Big Dyke Energy?
Commodification and Queer Female Meaning-Making in the Reception of *Ocean’s 8* (Gary Ross, 2018)

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Abstract

In a media landscape that continues to be characterized by heteronormativity, queer female audiences are continuously finding ways to make popular texts their own. Previous scholarship on queer female reception has largely approached queer meaning-making as a text-audience relationship, a perspective which disregards the position of films as commodities surrounded by an extensive promotional network. This thesis investigates the role of commodification in the process of queer meaning-making in popular film through a reception study of the film Ocean’s 8 (Gary Ross, 2018). Using a netnographic method that places social media reception in dialogue with the film and its promotional materials, it challenges the idea that queer meaning is always either embedded in the film text or brought in by the audience “(in)appropriating” the text. Rather, the film and its promotional context create an ambiguity that allows queer readings to flow freely, and actively interacts with a pre-existing Cate Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy amongst audiences to steer those readings in particular directions. Queer female meaning-making, then, is far from a one-directional action, but rather a complex and constant renegotiation of queerness between commercial actors and audiences alike.

Keywords
Ocean’s 8, Commodification, Queer Female Reception, Epiphenomena, Popular Film, Commodity Lesbianism, Cate Blanchett
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“and god said, ‘let's give the gays everything they want,’ and there was Ocean's Eight (2018) dir. Gary Ross - genesis 1:3”

- pia (studioeight)
Introduction

Venture into any queer female space online, and you are bound to come across the phrase “big dyke energy” sooner rather than later. Originally coined as a queer alternative to an internet meme through which the phrase “big dick energy” came to be synonymous with possessing great confidence, “big dyke energy” combines this confidence with queer cultural elements into a distinctly lesbian reference. Although, as with any internet meme, an exact definition is hard to pin down, “big dyke energy” has been discussed as meaning roughly to be “confrontational and confident,” or as containing a “mysterious, sensual appeal that is difficult to quantify or articulate.” Perhaps most simply, however, it refers to someone or something that is absolutely, undeniably lesbian – but what it means to be lesbian remains, of course, in the eye of the beholder.

One thing that, according to queer female internet users, certainly possesses this “big dyke energy,” however, is Ocean’s 8 (Gary Ross, 2018). Released around the same time that the term gained popularity, the film – and especially lead actress Cate Blanchett – quickly came to serve as a prime example of the concept. Even though the film features no explicit queer representation, audiences were quick to pick up on the many ways the film could be read as queer regardless. Ranging from wishful thinking that there might be more than just friendship between the two main characters to declarations that “this is a lesbian movie,” the reception of the film quickly became characterized by these queer female discourses, reaching such mainstream visibility that even major media companies such as Netflix and HBO interacted with it.

Although the high visibility of the queer discourse surrounding Ocean’s 8 is somewhat unusual, the actual processes at work resemble those that have characterized the reception of queer female audiences since the earliest days of the cinema. Located within a media industry that typically seeks to erase or contain queer sexualities, queer female audiences have adapted and continue to adapt popular film into something that more closely resembles the lives and dreams of those women viewing the film. As a subject that has received relatively little scholarly attention, however, the exact workings of queer

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1 An internet meme is a piece of content, often of humorous nature, that spreads virally via social media.
female reception (or queer reception in general) remain largely up for debate. To some, media texts simply are queer, whether because of or despite of the producer’s intentions, with their queerness only inaccessible due to heteronormative or homophobic reading strategies. To others, the queerness lies entirely with the audience: as a form of counter-reading, the ability to queer or “lesbianise” a text relies on the individual viewer. Both these sides position the process of queering as something happening outside of, or even undesirable to, the context of the film’s production.

Yet, in a day and age when queer female audiences are increasingly often perceived as profitable, positioning queer readings as a form of resistance fails to account for the vested interest producers have in increasing the size of their audience, even if it involves appealing to audiences they previously did not dare to acknowledge. Considering reception as a result of not just the film text or audience agency, but rather as a complex interaction between the film text, its promotional context, and the audience, this thesis will show that queer meaning-making is rarely a one-directional action, but rather a complex and constant renegotiation of queerness between commercial actors and audiences alike.

