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Love Simon as a Modern, Gay Coming-of-Age Narrative: A New Point of Contention and Engagement for Queer and Popular Culture

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The 2018 film *Love, Simon* has been acknowledged as the “the first gay teen movie from a major studio,” ushering in a new era of representation in cinematic coming-of-age storytelling, especially when compared to more fringe, independent representations of same-sex attraction (Gilbey). The film, based off of Becky Albertalli’s novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, has garnered widespread praise from critics and audiences alike. Many have looped the film into traditional coming-of-age stories such as those of John Hughes while recognizing its progressive message and unique cultural status. Yet the film is also not without its detractors, who claim the film fails to either adequately or holistically represent the gay community. Despite these objections, the film has inspired various forms of fan engagement such as free screenings hosted by celebrities or audience members sharing their own personal stories of coming out. Many of these instances of fan engagement are inspired by and can be traced to the *Love, Simon* narrative. While *Love Simon* is certainly not the first gay coming-of-age story to succeed on screen, the scale of its distribution and its juxtaposition against the conventions of its genre have inspired a unique fan culture which, though not completely in consensus, has utilized distinct behaviors and means of engagement to endow the film with a clear cultural value—not only within the larger *Simon* metaverse, but within cinematic history as well.

Love, Simon places a homosexual relationship within romantic comedy conventions which have traditionally been oriented around heterosexual couples. Despite advancements in the 21st Century with regard to portrayals and representations of LGBT youth, “the vast majority of queer youth films remained relatively marginalized within the independent market” (Shary). *Love*



Simon, armed with a \$17 million budget and an impressive cast, represented a more mainstream venture into LGBTQ cinematic representation backed by a major Hollywood studio (Gustines). In previous years, gay viewing pleasure, faced with an overwhelming mass of heterosexual film narratives on screen, has been derived from using “the heterosexual society’s images and messages offered on screen to suit their own viewing purposes” (Hart). This tendency has led to a gay fan culture which involves theorizing and speculating upon the sexuality of heterosexual males in mainstream films—a form of “nonheterocentric decoding” of the film in question (Ibid, 31). *Love, Simon*’s approach reverses this dynamic. While gay men would previously have to search for “hints of ‘queerness’” within mainstream heterosexual films, *Love, Simon* instead first presents a gay main character whose sexuality is immediately revealed to the audience and then integrates his narrative into the fabric of mainstream coming-of-age movies (Ibid, 22). The introduction of a gay male character on such a broad scale therefore contains implications for the ways in which audiences will decode the film—or, even, whether audiences need to do any decoding at all.

Because *Love, Simon* clearly identifies its character as a gay man, homosexual decoding by fans focused on the sexual orientation of the protagonist may not be entirely necessary, resulting in less overall interpretive work for the audience to perform. It is, however, worth noting that fan theories that Simon was bisexual instead of gay became sufficiently prevalent to motivate *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* author Becky Albertalli to shut these theories down via Twitter (@beckyalbertalli). As these theories were apparently started by individuals who wanted to see



Simon dating his female best friend Leah, Albertalli was joined by gay fans who felt motivated enough to stake their claim to Simon as a member of the definitively gay community (@apologizing) (@abtrct). This is, perhaps, one of the groundbreaking elements of *Love, Simon*: gay viewers do not have to engage in homosexual decoding in order to find a character with whom they may identify. Simon's sexuality has been clear since the film's trailers were released and is reaffirmed in the first few minutes of the film. *Love, Simon*'s plot instead lends itself instead to the questioning of surrounding characters' sexualities, almost playing with the historical notion of decoding a male's sexual identity. After Simon meets an anonymous online classmate "Blue" who also identifies as gay, he begins to search for clues to Blue's identity in his surrounding classmates. As he does, the film invites the audience to speculate alongside Simon as to which classmate is his online love interest, teasing viewers with imagined images of each prospective "Blue" typing his emails to Simon. This narrative slightly parallels the ways in which gay men in previous years searched for hints of a gay identity in the characters of films—yet in Simon's case, the search for clues is focused less on distinctly gay characteristics and more on hints derived from the emails about Blue's identity—his love of Oreos, for example, or his plans for winter break.

