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*But I’m Cheerleader* follows a teenager named Megan who’s parents send her to a gay conversion camp called True Directions. True Directions is described as a “boot camp” where she is meant to unlearn her “homosexual tendencies”. (08:33) The irony is that it isn’t until being sent to conversion therapy that Megan begins to come to terms with and recognize her own queer sexuality. The film relies on satire, exaggerating something to shed light on its ridiculous nature, to critique ideologies surrounding gay conversion therapy. Theories like Louis Althusser’s interpellation and Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis help to break down and analyze how this film uses a satirical five step program gay conversion camp to critique heteronormativity.

Interpellation is a term coined by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser and defined in *Practices of Looking* as “(...) the process by which ideological systems call out to or “hail” social subjects and tell them their place in the system.” (438) This idea of interpellation relies heavily on *ideology* and the idea that we are all living out what we believe to be our own role in a society. Whether it is conscious or unconscious, because of ideology we believe many values in our lives are natural and intrinsic to everyday life. This theory is utilized throughout the film.

Interpellation can be used to break down one of the first scenes of the film as seen in the trailer- the “intervention”. In this scene, Megan is surrounded by her friends, parents, as well as a representative of True Directions. When Megan’s mom tells her what’s going on, that they suspect her of being a lesbian, Megan is thoroughly confused. She doesn’t recognize what behaviors of her’s have made everyone question her sexuality. Her parents give her examples like eating tofu and being a fan of Melissa Etheridge- or as the True Directions representative translates- “in diet, look for a switch to vegetarianism” (08:46) and “gay iconography”. (09:02)

When thinking about the theory of interpellation, we can see its different effect between the characters surrounding Megan, and herself. Her friends and family have, as a result of interpellation, become worried that because Megan is presenting behaviors they associate with homosexuality, there is cause for concern and it must be unlearned. From the perspective of Megan, her role as a cheerleader and being in a heterosexual relationship means that she is exempt from any associations to lesbians. It’s almost as if Megan has one idea of what it means to be gay or straight, while her friends and parents have developed another.

True Directions follows a program in order to unlearn “homosexual tendencies”. In the exercises within the five step program, the film relies on behaviors that are often associated with lifestyles that are normal, healthy, and most importantly, heterosexual, to make its critique. The five steps are as follows: “Step one: Admitting you’re a homosexual. Step two: Rediscovering your gender identity. Step three: Family therapy. Step four: Demystify the opposite sex. Step five: Simulated sexual experience”. In step one, when Megan is questioned about whether or not she has “unnatural thoughts” about women (12:14), she responds by simply saying “I don’t think it’s unnatural”. (12:17) Again, highlighting the disconnect between what ideology has interpellated the program director, and Megan. In the second step, the girls practice cleaning the home and giving each other makeovers, while the boys practice working on the mechanics of a car and chopping wood. The foundation of the program is dependent on what actions and behaviors a heteronormative ideology has told us are our roles in a society and what should be natural to all of us. In other words, the program is relying on what this ideology interpellates a society at varying levels of consciousness.

Roland Barthes argues that when we don’t challenge the relationship between punctum and studium or denoted and connoted (the face value of something and the cultural significance), we create a myth. A theory like this is put on display and utilized by the film to form its critique. *Practices of Looking* defines *myth* as “the hidden set of rules, codes, and conventions through which meanings, which are in reality specific to certain groups, are rendered universal and given for a whole society”. (442) The function of a myth is to portray the connotative as the denotative, to make the meaning specific to one culture, appear as the natural reality to all.

The basis of True Directions is one rooted in what fits this definition of myth. The kids being sent to True Directions are there to “heal” and unlearn their “unnatural” “tendencies”, which puts the conversion camp in a position to deem which behaviors, values, relationships, etc. are acceptable and natural. Since this function of the camp then fits Barthes’ definition of a *myth*, what imagery and language True Directions uses can then be looked at in the context of the denoted and connoted.

There is an emphasis on blue and pink to enforce the environment of True Directions, one that is focused on exaggerating gender binaries to a point of ridiculousness. The kids at the camp are forced to wear hospital gowns until acknowledging their queer identity, after which they are given a pink or blue school uniform based on their sex. The girls sleep in a room that is entirely pink and all of the sets in which they practice their activities in “rediscovering your gender identity” are covered completely in a hot or baby pink color. These overstated patterns make it so that any deviation from these rules and categories stand out as unnatural and not in order.

The language that is used by True Directions and often in the discourse surrounding queer people and conversion therapy are terms like “(un)natural” and “(in)appropriate”. Some examples in the film are when Megan denounces her fantasies about women as being “unnatural”, when her parents refer to her identity as an “unhealthy lifestyle” (54:03), and when heterosexual relations are described as what “God intended”. (1:09:50) Assigning language like this to ideas and images of queerness work to substitute this ideology’s value of heteronormativity (their connotative) to become the denotative idea of what role a “man” or “woman” is supposed to play.

These modes of replacing the denotative with a heteronormative ideology’s connotative understanding of roles and identities based on sex, make up the way that True Directions works to create this myth that the film is ultimately critiquing.

Works Cited

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