Previous Research

The emergence of the word “lesbian” as an identifier for a homosexual woman rather than a person from the Greek island of Lesbos roughly coincides with the early days of cinema. To say that there have been popular film audiences who understood their queer sexuality as significantly shaping their identity since the very beginning, then, hardly seems like a stretch. Despite this, queer female audiences were almost entirely invisible in scholarship until the 90s, and continue to be understudied, often absorbed into categories of either queer or female. Although queer scholarship has become increasingly prominent in the field of film studies since the 1990s, the focus often remains on queer film, the importance of queer representation, especially for non-queer audiences, or on scholarly re-readings of film from a

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8 Clare Whatling, Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Andrea Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film (USA: Penguin Books, 1993).
10 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 485.
11 Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film, 4.
queer perspective.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, as Haslop points out, the highly empirical nature of reception studies and the poststructuralist resistance to empiricism and categorization of queer studies has limited the amount of interaction between queer studies and audience scholars to a handful of studies, nearly all conducted in the 90s.\textsuperscript{15} When scholars do discuss queer female audiences, it is more frequently done in highly theoretical and/or psychoanalytical terms – forcing itself into twists and turns to make the inherent binarism of psychoanalysis work with the almost impossible position of a same gender-attracted spectator – or by focusing on the very tangible practices of fans, who only constitute a small part of the overall queer female audience.\textsuperscript{16} Direct engagement with queer female audiences outside of their fan labour, in the meantime, has received considerably less attention – especially when it concerns their relationship to popular film.

Yet, as Caroline Sheldon already addressed in 1977, queer female audiences often find a great deal of meaning in popular films without queer representation; often even more than in those films that do feature queer female characters.\textsuperscript{17} While popular discussions, often intertwined with a certain degree of activism, generally consider representation an important aspect of queer emancipation, Vito Russo expressed as early as 1987 that representation is film is rarely for homosexual audiences, but rather address themselves to straight audiences in asking the question of “how should ‘we’ (society) react to ‘them’ (me)?”\textsuperscript{18} Andrea Weiss similarly argues that the handful of lesbian images in film were created for straight audiences, “to appeal to male voyeurism about lesbians and to articulate and soothe male sexual anxieties about female autonomy or independence from men.”\textsuperscript{19} In many instances, lesbianism on screen was neutralized by the death or otherwise tragic ending, such as insanity, of the lesbian character, a trope popularly known as ‘dead lesbian syndrome.’\textsuperscript{20} Later representations of lesbianism

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Alexander Doty, \textit{Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon} (Routledge, 2002).
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Teresa de Lauretis, \textit{The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire} (Indiana University Press, 1994); Henry Jenkins, \textit{Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture} (United States: Routledge, 2003); For examples of scholarship on queer female fan labour, see the special issue on queer female fandom by the online journal Transformative Works and Culture: Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng, eds., \textit{Transformative Works and Cultures}, vol. 24, 2017, https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/35.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Vito Russo, \textit{The Celluloid Closet} (United States: Harper & Row, 1987), 325.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Weiss, \textit{Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film}, 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} One of the best known contemporary cases of ‘dead lesbian syndrome,’ a part of a larger trope called ‘bury your gays,’ is the death of the lesbian character Lexa on \textit{The 100} (The CW, 2014 - ). Killed off after a long build-up of sexual tension between two female characters that had attracted a large number of queer female viewers, Lexa’s death led to a major online campaign that brought awareness to the persistence of the trope. An \textit{Autostraddle} survey of queer women in television, published in response to the killing of Lexa, showed that nearly half of all queer female characters were killed eventually, and only 16% of queer female characters were given a happy ending between 1976 and 2016. Similar statistics are currently lacking for Hollywood film, where very few queer female characters make it onto the screen to begin with. For more statistics on ‘dead lesbian syndrome,’ see Heather Hogan, “Autostraddle’s Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV,” \textit{Autostraddle}, March 25, 2016, https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/.
\end{itemize}
resort to what Weiss refers to as the “happen to be gay” type: a character who has a same-gender partner or love interest but appears heterosexual in all other regards, with their sexual identity appearing more like an “individual lifestyle that can be chosen devoid of community, politics or discrimination.”

