizing* function of an effective ideology “can be seen as more or less systematic attempts to provide plausible explanations and justifications for social behavior which might otherwise be the object of criticism” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 52). There is an understanding that what one is rationalizing may be inexcusable, and that is why it requires such vigorous defense. With *In & Out*, excuses and explanations are plentiful to establish heterosexuality as an acceptable ideology. Everyone in the movie believes that homosexuality is wrong and against nature, but none of them really knows why because they have never been asked to explain it before. One particularly graphic explanation occurs when Mike, one of Howard’s students, enlightens his friends on the concept of “in-holes” and “out-holes.” Rather than give a logical explanation to support heterosexuality, Mike instead discredits homosexuality by saying they “put stuff in the out-holes,” which is against nature. Oddly enough, it is really the only rationalization for heternormativity that is provided throughout the entire movie. Otherwise, everyone is of the same mind, and no explanation is required. The ideology is free to rule without question. Just as this analysis mentioned earlier about previous studies, many of the characters in the movie would make the argument that heterosexuality is not wrongly dominant. It is just that the majority of people live that way, so it must be right.

Once an ideology has been rationalized, it has the potential to reach the next step of *legitimation*.

Legitimation refers to the process by which a ruling power comes to secure from its subjects an at least tacit consent to its authority….A group or class may well perceive that there could be kinds of authority other than that of their masters, but endorse this authority even so. A mode of domination is generally legitimated when those subjected to it come to judge their own behavior by the criteria of their rulers. (Eagleton, 1991, pg. 54-55)
Howard is a victim of legitimation. Being born and raised in Greenleaf, Indiana, he has never experienced any other way of life, and sees that everyone else around him respectfully serves the same ideology. For Howard, it is simple. There are clear-cut rules and expectations to follow, and any deviation is a disruption to the social order. Eagleton (1991) highlights the complexities of this concept when he explained that ideology, among other concepts, is “an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness. It is because being oppressed sometimes brings with it some slim bonuses that we are occasionally prepared to put up with it” (p. xiv). Howard has lived a lovely, successful life following the rules. He genuinely believes that he is completely happy because he is supposed to feel that way. He has done everything he was supposed to do. However, not everything in Howard’s life is a lie. Actually, the only lie is his sexuality. He loves his job, he loves his town and he loves the people in his life. But to keep these “slim bonuses,” he must follow all the rules, not just some of them.

Eagleton (1991) delineated the course of events that could occur with emancipation from a dominant ideology:

Someone who was entirely the victim of ideological delusion would not even be able to recognize an emancipator claim upon them…This is not to claim that oppressed individuals secretly harbor some full blown alternative to their unhappiness; but it is to claim, that once they have freed themselves from the causes of that suffering, they must be able to look back, re-write their life-histories and recognize that what they enjoy now is what they would have previously desired, if only they had been able to be aware of it. It is testimony to the fact that nobody is, ideologically speaking, a complete dupe…that people who are characterized as inferior must actually learn to be so. (p. xiv)

Before Cameron Drake and the Oscars incident, Howard had no idea that he needed to be rescued from his own life. He must have had some inkling that he was a homosexual, but since the idea was so fantastically out of the question, he repressed it. It wasn’t until he
was forced to address the issue, because of Cameron, that Howard opened up to the idea that he may have allowed himself to be controlled. Peter Malloy serves as his emancipator, and naturally, Howard rejects him at first. For the first time, someone articulated what Howard must have felt inside so many times and explained that it was normal for him to feel that way. Peter identified with Howard’s constant struggle to remember to “lower his voice” and “switch pronouns,” and finally gave Howard some relief.

This legitimation in Howard’s eyes created an internal conflict that needed resolving. Boggs (1985) explained how these conflicts play out in film by stating “in all internal conflicts, we see a character caught between equally strong but conflicting desires, goals or value systems” (p. 68). Howard has the added pressure of his internal conflict being public knowledge and open to public scrutiny. The unique experience of a homosexual’s internal conflict has been documented by researchers and dubbed the term “internalized homophobia.” Meyer and Dean (1998) clarified this phenomenon by defining it in the following way:

Internalized homophobia is the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard. Homosexually oriented persons are most often raised by heterosexual parents and socialized as heterosexuals in environments that frequently promote antihomosexual attitudes…most homosexually oriented persons are not exposed to self-protecting, supportive attitudes in their families. Thus, until they come out, most homosexuals lack access to an affirmative reference group and to mentors and role models to help in the development of healthy sociosexual identity. Long before they begin to realize their own homosexuality, homosexually oriented people internalize societal antihomosexual attitudes to varying degrees. (p. 161-162)

Howard internalized the heteronormative way of life in which he was raised. His internal conflict must have been insufferable. We can see his painful struggle throughout the
movie, lending to the perpetuated idea that homosexuals are confused individuals. Even though comical, the audience cannot help but feel sympathy for the character they come to care for and genuinely like. Once again, Peter Malloy offers some solace to our hero by letting Howard know that he too has been in the position of trying to negotiate equally powerful, yet competing emotions.

