



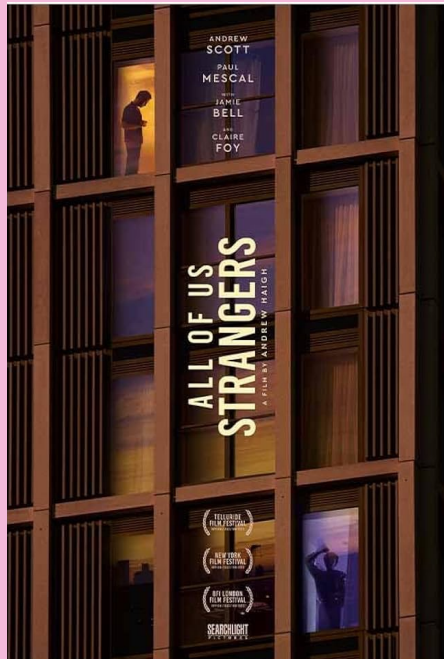
(All of Us Strangers 2023)

One night during the Easter Break of 2024, after a terribly trying long week at work I decided to finally get into bed and watch one of the films I had been waiting to find time to indulge in. This night I decided to watch *All of Us Strangers* (Haigh, 2023). Being an avid fan of Andrew Scott and after seeing Paul Mescal and his short shorts around social media for the past few months, I felt the film had been following me for a while. Since December of the

following year, I had seen the serene and moody poster with its purple, pink and blue hues and had been telling myself 'I must watch that when I get the chance'. So, tonight was the night.

By the halfway through, I was breaking. By the end, I was in fragments, tears streaming, trying to catch my breath under my sobs. I remain to this day (at the writing of this article) affected by what I saw. Never before had a film made me lose my cool in such a way. It may have been due to the vulnerable state the work week had left me; I can only assume I was an easy target. Three days later I was still considering what I had seen, unwrapping possibilities to why I felt the way I did. After a week's contemplation, I was back at the computer screen, watching each scene. This time prepared for what I would experience. Much less distressed I realised the connection I had with each of the characters. Two men play two different experiences of life, but both individual storylines spoke of my own one experience.

The following article is the result of the watching of *All of Us Strangers* (2023). The conversation aims to bring to light (and continue) the exposure of gay men, as they move through the liminal spaces of their gay experience. Isolating Haigh's story-telling, I aim to identify a moment, when at a certain point in their life, gay men becomes less visible. Methodologically I will use past discussions of Richard Dyer (2001, 2002) on the lonely young boy, and other works on representation and stereotypes from the established theorist. The discussion of representation and stereotype of the gay man within cinema is fundamental. Dyer's work holds incredible weight still within the field.



(All of Us Strangers 2023)

## Definition:

'*Dressing the Invisible Gay Man*, asks the reader/audience to consider the dressing of such a man, as to consider the existence of such a man. A Spector within gay culture. Additionally, 'dressing' within this context is linked to the involvement of removing clothes [...]' (Minchell, 2024)

*Dressing the Invisible Gay Man*, asks the reader/audience to consider the dressing as the existence of such a man. A formal Spector within gay culture. Additionally, 'dressing' within this context is linked to the involvement of removing clothes [...]' (Minchell, 2024). As the complexities of gay culture move in ebbs and flows throughout a gay man life, the struggle to find a place within such an aesthetically stimulated culture is difficult. For the first time, the invisible gay man is seen. And to dress him, we must undress him.

‘The representation of women and other oppressed groups was, and by and large still is, a relentless parade of insults.’

(Dyer,2002:1)

Whilst it is clear that queer film and the gay man within film is seemingly moving in a successful direction out of the derogatory ways gay men have been shown, the Dyer quote shown above is still relevant. Ultimately, when one analyses, deconstructs and rebuilds film through their own analytical intensions, one can be found to be slightly pissed off.