Although these portrayals are arguably an improvement from the highly homophobic, often pathologized depictions of homosexuality in earlier films when concerning attitudes of straight audiences towards homosexuality, they do not necessarily offer a more meaningful viewing experience for queer audiences.

Although Sheldon, Russo and Weiss were writing in the later decades of the 20th century, most of their observations still apply today, with little to no improvement in the representation of queer experiences in popular film. While lesbian characters occasionally survive until the end of mainstream film today, there are still, exactly like when Vito Russo addressed it in 1987, no queer female heroines in mainstream cinema. And while television has seen an increased – and largely applauded – diversity of portrayals of queer women on television, representation in Hollywood largely continues to serve heterosexual interests.

Yet, the shortage of meaningful portrayals in mainstream cinema has never repelled queer female audiences from consuming popular film, and the cinema remains of great interest to queer female audiences who “are more than capable of translating films and appropriating texts to a receptive context of their own.” Doing so, however, requires interpretive strategies that differ from those of heterosexual audiences.

Often credited as one of the founding texts of queer reception studies, Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer* provides an early insight into the way queer meaning is derived from mass cultural texts, which in his understanding exist of popular film and television texts. Exploring queer authorship from a (theoretical) reception perspective and discussing “queer reception positions” that can be adopted by anyone, regardless of how they identify, Doty argues against the idea that queer readings are merely a result of audiences “reading too much into things.” Rather, they stem from a recognition of “a complex range of queerness” that has been embedded in popular culture. Although he argues that


22 Levina, Fitzgerald, and Waldo, “We’re Here, We’re Queer, We’re on TV: The Effects of Visual Media on Heterosexuals’ Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians.”

23 The recently released *Birds of Prey* (Cathy Yan, 2020) contains a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment confirming that its lead character is bisexual, but further confirmation of protagonists’ sexualities remains absent; Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 293.


queerness in mass culture is not necessarily tied to an inherent queerness in the text, his focus remains primarily on the text and the queerness embedded into it through a variety of queer influences such as queer directors or narrative choices. To Doty, this queerness is not subtextual: rather, he argues discussing queer readings as connotation or subtext is merely a tool to dismiss queer readings, allowing them to be deemed insubstantial, deniable, or otherwise less legitimate than a straight reading. The idea that they are less legitimate only holds up when considering queer readings within heteronormative paradigms, however, and it is therefore necessary to dismantle the “closet of connotation.” As Doty puts it:

I’ve got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually ‘alternative’ ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture. The day someone can establish without a doubt that images and other representations of men and women getting married, with their children, or even having sex, undeniably depict ‘straightness,’ is the day no lesbian or gay has ever been married, had children from heterosexual intercourse, or had sex with someone of the other gender for any reason.

Defining himself as a “scholar-fan,” Doty’s stance is not purely academic but also serves a clear activist purpose. The rejection of the concept of connotation undoubtedly serves the latter, but as a discussion of queer reception unfortunately fails to account for the position which audiences understand themselves – and by extension, their readings – to be in. Regardless of whether the queerness was in popular culture all along, queer audiences generally show an awareness that they are not considered the primary audience of the popular culture they consume. Moreover, popular film texts rarely encourage straight audiences to piece together queer subtext, allowing them to leave the theatre “with their heterosexual assumptions unchallenged.” Meanwhile, queer audiences typically have to actively engage with the text in order to construct a queer reading, ranging from the appropriation of homophobic imagery into something new to an altogether rejection of the narrative’s heteronormative underpinnings. As Clark points out, no matter how much queer viewers try to reject it, the straight reading persists. In this sense, the viewing process for queer viewers is “inevitably more complex, indirect, and selective” than for the heterosexual men that are often discussed as being the mainstream cinema’s intended audience.