The last two components of an ideology, *universalizing and naturalizing*, are also prevalent in *In & Out*. An ideology becomes universalized when “values and interests which are in fact specific to a certain place and time are projected as the values and interests of all humanity” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 56). Greenleaf benefits from heteronormativity being perpetuated all throughout the world, because it keeps the citizens from having to continually justify why it is considered to be a normal way of life. However, the community is not attempting to reinvent the wheel. They are not overly interested in making sure everyone follows their way of life, just everyone that lives in their town and comes in contact with their children. By keeping their zone of interest small, it is much more manageable to keep consistency and control.

In *naturalization*, ideologies take on a bit of an ignorant characteristic. Eagleton (1991) explained that “successful ideologies are often thought to render their beliefs natural and self evident- to identify them with the ‘common sense’ of a society so that nobody could ever imagine how they might ever be different” (p. 58). This phase of an ideology is a bit diabolical. Naturalization would indicate that the people following the ideology do not believe it is an ideology, because to them it is “natural,” the only way to be. It is difficult to get someone to discuss the possibility of changing their ideology when they are unwilling to admit it is an ideology in the first place. Dyer (2002) argued
that heterosexuality as an ideology is one of those concepts that seems to be above questioning:

   Heterosexuality as a social reality seems to be invisible to those who benefit from it. In part, this is because of the remorseless construction of heterosexuality as normal. If things are natural, they cannot really be questioned or scrutinized and so they fade from view. Such naturalization often characterizes how we see, and don’t see, the powerful; how they see, and don’t see, themselves. (p. 119)

The characters in In & Out never really consider Howard’s feelings until the very end. Their initial reaction and concern is for themselves. What will having a gay man in our community do to us? What has it already done? How did we not know he was gay? All of the initial concerns are selfish in nature and concerned primarily for the good of the ideology. The majority of the characters have a hard time even processing the information because they never imagined it could even happen- including Howard. He is a gay man, yet he internalized and naturalized the idea of heterosexuality in his head, so much so, that he needed to take time to even process the idea that heterosexuality did not pertain to him.

   Once an ideology takes hold, the new concern is its endurance. Ideologies do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in an ever changing world, with constant pressures being placed upon them to transform. If an ideology has any hope of survival, it must be willing to address its opposition and fight. Williams (1977) elaborated on this stating “a lived hegemony is always a process. It is not…a system or structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities with specific and changing pressures and limits” (p. 112). To endure, the hegemonic, or dominant culture, needs to regularly be aware of potential alternatives or “opposition which threaten its dominance,” so that if such threats
arise, the hegemony can take control and direct the course of the change, always maintaining its power (Williams, 1977, p. 113).

In order for Howard’s new way of life to be acceptable, it has to pass through the dominant ideology of heterosexuality. The citizens, without realizing they were in an ideological struggle, had to negotiate how this disruption would incorporate into their accepted hegemonic worldview. The characters in the movie needed time and discussion to ingest the new scenario, and they needed to determine how they would go about maintaining their sense of order and normalcy, but still allow their beloved resident to live the life he wanted to live. With regard to film depiction, Boggs (1985) explained this as static versus developing characters. A developing character is one who is “deeply affected by the action of the plot and undergoes some important change in personality, attitude or outlook on life as a result of the action of the story” (p. 63). A static character “remains essentially the same throughout the action of the film” (Boggs, 1985, p. 63). The audience expects that Howard will be the main developing character in the film, but if deconstructed carefully, one can see that Howard is actually the only static character in the film. The only reason he appears to be “changing” is because he has to publicly go through his personal acceptance, but Howard himself remains the same person throughout the movie. It is all the other characters who go through a transformation, thanks to Howard. For the first time, they confront a challenge to their ideology directly and determine the best way to integrate it into their comfort zone.