(Maurice, 1987)

'We are accustomed to thinking of them (stereotypes) as simple, repetitive, boring and prejudice group images [...].' (Dyer, 2001:116)

In *The Culture of Queers* (2001), Dyer derives that it is through the repetitive nature of film and television that 'We are accustomed to thinking of them (stereotypes) as simple, repetitive, boring and prejudice group images [...]' (116). The mistake gay culture has made (though through no fault of their own) is the value that is given to such stereotypes and ideological beliefs demonstrated by Hollywood cinema. 'We mistake their simplicity for formal means [...] an evident ideological purpose [...] for simplicity of connotation and actual ideological effect. [...]. On the 'sad young man', Dyer shows interest in 'the way it's stereotype can be complex, varied, intense and contradictory, an image of otherness in which it is still possible to find oneself.' (Dyer, 2001:116-117). It is an act of many to discover oneself on the cinema screen. One looks for those who are 'just like them' in order to gain or create value to their existence.



(Cruising, 1980)

'Gayness was drenched in darkness - dark rooms, dark bars, dark alleys, and dark endings as the lingering shame required sacrifices.'  
(Goltz: 2010, 20)

In previous realities of gay male images shown within cinema gay male as 'villainous, blood-thirsty monsters or fashion savvy cosmopolitan leading men' states Goltz (2010).

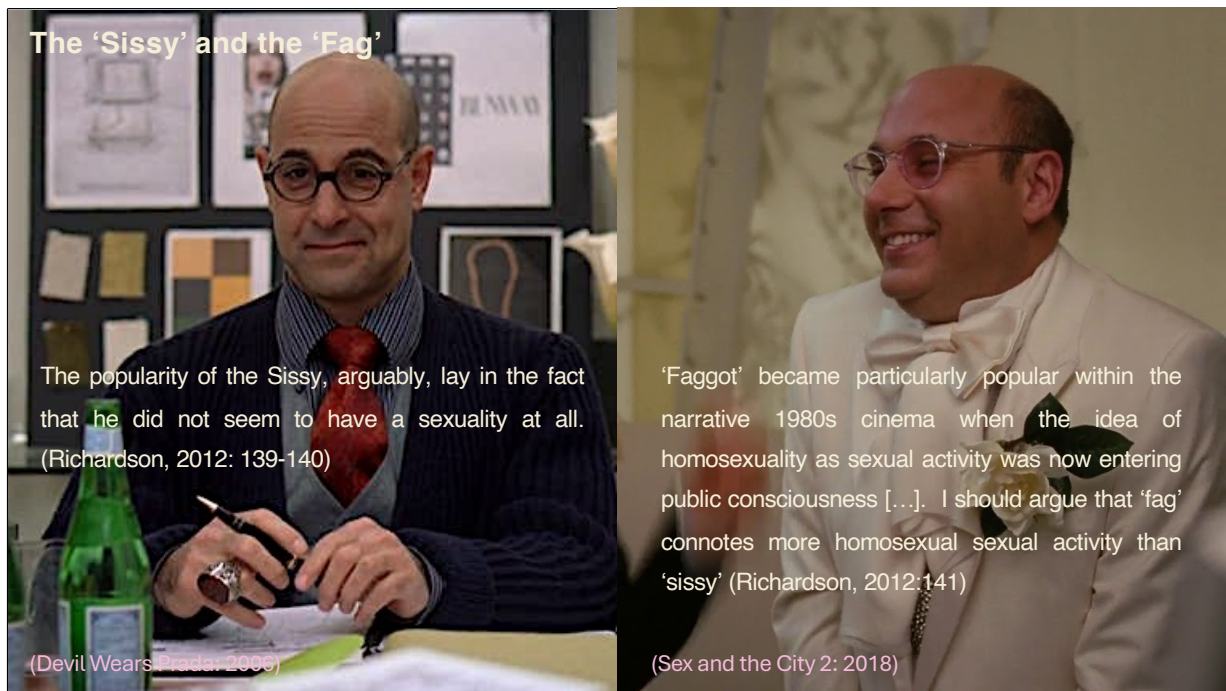
Richard Dyer informs us that 'Cultural forms set the wider terms of limitation and possibility for [...] representation [...], and we have to understand how and [...] why such-and-such gets (re)presented in the way it does [...]' (Dyer, 2002:2). Representations in film 'restrict and shape what can be said by and/or about any aspect of reality in a given place in a given society at a given time' (Dyer, 2002:2).