28 Ibid., xi.
29 Ibid., xii.
30 Ibid.
31 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 490.
32 Whatling, Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film, 88.
33 Ibid., 19.
34 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 490.
35 Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film, 28.
This understanding does not necessarily contradict Doty’s, but considering queer readings as existing not just separate from the heteronormative paradigm he discusses is necessary in order to understand the way queer audiences engage with popular text to find the queerness he considers to be existing within mass media. For Whatling, this is reason to position queer readings not on equal footing as the straight reading, but rather as counter-readings or “(in)appropriations” of the text. Rather than speaking of queerness as being a part of mass culture, she argues that the power to “lesbianise” a film lies entirely with the individual viewer and that there are “as many lesbian readings of films (and hence lesbian films) as there are lesbians in the audience.” Her interest is primarily with those individual responses, shaped entirely in the private realm of desire. Weiss’ discussion of the queering of texts in Vampires and Violets similarly focuses on “the private responses of a woman’s heart and mind in the darkened theatre,” rather than the way she defines her identity or interacts with others in relation to the film. Yet, film-viewing is rarely such an isolated process, and queer readings often emerge in conversation with contextual elements. In a series of interviews amongst members of a small lesbian community in Canada, almost all respondents acknowledged a collective aspect to their viewing experience, leading to the conclusion that community and friends strongly affect individual viewing experience, “potentially changing the way they read a film or influencing them to see certain films-none of which would be apparent if one only considered the isolated viewer in the absence of a social group or community context.”

Despite this, queer female reception as a communal or collective act, rather than an individual one, has rarely been investigated. When collectivity is studied, the focus is almost entirely on the outcome of queer reception, such as forms of queer fan labour (including fanart and fanfiction), online community building, and the role specific platforms play in creating queer spaces. Research into the very processes through which queer readings come into existence, however, remains limited either to collective readings taking place because of an inherent queerness to the text, or to individual readings that arise as a resistance to the text, “(in)appropriating” what is there. The film’s position as a commodity,

36 Whatling, Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film, 22.
37 Ibid., 5.
38 Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film, 3.
surrounded by a vast promotional network with the goal of selling the film to as large an audience as possible is largely overlooked when considering reception through these text- and/or audience-centric approaches. Yet, in a media landscape where queer female audiences are increasingly visible – and therefore an increasingly viable market for the film product – there remains the question of how inappropriate the process of reading queerly truly is.

Aims

This thesis seeks to re-assess the “(in)appropriateness” or resistant nature of queer readings through a case study of Ocean’s 8. Through a netnographic reception study of Ocean’s 8 structured along the concept of commodification, I will place the film, promotion and reception in dialogue with each other to investigate how queer meaning-making is not an act of either pure reception or producer intent, but rather a complex interaction of interests on the producer and the consumer (audience) side alike.

Through this, this thesis seeks to investigate:

- How an ambiguous promotional identity is created for the film in order to appeal to both queer and non-queer audiences simultaneously, in order to optimize the film’s consumption
- How queer meaning in the film relies on a pre-existing Cate Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy that is activated by a constant interaction with this aspect of Blanchett’s stardom
- How this same interaction is used to keep queer readings “safe,” ultimately preventing them from really threatening the perfect sexual ambiguity of the text