Comedy plays a large role in this film and its perpetuation of the heteronormative hegemonic ideology. Remembering that comedy brings us a clown that can be ridiculed and derided, it is essential for that clown to “violate the expectations of the role” so those
violations can “provide the grounds by which ‘we must show that he is inferior, either to
the ordinary, or at least inferior to what has been thought or claimed about him…””
(Olsen 1968, cited in Bineham p. 62). As long as the clown is behaving like everyone
else, there is nothing to discuss. It is when the unlikeliness surfaces that we get our story.
But, unlike tragedy where the “central figure is ultimately isolated from society,” in
comedy the goal in to integrate the clown back into society (Bineham, 2005, p. 96). The
clown has the unique position of being different from the pack, but still adored. Because
the other characters do not believe that the clown is intrinsically evil, they are more
willing to work with him/her in order to make sense of the chaos and to welcome him/her
back into the group. “Even though the vices that the clown represents are destructive of
social order, comedy emphasizes that those vices are frequently the excesses of virtues,
[and therefore] the possibility exists for correction and reconciliation” (Bineham, 2005, p.
92).

This is how the heteronormative ideology is perpetuated in the film, even after its
feel-good ending. The town took the time to reintegrate Howard back into the community
in their new modified hegemony. Williams (1977) delineated this hegemonic
metamorphosis with his explanation of dominant, residual and emergent ideologies. The
dominant ideology is the prevailing rule under which all citizens are forced to follow. A
residual ideology by definition “has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still
active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as
an effective element of the present” (Williams, 1977, p. 122). The emergent ideology is
unique in that “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of
relationships are continually being created” (Williams, 1977, p. 123). Regardless of
whether residual or emergent in nature, the question remains if the presented ideology is simply benign or directly oppositional to the dominant ideology. Williams (1977) claimed:

…the dominant culture cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk. It is in the incorporation of the actively residual- by interpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion- that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident….To the degree that it emerges, and especially to the degree that it is oppositional rather than alternative, the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins. (p. 123-124).

Howard does not really directly challenge anything fundamental about the lifestyle of those living in Greenleaf, but his homosexuality is something that requires incorporation if he is to continue living there. Therefore, they are able to take what is oppositional and absorb it to the point where it loses its critical edge. Basically, because the only thing changing about Howard is his sexual preference, he is allowed to stay. Since Howard is the same person, who wants to do the same job and keep the same friends, and has no intention of rocking the boat, he will be allowed to live his one difference, just so long as everything else remains static. The hegemony is allowed to rule once again, in its modified version, and Howard gets to live the life he wants.

Challenged Ideologies and Stereotypes in *In & Out*

The previous section was dedicated to those ideologies and stereotypes that were perpetuated in the film. This section will address those presented ideologies and stereotypes that are challenged. Of the 38 determined descriptors of homosexuals, 19 of them are challenged in the film *In & Out*. Of the 19 challenged descriptors, 1 is from the positive list and 18 are from the negative (see Table 4.4).
Table 4.4 Challenged Descriptors in the film *In & Out*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Descriptors</th>
<th>Negative Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Is open-minded</td>
<td>• Feels ashamed of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thinks of self as better than heterosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is extremely politically liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is bitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is rebellious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is psychologically sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Publicly displays affection for romantic partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lacks self-control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attempts to come on to heterosexuals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term “homosexual” is a loaded term in Greenleaf, Indiana. The complexities of the term are so difficult for the residents to comprehend that it is even difficult for them to utter the word, as was the case for the principal, who stumbled several times before actually getting it out. The term represents to the people a dense amount of intricate assumptions, and they have a hard time reconciling them with the man they have come to know as one of their own. McGee (2005) provided a term to explain this odd occurrence which he dubbed “ideograph.” For a concrete definition, McGee (2005) stated the following:

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as
acceptable and laudable. Ideographs...may guide behavior and belief negatively by branding unacceptable behavior...Ideographs are culture-bound, though some terms are used in different signification across cultures. Each member of the community is socialized, conditioned, to the vocabulary of ideographs as a prerequisite for 'belonging' to the society. (p. 462-463)

In function, ideographs serve a unifying purpose. With a universal understanding of what the word “means” to the people, they are able to determine what behavior and actions will be considered acceptable by their contextual standards. When those in Greenleaf, Indiana think of the word “homosexual,” a whole schema of associated words come to mind in an effort to categorize the lifestyle into their recognized way of life. Based on the reactions by the people in the film, one can assume that a great number of those ideas associated with “homosexual” are the same descriptors listed above in the negative section of Table 4.4. Howard, who is probably one of the only homosexuals they have every known, attempts to challenge these negative stereotypes.