It is within film and display of stereotype and representation of gay men, that the stories of gay men seem to slip through the gaps of reality and the question is raised *what is the reality being shown?* As cinema has shown 'Gayness was drenched in darkness – dark rooms, dark bars, dark alleys, and dark endings as the lingering shame required sacrifices' (Goltz, 2010:20).

Without these representations told through cinema, there would be little stories to tell. Therefore, 'what is re-presented in representation is not reality itself but

other representations' (Dyer, 2002:2), the gay male's reality is bound to be represented through film, and as a result, one makes meaning through those images. In the case of this discussion, without film, the invisible gay man's reality fails to exist at all.





Queer/Gay cinema has succeeded in featuring small 'styles' of gay men for audiences who those who search for identity and familiarity. However, there are some stereotypes that one may find themselves rejecting, for example the 'sissy' and the 'fag' analysed in-depth in Nial Richardson's; *Fashionable 'fags' and stylish 'sissies': The representation of Stanford in Sex and the City and Nigel in The Devil Wears Prada* (2012). If the 'centrality of the (gay) stereotype is most marked in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, (Dyer:2001), Richardson's study of the 'sissy' and the 'fag' is

proof that representation of gay men is still yet to evolve. Since the writing of said article, the landscape of gay cinema has changed, and indeed more gay men are seen in cinema (whether overtly or subliminally), however the modern 'sissy' and 'fag' continue to be present. I believe, these representations are some that many gay men are easily aligned with, easily devote their identity to, but in the case of the *invisible gay men*, the 'sissy' and the 'fag' are rejected.

The earliest representations [...] on the cinematic screen with gender-transitive (or, would now term, effeminate) characters, often dropped into the narrative to provide a moment of comic relief' (Richardson, 2012:139). Gay men traits within cinema can also include but are not limited to: *adviser/conscience, gay best friend, innocent virgin, promiscuous individual and villain*. In the last 30 years gay men have even played the part of the 'desired' as seen in the 1998 film *Object of my Affection* (Hytner), where Jennifer Aniston falls in love with her gay best friend played by Paul Rudd.

Richardson's exploration and analysis of the 'sissy' and the 'fag' within cinema brings to light the difference between the two. The 'sissy' being desexualise, the comedic relief who poses no threat

of sexual desire or prowess to the female antagonist. In fact 'The popularity of the Sissy, arguably, lay in the fact that he did not seem to have a sexuality at all'(Richardson, 2012: 139-140) therefore remaining non-threatening to the heterosexual male audience. The 'fag' according to Richardson continues the feminine traits of the 'sissy' as the words themselves remain connected in their derogatory terms within homophobia.

The 'Faggot' became particularly popular within the narrative 1980s cinema when the idea of homosexuality as sexual activity was now entering public consciousness. In this respect, [...] 'fag' connotes more homosexual sexual activity than 'sissy' (Richardson, 2012:141).



### The Sad Young Man

The '[...]' sad young man is especially strongly marked in terms of transition, not only by virtue of age but also by virtue of the notion of moving between normal and queer worlds, always quote at the moment of exploration and discovery' (131)

One should emphasise a sense of caution when addressing stereotypes when they address both individuals or social groups. 'The need for stereotypes to represent social groups as if they're fixed should not be taken to mean that they are always images of stasis. Many stereotypes do indeed assert a static, unchanging, settled nature of the designated group [...]' (Dyer, 2001:131).