While *Love, Simon* may not provide many opportunities for fan decoding, the film nonetheless appears to make efforts to introduce communication between the film and its fans. *Love, Simon*, while mostly adhering to the plot of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, contains cinematic and narrative elements which seem to speak to the fanbase, addressing both queer and heterosexual audiences in different ways. In the first words spoken in the film, Simon says "I'm

just like you,” and this statement represents a moment of interpellation: Simon speaks directly to the audience, imploring viewers of all demographics to understand that his love story deserves its rightful place within the canon of youth coming-of-age films and youth romantic comedies. In this way, Simon may be claiming symbolic status as the first gay main character in a mainstream coming-of-age movie, one who is just as important as previous stars of heterosexual coming-of-age romantic comedies. There may also be a duality to his claim: while Simon is claiming his status as a modern coming-of-age icon deserving the same recognition as previous iterations, he may also be claiming his ability to embody specifically the stories of queer individuals in the audience who, like him, may not embody the typical heterosexual identity. Simon positions himself as a figure capable of relating to these individuals and understanding their experiences.



The character of Simon may, therefore, simultaneously embody and transcend coming-of-age traditions. He claims a common identity with previous incarnations of this character trope while

also existing as a step toward a more inclusive portrayal of youth on screen. Near the end of the film, Simon writes an open letter to his classmates in which he gets to tell his story on his own terms. By this point, the “you” addressed in the film’s opening line has morphed into a direct address to Blue, the object of Simon’s online affections, yet the language remains vague enough to speak to a wider audience. When Simon closes the letter by stating that “you deserve a great love story too,” his message constitutes a statement which could be repackaged and delivered to any of the film’s viewers in the audience. The line is remarkably self-referential as well: a character stating that everyone deserves a great love story, within a film which itself is aiming to prove the very same thing.

Simon’s act of hailing viewers within the film’s narrative was supplemented by external,

Marketing for the film capitalized upon the film's theme of correspondence; a central plot point involves Simon's email correspondence with Blue, the anonymous classmate who Simon meets online and who, like Simon at the time, is also gay and closeted. Large billboards erected in cities across America included a salutation to the city, such as *Dear LA* or *Dear Portland*, and the signature *Love, Simon* (Henderson). Between the salutation and the closing lies a message which engages the audience in Simon's process of coming out; for example, Chicago's billboard ponders "Which way to Boystown? Asking for a friend," while San Francisco's declared "I'm straight like Lombard Street," the iconic curved street within the heart of the city (Ibid). Billboards such as these found a way to loop audience members into Simon's story before they had even seen the film. Yet it was not simply Simon's coming out process within the film's narrative that formed the foundation for this marketing but also the coming out of the film itself, claiming its place as the first mainstream gay coming-of-age movie.

Simon's actions of reaching out to his audience has generated responses among the film's fanbase. Among queer audiences, viewers have either accepted or rejected Simon's attempt to represent their stories. In one instance, *Vulture* hosted a debate between two queer viewers, one of



whom related to Simon's story and another who found it incapable of being truly representative. Bowen Yang, one of the viewers in question, found the film's main character too bland to be relatable, noting that the film was

"aggressively banal," there were "no contours to Simon's queerness," and comparisons to John Hughes films were misguided (Yang). Yang also struggled with a Simon who, while himself being conventionally attractive and masculine,

appears to deny “fats,” “femmes,” and “well-groomed black twink” (Ibid). Matt Rogers, Yang’s complement, found the film’s partially generic plot “wonderfully basic,” noting in a comparison to queer film *Call Me By Your Name* that Simon

does not “fuck peaches and [he] certainly [has] never been to Italy” (Ibid). Rogers appreciated the film’s simplicity in allowing him to finally imagine himself “kissing the cute boy on top of the Ferris wheel” (Ibid). For some fans,



Simon represents a long-overdue opportunity for personal relation and imagination; for others, his character lacks the diverse features and openness to all members of the queer community that would make him truly compelling and representative. The possibilities for homosexual decoding present within *Love, Simon* may therefore lie not in determining characters’ sexual orientation but instead in determining characters’ places within the gay community, as well as their ability—or inability—to successfully embody this particular community. The fact that this debate is able to occur at all—that queer fans are in a position in which they can identify with or reject a character who has been introduced on such a broad scale—represents its own form of groundbreaking advancement for the genre.