Several items from the list of negatives can be challenged right off the bat, since they are never mentioned in the movie. Never once does Howard ask for special political rights; never once does Howard attempt to come on to heterosexuals in an effort to convert them; never once does Howard mention his political viewpoints, even though one can probably assume that he is relatively conservative using other contextual cues from his life; and never once is AIDS mentioned in the entire movie. Just by omitting several widely accepted stereotypes, the script challenges these popular assumptions by heterosexuals.

Other stereotypes are challenged by painting Howard as the complete opposite of the descriptor. Howard, just by nature of his behavior and personality, absolutely contradicts the notions of being rebellious, immoral, out of control or psychologically
sick. As previously discussed, many times, Howard follows the social order of his community. He is an esteemed teacher who is placed in the unique position of being responsible for turning his students into respectable members of society. Before he was outted on national television, Howard was always in complete control of his faculties and was dependable and reliable. Even during his self-revelation, Howard worked hard to maintain composure. The movie also opposes the notion that a homosexual cannot be a Christian. Even though he is not Catholic, Howard goes to confession to solicit the help of a higher power in his decision; and, at the end, we see that Howard was planning to marry Emily in a church, in front of God and his whole family.

It has also been established that many heterosexuals believe that homosexuals are gay simply because they have either not found the right opposite-sex partner, or they had a bad experience with one. Once again, we see this challenged in Howard’s relationship with Emily. She is a lovely woman who brought much happiness to Howard’s life. He genuinely loves her as a person, and would never label his relationship with her as a negative experience. We also see, through his relationship with Emily, that Howard is not a sexually explicit person. As a matter of fact, he is quite the opposite. In one of the funnier scenes of the movie, Howard goes to confession and pretends to be explaining someone else’s sexual dilemma. He explains to the priest that, even after three years of engagement, “his friend” has never “been” with his fiancée in “that way,” to which the priest immediately responds “never?…in three years?...he’s gay!” Howard is very reserved about sexuality, and would never go against the moral code that has been taught to him, even though everyone else realizes that no one is actually expected to follow it.
To demonstrate even further Howard’s discomfort with overt sexual behavior, at one point Peter plants a long passionate kiss on Howard’s lips to see how he would react. The unexpected kiss threw Howard into a dramatic explanation of its inappropriateness claiming “you…what’s the matter with you…this isn’t Los Angeles!” When the movie’s writers were scripting this scene, they were concerned about the reaction it would generate from the normally homophobic audience, specifically young men. Screenwriter Paul Rudnick said the following quote in an interview about the movie:

Amazingly, the kiss scene, which so worried the filmmakers, had proved to be an indisputable high point of every test screening. The very same teenage guys who covered their eyes and howled- when you looked at their questionnaire responses, it was always their favorite scene, which is a real American paradox, I think. (Daly, 1997, para. 22)

In an interesting turn, the same people who claim to have a negative opinion of homosexuals were able to enjoy and laugh at a demonstration of it. Just as the case was made earlier in this study, this openness to a new idea would not have been possible if it was not for the comic frame. The young boys knew it was supposed to be funny, so they were free to have the reaction that came naturally to them. Perhaps the more important point comes with the fact that nothing happened to the young kids seeing the movie. Being exposed to homosexual displays of affection did not have some kind of long lasting physical or psychological negative affect on them. However, with regard to their opinion of homosexuality, there are potentially two different outcomes. Either individuals exposed to the film can become more tolerant and understanding of homosexuality, or the film can perpetuate the idea that it is okay to mock and ridicule homosexuals.

Howard also directly contradicts some of the negative descriptors that speak to a homosexual’s psychological well-being. One of the descriptors claims homosexuals
routinely feel ashamed of themselves, which Howard never does. At one point he feels sad about hurting Emily and letting his mother down, but he is never ashamed of who is really is. The idea that homosexuals are self-centered and bitter is also challenged. The entire plot revolves around Howard trying to keep the people around him happy and proud. His actions indicate that he would be content giving up something for himself just to keep those he cares about satisfied. Howard and Peter Malloy also challenge the notion that homosexuals think of themselves as better than heterosexuals. If anything, they are actually looking for approval from the straight people in the film. Peter even explains to Howard that other’s reactions to his homosexuality would probably surprise him, because at the heart of it, people are good. It is an uplifting message that demonstrates Peter’s humility.