When there is a sense of 'need to exist', there is opportunity for individuals to take what and who they see on screen as gospel. Stereotypes change

due to the human state being transient (2001) Dyer further specifies that the 'Sad young man is especially strongly marked in terms of transition, not only by virtue of age but also by virtue of the notion of moving between normal and queer worlds, always at the moment of exploration and discovery' (131).

The 'sad young man' can be found in modern films such as Xavier Dolan's *I Killed My Mother* (2009), *Heartbeats* (2010), *Tom at the Farm* (2013). More audiences would recognise such types of young man in Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2016). And indeed, in this film the young boy walks the line between two worlds. Based on his conflict between sexualities.



As with such television series as Will and Grace, Gay men in film (if there is more than one), tend to play a balance between one another. In films such as The Birdcage, we see the more effeminate character met by the more 'butch' or masculine individual.

This balance is seen again in the films mentioned previously...



In Heartbeats 2010  
Where the relationship is between two friends.



Tom at the farm (2013)

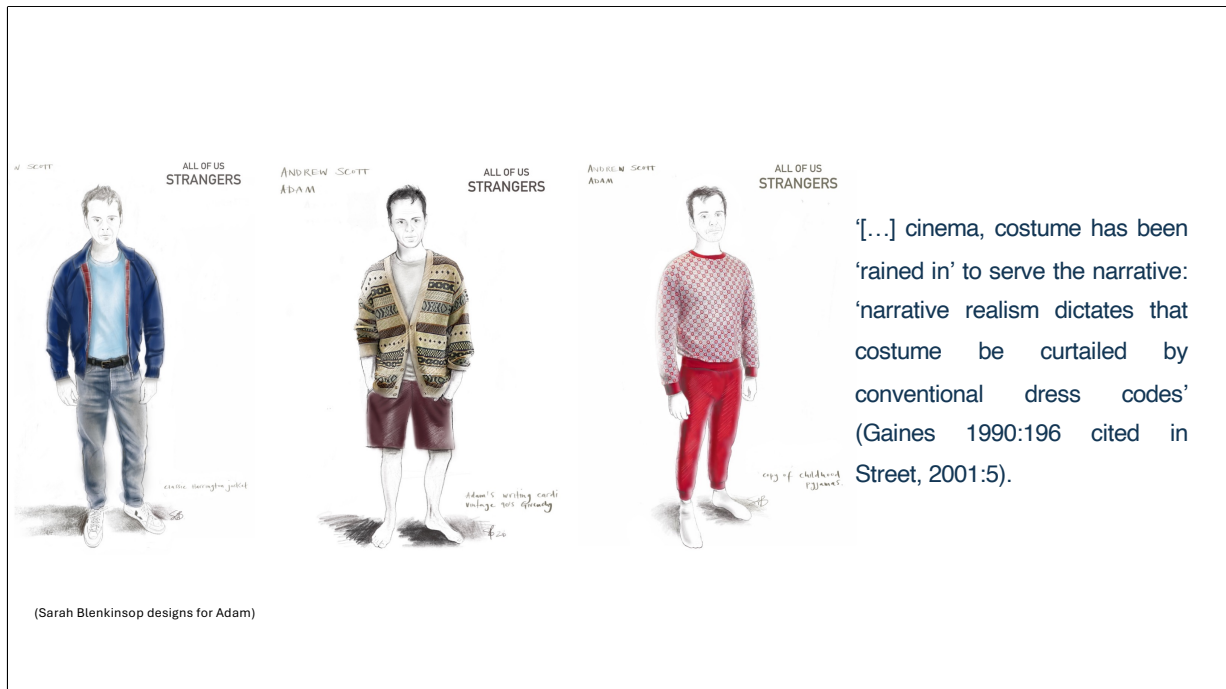
Where the relationship is between an 'obviously gay' man signified by the blonde hair compared to the 'straight' farmer.





Even more recently Freeman and Choon's 2023 *Femme* portrays the violence between the Feminine and the Masculine performing males. One character that aims to be invisible and the one that aims to perform as their sexuality is part of the gender performance.