Overall, however, Simon’s debut as an icon of mainstream gay cinematic representation was generally well-received by audiences and critics alike, many of whom instantly sought to define the film’s place both within and against the conventions of the coming-of-age genre. A central component of this effort has involved connecting *Love, Simon* to the legacy of this genre, forming connections between the film and its predecessors. *The Hollywood Reporter* identified a common verdict among critics: “like John Hughes, but with progressive social commentary” (Waters).

Many others elaborate on these comparisons within the reviews themselves; a review appearing in USA Today noted that the film's conclusion was "as satisfying an ending as a Judd Nelson fist in the air" (Truitt). This process of identifying *Love, Simon* as a modern gay John Hughes film

functions as a form of cultural legitimation for the

film. Hughes films have come to be credited for

introducing "more sensitive narratives" with

"depictions of youth dealing with the more romantic

aspects of their burgeoning sexuality" when



compared to more sexualized but less meaningful representations of this process (Shary). A

rundown of themes present among John Hughes coming-of-age movies of the 1980s—"alienation

and peer-group identification, bullying, the role of parents and other authority figures, and

romance"—could double as a checklist for all the narrative drivers in *Love, Simon* (Brammer). The

film notably includes a soundtrack constructed in the vein of classic John Hughes films of the

1980s. John Hughes films adhere to the idea that "a well-placed song can evoke memories not only of a film itself but a 'place in time' that resonates emotionally with the listener for years to come"

(Ibid, 25). Jack Antonoff's soundtrack accompanies the movie with similar goals, seeming to brand

each scene with a distinct mood—a sort of emotional stamp to mark the moment's significance.

Just as fans of *The Breakfast Club* recall Judd Nelson's raised fist as "Don't You (Forget About

Me)" plays in the background, viewers of *Love, Simon* might call to mind Simon picking up his

new boyfriend and driving into the city as the Bleachers song "Wild Heart" signals the film's

conclusion.

While the team behind *Love, Simon* seemed to lean into comparisons to Hughes' films

and other coming-of-age movies in certain settings, conscious efforts were made to emphasize

Love Simon as a cultural innovation in its own right, one which is introducing its own traditions. Marketing for the film on its social media pages tended not to emphasize the critics' comparisons of Love, Simon to John Hughes films, instead quoting reviews which described the film as "a genuine groundbreaker," "its own kind of revolution," and "your new favorite coming-of-age comedy" ("Love, Simon", Facebook). For a new generation, this narrative of the film as groundbreaking may indeed be true; Love, Simon carries the potential to eventually break away

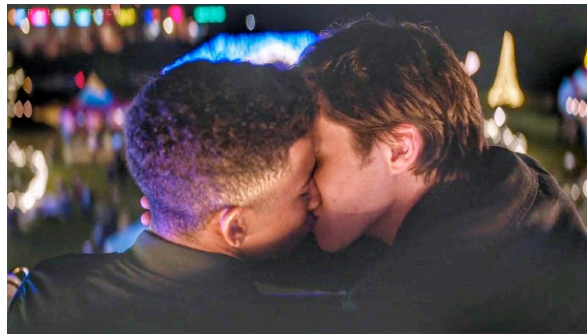


completely from comparisons to John Hughes films.