Possibly the most directly challenged descriptive stereotype is that of gay men being threatening individuals that attempt to convert children to homosexuality. Howard’s entire existence revolves around his work with his students. He is dedicated to his craft and loves working with teenagers. Howard was not interested in discussing sexuality, in fact, he never started the conversation. If it was discussed, it was because the students initiated the dialogue. However, regardless of who started the discussion, the traditional townspeople did not want their students exposed to homosexuality. They relied on their schools to reiterate what was important in life, and to support the customary lifestyle of heterosexuality. Louis Althusser (1977) explained this use of school and education as “state apparatuses.” Althusser investigated the way in which the dominant ideology, or state, managed to exert perpetual control over its subjects. One of the primary “state apparatuses” are the schools in which we teach time-honored traditions.
that are expected to be upheld in adulthood. Howard posed a threat to this method of control when he introduced a topic that is typically off limits, and he was fired for it. As a matter of fact, Howard is only allowed back into the school once they realize that the notion of influence is ridiculous and would never actually be a threat. The people are guilty of the very thing they accuse Howard of doing, exerting control over the students so that they can continue their way of life. It seems that the people are okay with the idea of being controlled, as long as those in charge are just like them.

Although the school and the lives of the townspeople return almost back to normal, Howard does manage to exert influence in one small way. He teaches those in the community to be open-minded and to question the traditional mindset that had dominated their lives. Eagleton (1991) addressed how this indirect influence is possible in the following quote:

…some types of ideological enunciation are true in what they affirm, but false in what they exclude….It would seem, then, that some at least of what we call ideological discourse is true at one level but not at another; true in its empirical content but deceptive in its force, or true in its surface meaning but false in its underlying assumptions. (p. 16 & 17).

This concept outlines the complex nature of an ideology. That, overall, an assumption can be right, but its underlying notions can be false. Howard did manage to exert influence on the lives of those around him, but he did so in a completely different manner than what was expected. Everyone expected that Howard’s influence would be that of “turning” his students gay. Rather, Howard had no effect on their sexuality, but he did have an effect on their level of tolerance. It took the students to show everyone that the influence was good and would ultimately not threaten their way of life. However, this newfound tolerance will be limited in scope. The people in Greenleaf, Indiana, may now be open to
the idea of homosexuality, but they will only be tolerant of it as long as all other aspects of the gay person’s life follow their rules. As previously mentioned in this analysis, it took them time to reconcile Howard back into their culture, and to find an adequate place for him. Since Howard is still desperate to belong, and still wants to be a part of this society, his open-mindedness will also be limited. He will be a minority that will only accept other minorities if they follow the rules. This directly challenges the positive descriptor of homosexuals being open-minded individuals. This is the only positive descriptor challenged in the entire movie.

Social Construction of Gender in *In & Out*

Just as comedy provided a unique method of perpetuating and challenging ideologies, so does it provide a distinctive way of looking at gender construction. Over the years, scholars have debated over the societal contextual view of a person’s ‘sex’ versus his/her ‘gender.’ Traditionally, ‘sex’ refers to one’s physical attributes present at birth, with ‘gender’ referring to the socially constructed expectations of men and women. Goffman (1977) elaborated on this distinction in the following excerpt:

> In all societies, initial sex-class placement stands at the beginning of a sustained sorting process whereby members of the two classes are subjected to differential socialization. From the start, persons who are sorted in the male class and persons who are sorted into the other are given different treatment, acquire different experience, enjoy and suffer different expectations….Observe that although gender is almost wholly a social, not biological, consequence of the workings of society, these consequences are objective. (p. 303)

From birth, a person is injected with expectations based on his/her sex. These expectations tend to dictate choices in life, both big and small, but they do so in an almost clandestine manner. West and Zimmerman (1987) referred to this subconscious acting as
“doing gender,” which they define as “creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or biological.” Human beings have an innate desire to categorize everything in order to make sense of their surroundings. Gender behavior is no exception to this rule. However, its unique quality is that no one intentionally categorizes gender, it appears to be something that just happens naturally. Lorber (1994) explained that “gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume that it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction…” (p. 13).