In this case, it is the difference between two worlds, however, the one that passes, is the character that wears the clothes of the 'invisible' is indeed plays the role of the sad young man.



All of us strangers is a ghost story, love story and ‘time flipped coming-of –age narrative’ (Needham, 2023)

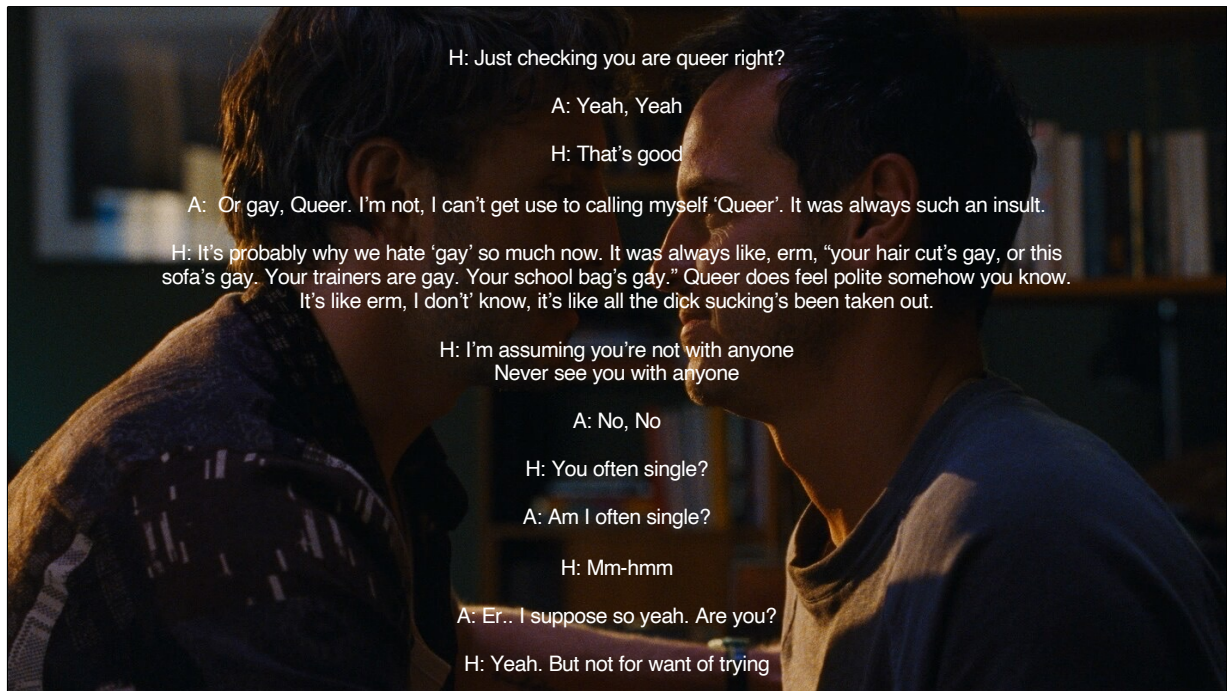
Here it is important to establish that through costume, the connection between the sad young man and the invisible gay man exists by connecting them to the inbetween worlds that Dyer speaks of, these worlds are the present and the past as well as the reality and the spectral world.

[...] film costuming frequently operates as a ‘system’ governed by complex influences that relate to notions of realism, performance, gender, status

and power' says Sarah Street in *Costume and Cinema Dress Codes in Popular Film* (Street, 2001:2). In the case of Andrew Haigh's films, the aim of the costume is to dress the 'invisible'. Clothing that helps to dress the characters in a way that reflects the realism or normality of life. Costume within *All of Us Strangers* sees small whispers of nostalgia that simmer in the longing for Adam to return to the 80s and establish him in the past and as someone who has missed out on life as such. Whilst Harry tends to dress in modern clothing styles (without a specific era attached to them) (Denim jackets, Jumpers, Baggy Jeans, and Dirty Trainers) that reflect the styles of the time of filming.