Beyond debates over Simon's ability to represent the gay community or simply praising the film for being groundbreaking, the film's fans have begun to engage in behaviors that are distinctly rooted in Love, Simon's narrative as opposed to more generic coming-of-age traditions. On Twitter, fans have changed their names to "Love, [Blank]," simultaneously identifying with the film while also claiming their right to their own story equivalent of Simon's (Silman). The name change effectively marks individuals as member of the larger Love, Simon fanbase. In another instance, a dedicated fan took over the email addresses used by Simon and Blue in the film; fans can now email the two addresses and receive a response characteristic of these film characters (Guillaume). For example, an email to Simon's

email, frommywindow1@gmail.com, would receive the response "Why are you emailing me when you could be eating Oreos?", a message which nods to one of the film's plot points and is signed with Simon's online pseudonym: Jacques. This behavior allows fans to participate in the romance between Simon and Blue, albeit on a much smaller scale. Other fans created Twitter accounts based on characters from the novel and film for fans to interact with and follow. While these fan

behaviors and the overall buzz surrounding *Love, Simon* add to the film's cultural significance, the ultimate test of the film depended upon its financial performance at the box office (Gustines). Determined to show support for the film, various celebrities bought out screenings of the film and invited individuals in the surrounding metro areas to attend for free—a trend started by gay actor Matt Bomer. The celebrities hosting these screenings often insisted on the inherent importance of the film, noting that *Love, Simon* deserved to be seen by audiences far and wide (Moniuszko). These screenings provided a unique form of cultural legitimization for the film—an immersion experience paired with the endorsement by a public figure.



In perhaps the most moving instance of fan participation, fans have repurposed *Love, Simon*'s narrative as a means of coming to terms with their own sexuality, hopping on to the narrative of Simon's coming out to the world and using this narrative to come out to their families or friends or to attempt to address conflicts and differences which may be connected to an individual's sexual orientation. Fans who have participated in this particularly unique form of fan behavior have used Twitter to share their stories, as 17-year-old Kai Faith did, noting: "after watching #lovesimon with my dad, i came out to him in the car. i had the courage to come out to my parents bc of this movie" (Faith). Faith signed her letter "Love, Kai" in yet another example of living out Simon's experience coming to terms with sexuality (Ibid). This type of fan behavior and parallel participation in the narrative of the film may even lead one to question whether fans who

live out Simon's experience alongside him in this way have too become authors in the film's expanding metaverse.

In examining *Love, Simon* and its active relationship with its fan community, a consideration of the film's novelistic origins is essential. Becky Albertalli, author of *Love, Simon*'s source text *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, actively encourages fan participation in the metaverse—albeit one with a retained degree of authority over the world she created. Actively engaging with fans on Twitter and Tumblr, Albertalli has established the *Simon* metaverse as one with general rules that nonetheless remains open to participation. In their engagements with media, fans have historically possessed an “assumed disempowered social position,” one which overshadowed fan activities such as fan fiction writing (“Introduction: Why Still Study Fans?”). Albertalli has bucked this trend, endorsing the stories as a legitimate form of participation in the *Simon* metaverse and encourage readers and viewers to follow the fan-run Twitter accounts pretending to be characters from the novel (Albertalli). Albertalli encourages the existence of a metaverse itself around *Love, Simon* in general, empowering the fan base to continue to engage with the source text and the world that it has spawned. In doing so, Albertalli has endorsed a world which lives up to the film's tagline: “everyone deserves a great love story”—including you (Berlanti).

Marking a departure both from previous gay film narratives as well as the dominant heteronormativity of coming-of-age films, *Love, Simon*'s debut brought with it the potential for the gay community to debate its merits as a representational work as well as for the larger moviegoing population to recognize a new moment for youth narratives in film. In part due to the endorsement of the source material's creator, fans engaged in behaviors which extended

beyond simple debate and appreciation of the film and marked *Love, Simon* as its own distinct moment in popular culture. While critics discussed the film's connection to the John Hughes filmmaking style and other coming-of-age traditions, fans introduced behaviors which mostly ignored comparisons to the coming-of-age legacy and tended to recognize the film in its own right as a distinct advancement for representation in cinema.

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