Because this idea of gender is so quietly persistent, it is only natural that individuals begin to evaluate themselves against the norms that have been established for their particular sex. Goffman (1977) laid the foundation for this concept when he wrote “insofar as the individual builds up a sense of who and what he is by referring to his sex class and judging himself in terms of the ideas of masculinity (or femininity), one may speak of gender identity” (p. 304). West and Zimmerman (1987) referred to this gender categorization as being “omnirelevant,” and declared that “…a person engaged in virtually any activity may be held accountable for performance of that activity as a woman or a man” (p. 136). Unknowingly, all people measure their behavior against the gender yardstick that has been entrenched in their minds through interaction with others. Whether or not an action is socially acceptable will depend directly on whether it is a man or a woman asking the question.

In the movie In & Out, the question of what it means to be a “real man” goes to the heart of the plot. Biologically, Howard is a man, but he is struggling to merge his love of things traditionally reserved for the female gender in society with his sex. He is
measuring himself against the norms that have been guiding social behavior in his town since long before he ever came along. Actually, until Howard’s dilemma, no one thought to question the validity of the expectations of men and women in Greenleaf. Lorber (1994) explained this phenomenon in the following excerpt:

Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated. (p. 13 & 14)

Howard presented this disruption in Greenleaf. His behavior and lifestyle choices forced everyone to take a step back and ask, how is it possible for him to end up this way? Didn’t he understand the role he was supposed to play? Until he was successfully placed in a gender status, even if it was a different gender, the people in town felt completely dislocated. For the first time, they were forced to address the issue of what they believed to be acceptable behavior by a “masculine” man.

According to Gill (2007), this is not only an issue for our fictional small town. She explained that “one of the most important notions in masculinity studies is the idea of hegemonic masculinity” and that there is this belief that “there is no single masculinity, but rather multiple masculinities” (p. 30). What makes a particular masculinity hegemonic is that it is valued more than the others, and although it is unlikely that all men could ever achieve it, it is the masculinity to which they should compare their behavior (Gill, 2007, p. 31). Gill (2007) also recognized that which masculinity is the hegemonic version can be culture specific, and that one should be careful not to employ a uniform comparison of contexts, but rather should consider each situation based on its own personal characteristics (p. 31). We can see this culture specific masculinity in In &
Out. What it meant to be a “man” in Greenleaf, Indiana had some different characteristics compared to what it meant to be a “man” in Hollywood, California.

Howard’s life never really epitomized masculinity, but because he was marrying a women, citizens of Greenleaf just considered his unique nature as nothing more than quirky. Several characters and scenes from the movie effectively establish what Greenleaf expected of its male citizens, and that Howard definitely falls short of the mark. We first hear what is “expected” of male behavior when Howard’s students discuss why Cameron Drake thought their teacher was gay. Mike, the stereotypical unintelligent jock, insisted that it’s because Howard is decent, clean, “kinda prissy,” and rides a bicycle. Mike also suggests that because Howard teaches literature and “bonnets” that it is easy to think he is not a real man and must be gay. Howard’s confusion is overwhelming because he cannot understand how these typically positive attributes can keep him from looking like a real man. It is difficult to understand that the negative characteristics of being dirty, unintelligent and disorganized are what is expected of men, and somehow, oddly cherished.

These ideas are corroborated in what must be the most telling part of the movie regarding gender expectations, Howard’s use of the self-help tape called “Exploring Your Masculinity.” To come across more masculine, Howard solicits the help of a professionally made audio tape that is guaranteed to make him more of a “man.” Before the lesson begins, the voice on the tape asks Howard if he is “in suitably masculine attire.” Howard responds with “very” since he is wearing blue jeans and a flannel, indicating that is what “real men” wear in Greenleaf. But the instructor insists that Howard untuck one side of his shirt and calls him a “sissy” because he wants to be neat
and tidy. Next, the tape insists that he stand straight and tall, and that he adjust himself. It takes Howard a moment to realize that he is supposed to adjust “down there” in the “family jewels.” It quickly becomes clear that the tape is reiterating all the characteristics that Mike outlined earlier in school.