However, the clothes that are overtly 80s such as the jumper worn in the 'coming out' scene or the pjamas in the 'family bed scene', confirm the realisation that Adam does not belong in the place that he is, he is no longer a sad young man, instead he is an older man in dated sad young man clothing, shown in the image above. This extends the ideas of Dyer and the sad young man that exists between two worlds, here... we see this literally as Adam exists in the real world and the past at the same time.



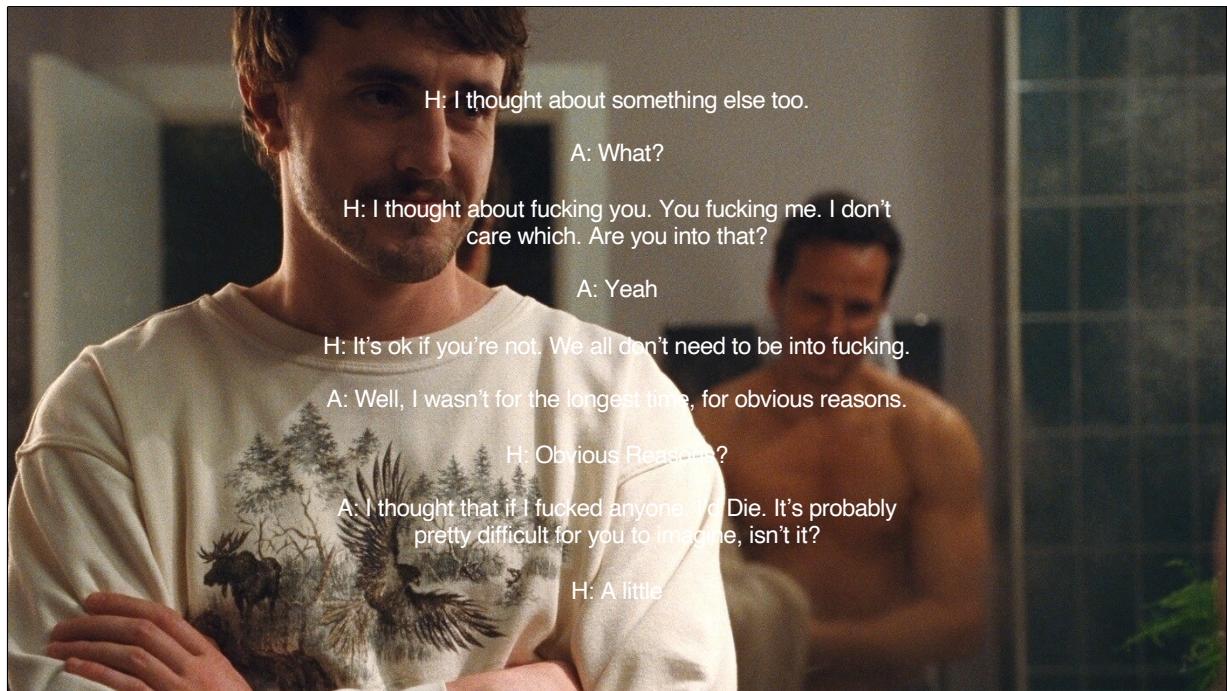
In the scenes mentioned from here, we see the sad young man and the invisible gay man in two places at once, and reflect the battle of identity that the onvisible gay man as experienced and what the sad young boy will ultimate experience.

The script mentioned above is associated with the moment the two lovers converse for the second time.

Adam's association with the word 'queer' compared to that of Harry's dislike of the word 'gay' is linked to

a more historic use of the term, and manipulation of historic media relations with the community. Queer historically meaning 'strange' like 'gay' links to derogatory or negative associations, now modern ways of using such words are paramount to the evolving positive changes 'queer culture' has made. Arguably still harmful in many ways to personal identities that live within this community. As seen when Adam rejects that word, preferring 'gay' as a statement word, an identity possibly earned.

Whilst Adam continues to emotionally 'open up' Harry takes control of the conversation and of the flirtation showing the boldness and confidence of the youth. Seeing the invisible man. By, directly asking about Adam's relationship status Harry is offering the possibility of sex on a silver platter. As older men have repeatedly been cast as less than desirable, obsessive and even monstrous. Here, we see the importance of intimacy. Something rarely shown, followed by a sex scene as graphic as soft porn, but fitting to the storyline. The older man showing less control within the act but desired by the younger male. The act of Harry licking the sperm from Scott's chest and kissing, is indeed the directors view on bonding and ultimate intimacy. They are connected. They are equals. Something that has previously been explored in less 'overt' ways in Haigh's catalogue; specifically in *Weekend* (2011).



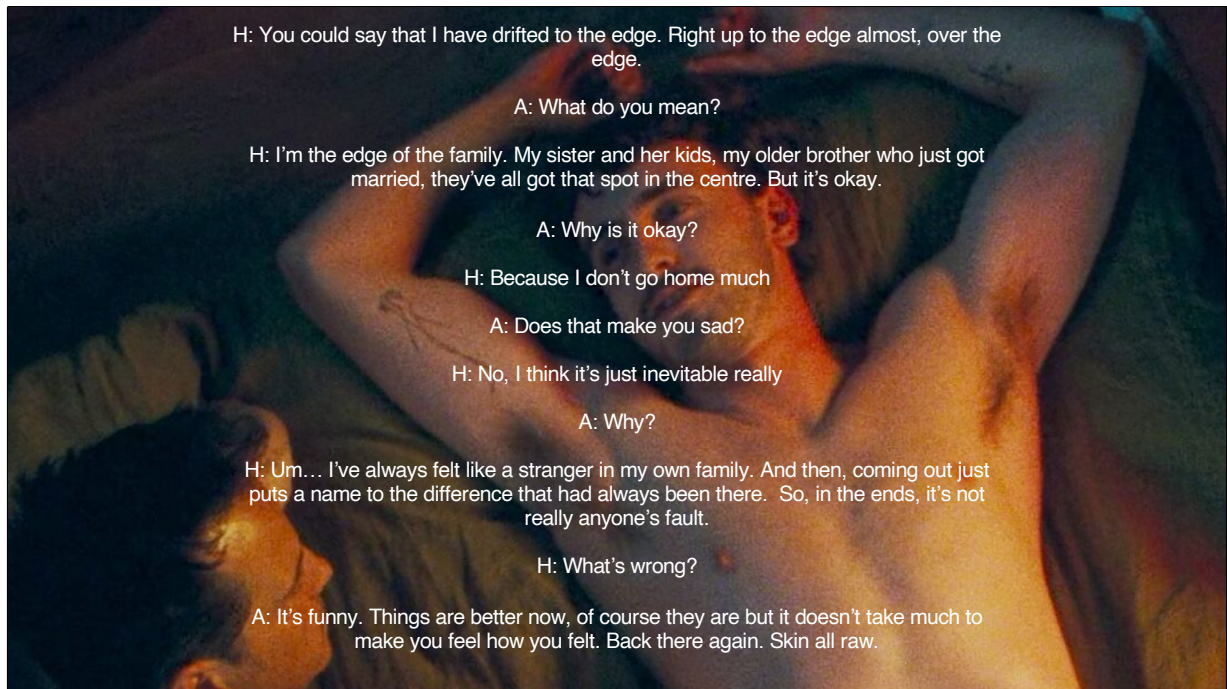
Within this scene, we not only see the beginnings a further sexual connection between our two protagonists, but also the beginnings of sexual liberations and submission as well as education of the history of gay men's relationship with sex and the fear of death from AIDS. An open, honest conversation of how one has gained fear of sex due to the fear of death.

There is an admirable quality to the conversation. Lead by Harry as he confesses "I thought about fuckin you". There is an honesty between the two.

The young male is openly sexually active and attracted to the older man. Making Adam more sexually attractive to the audience and removing the sense of taboo between older and younger men in sexual relationships.