After a brief interlude into what is appropriate for men to say, the tape conducts the ultimate test of masculinity…dancing. The song “I will Survive” starts to play in the background, and Howard is feeling excited and ready to dance, until his happiness is shattered by the instructor claiming that “truly manly men don’t dance, under any circumstances.” Howard does the best he can to fight the music as the tape tells him that men are to avoid, at all cost, “rhythm, grace and pleasure.” Ultimately, the music overpowers him, and he breaks into a violent dancing frenzy all over his home while the tape is yelling at him in the background. The instructor suggests different ways for him to release the tension of wanting to dance, saying that Howard should “be a man, kick someone, punch someone, bite someone’s ear.” The instructor even goes so far as to use Arnold Schwarzenegger (the true man’s man) as an example saying “Arnold doesn’t dance, he can barely walk.” The tape cuts the song off about halfway through, bringing Howard back to the realization that he is failing miserably as a “man.”

Several times throughout the movie, we can see that Greenleaf also expects their men to be perverted and obsessed with sex. Again, we see Mike serving this purpose. At the end of the movie when he and his friends come to Howard’s aid, Mike proudly announces to the whole town that he himself “still gets with chicks” every chance he gets and that “he is totally good at it.” Of course everyone laughs at this and chucks it off as “boys will be boys” who eventually grow into men that will do the same thing. Even the
priest in the confession scene lends his support of this expectation when he says that any man who has been with the same woman for three years and has not had sex must be gay. There is this understanding that men search for sex and will take it any time it is offered to them without question. Howard himself supports this stereotype when he enters his bachelor party demanding pornography, because then everyone will think he is a real man.

Very much like the citizens of Greenleaf laughing at Mike’s perversion, those people watching this movie are encouraged to laugh at how men typically behave. But, the movie never actually calls into question these characteristics. In & Out does not challenge the idea that men are typically sloppy, lazy, and sexually explicit. Rather, they used this template to support the idea that gay men are not typical men, and that a whole new set of standards is required for what will be expected of them. The only time we see any of these descriptors being challenged is at the very end, when the whole town (men and women alike) are dancing at the reception. However, this seems to be more about showing Howard’s assimilation back into society, rather than defying the idea that men should not dance.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

“[I] tried real hard to avoid turning it into a liberal good deed, or a movie-of-the-week saying ‘Oh, gay is good, and aren’t we all better for watching this?’”
--Screenwriter Paul Rudnick

*In & Out* was supposed to be a simple comedy- a simple comedy that would allow people to disappear from their lives for a few hours for a good laugh. Although the writer’s intent was not to voice an opinion and bring awareness, he set himself up to fail when he wrote a script about one of the most controversial topics of our time. Just by nature of the script and its topic, it is impossible to avoid taking some kind of stance. Rudnick may have tried to avoid saying “gay is good, and aren’t we all better for this,” but it is exactly what happened with the film. By perpetuating most of the positive descriptors and challenging most of the negatives, Rudnick (along with producer Scott Rudin and Director Frank Oz) was guilty of the very offense he attempted to avoid. Even when they perpetuated some of the negatives, like Howard’s confusion, they did so to garner sympathy for the protagonist. They even made Emily’s suffering funny so that we would not hate Howard for leaving her at the alter.

The overwhelming positive attitude that everyone is feeling at the end of the movie lends to the trite realization that we are all better people for having experienced this film. When reviewing the movie, Roger Ebert (1997) wrote “there’s a scene in the high school auditorium that could have been recycled directly from a Frank Capra
movie…I will say that it is too long, too lugubrious and too coyishly uplifting” (para. 7). This utopian ending, although terribly cliché, was unavoidable because of the nature of comedy. A film cannot claim to want to make you laugh and then leave you sad for the main character at the end.

Paradoxically, the movie simultaneously makes people feel good about their newfound understanding of homosexuality, but does so while still maintaining heteronormativity. Because people fear what they do not understand, this movie can be considered a good deed for addressing those fears head on to squash whatever misunderstandings may exist. In a positive light, this movie opened the door for understanding and tolerance, albeit in a simple way. The difficulty with officially calling this a good deed is that it perpetuates the idea, overall, that straight is still the norm, and that homosexuality is something that needs to be assimilated into culture, rather than something that already exists as a part of the culture’s history. Westerfelhaus and Lacriox (2006) explained this complication by stating “…as long as sexual orientation is a term applied primarily to those who are not deemed sexually ‘straight,’ then heterosexuality will continue to serve as the taken-for-granted norm against which other forms of sexuality are defined, measured and judged” (p. 428). Although In & Out did succumb to some of the dominant ideologies, it provided a place to start and a template upon which other movies may build and grow. In the end, great opportunity comes from just addressing the issue; and if you can make people laugh in the process, they may be more willing to embrace that opportunity.
REFERENCES