In this scene it is the vulnerability and fragility of the older man that matters. It is Adam's willingness to submit that evokes the fragility that has previously been seen in death scenes such as *Death in Venice* (Visconti, 1971) or *Philadelphia* (1993). The bathroom scene moves swiftly on to the act of sex between the two men. The older man in the submissive position, under the tutorship of the younger more experienced, sexually positive man.





H: You could say that I have drifted to the edge. Right up to the edge almost, over the edge.

A: What do you mean?

H: I'm the edge of the family. My sister and her kids, my older brother who just got married, they've all got that spot in the centre. But it's okay.

A: Why is it okay?

H: Because I don't go home much

A: Does that make you sad?

H: No, I think it's just inevitable really

A: Why?

H: Um... I've always felt like a stranger in my own family. And then, coming out just puts a name to the difference that had always been there. So, in the ends, it's not really anyone's fault.

H: What's wrong?

A: It's funny. Things are better now, of course they are but it doesn't take much to make you feel how you felt. Back there again. Skin all raw.

As in other Haigh films, the most intimate and confessional scenes feature the naked body. Both *All of us Strangers* and *Weekend* showcase the intimate and awkward activities that follow sex, when both participants are fully naked. Vulnerable, stripped and later as Adam will say 'Skin all raw' (Scott, cited in *All of us Strangers*: 2023). The conversation switches to Harry and his relationship with his family. Clearly demonstrating the films underlying theme of 'queer loneliness' the scene demonstrates the tumultuous relationship gay men (and other queer people) can have with their family,

as the act of acceptance of 'out of the norm' relationships and sexuality is still something for many to be openly 'accepted'.

The emphasis of the 'outsiders' or 'others' experience and existence is abruptly and emotionally shoved into the audience face, though the symbolism of the naked body of Harry and the words that are spoken between the two. Ultimately, there is proof between the two of them that nothing has changed although Adam suggests that 'things have gotten better'. Here, the seeking for acceptance and approval that Adam faces from his mother in a previous scene, is reflected in the seeking of approval Harry speaks of from his parents.



This time, it is Adam who must be bare and honest to Harry. Unlike Harry's discussion on his family, Adam is not naked. Instead of the bed they are seated on the sofa. Adams description of the feeling of a knot within his chest/sternum 'all the time' links to the loss of his parents and the 'other stuff', about 'being gay' is the part of origins of the invisible gay man stereotype.

The recognition of the feeling of the future not being considered relates to theorists such a Dustin Bradley Goltz and their conversation on aging gay

men and the lack of consideration of life beyond youth, due to AIDS. This is the second mention of death and the immortality by the older of the two gentlemen. The constant thought or reminder of death and the lack of fear, and numbing acceptance are similar to previous gay or queer films where death and loss of life are a feature within the story line.

Haigh has acknowledged that growing up in the 80s, one was too young to take part with sexual activities, therefore avoided the AIDS epidemic on a physical level, but experienced the loss in other ways, including the mass media attention to the gay community and ridicule that gay men experienced at the time.

The fear of being gay was bigger than the fear of AIDS. Both meant some form of death. A further confession from Harry switches the experience of the knot the invisible gay man speaks of to the sad young man. By this point, the audience is aware that Harry likes to drink. It is the silence that speaks louder in many of the film's scenes. The silence is the connective energy that speaks between the two men. It is both the fear, the loneliness and the sexual energy.



## Conclusion

The Invisible Gay man it connected directly to the sad young man. All of Us Strangers through costume and mis-en-scen, music and script enable the audience to identify the connection these two stereotypes have, or as I have found, how one becomes the other. The knot never goes, the fear of death remains and therefore, the invisible gay man begins to become a significant part of gay cinema. As a human life is not in stasis Haigh manages to disrupt the static of the well-known stereotypes of the sissy and the fag, the butch and the femme, resulting in another pairing, the sad young boy and the invisible gay man. Here there is no taboo, just skin, all raw.

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