In the upcoming chapter, I will outline the methodology used to tackle the complex contemporary reception space found on social media, followed by the theoretical framework (chapter 3) in which I will discuss the concept of commodification and its relevance in the context of this research. After this, chapter 4 forms the start of a reception-guided analysis. Exploring the way in which the film, its epiphenomena, and reception work together to create an ambiguity around the meaning of friendship, I will argue that the film freely allows for both platonic and romantic interpretations of the relationships between the actresses and their characters to occur. Rather than controlling the extent to which Ocean’s 8 can be read as queer by forcing heterosexual narratives into the story, the text nor its promotional context ever attempt to close the narrative, allowing for – and even playfully engaging with – queer readings to take place. Chapter 5 focuses on how, within this ambiguously queer context, queer readings are steered into controllable directions through the synergy established between lead actress Cate Blanchett and her character Lou. By actively relying on and interacting with a pre-established Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy to embed the film with a certain queerness, queer readings are always contained within the realm of a ‘safe’ or marketable queerness. The final chapter will conclude the results of this thesis and offer some suggestions for further research in relation to the resistance or “(in)appropriateness” of queer female reception.
As a case study of a single film, this thesis primarily provides answers regarding the “(in)appropriateness” of queer readings within the context of *Ocean’s 8*. However, by approaching film reception using a netnographic method and drawing promotional materials into a discussion previously focused on text-audience relations, I offer a new perspective on a form of reception that is too often constructed as inherently resistant. Exposing the role of commodification in this process will contribute to an understanding of the limitations of queer readings in a media landscape in which queer audiences are increasingly often recognized as a viable market segment. Ultimately, I hope to offer a critical reassessment of the idea that queer readings are always counter-readings, and open up for further research regarding the position of queer female reception in the contemporary media landscape(s) overall.
Methodology

In order to explore the role of commodification in queer female meaning-making, I will conduct an online reception study of the film Ocean’s 8. Announced in 2015, the genderswapped reboot/spin-off of Soderbergh’s Ocean’s franchise (2001, 2004, 2007) managed to avoid the misogynist backlash that characterized the Ghostbusters (Paul Feig, 2016) reception, instead generating an unusually visible queer female response that makes it a suitable case study for this thesis. To fully understand the way in which these queer responses were generated, this thesis will place the film, its promotion, and its reception in dialogue with each other. Primarily based on a netnographic method, I will collect audience responses from social media platforms and analyze the film and its promotional materials through the perspective(s) offered by these users. Drawing from a wide range of materials, including promotional materials (posters, trailers, photographs, press releases, interviews and TV appearances by the cast), the film text itself, film reviews, social media discussions of the film, and intermedia discussions surrounding the film’s stars, especially Cate Blanchett, I will map the way in which queer meaning travels from the films and its promotion to the moment it loops back from reception into promotion again. Rather than relying exclusively on my own interpretation of the film and its promotional materials, I will work in the reverse order of the production-reception process, using the film’s reception data to guide the analysis of the film and its promotional materials. Although an analysis of the materials that are not discussed is also necessary and will be conducted, letting the audience speak first helps create a solid empirical grounding that avoids an over-theorization of reception in which the real – rather than theoretical - audience response is forgotten.

Why Ocean’s 8?

The choice to conduct a case study of Ocean’s 8 relates directly to the unusually high visibility of its queer female reception online. Announced in 2016, in the midst of a misogynist backlash against the genderswapped Ghostbusters remake, the film initially seemed to attract a similar controversy regarding its genderswap premise, but ultimately escaped a negative backlash and was embraced by queer female audiences who were quick to adopt it as a part of a “gay culture” instead. Although it is by no means unique for a popular film to inspire queer readings or for discussions thereof to be shared online, the scale at which this happened – especially relative to other forms of reception – was highly unusual. Rather than only occurring in online ‘bubbles’ – either on closed platforms or within social media bubbles shaped by algorithms – as typically happens with marginalized forms of reception online, the queer female response to Ocean’s 8 was substantial enough to surface in the majority of popular reviews.

41 vicky (@THEBLACKWIDOW), “I love that we have all made an agreement that ocean’s 8 is gay culture,” Twitter, December 20, 2017, https://twitter.com/THEBLACKWIDOW/status/943554705590013952.
on film social media website Letterboxd, in articles in (non-queer) pop culture magazines and websites such as Variety Fair and Vulture, and even on the marketing channels of major media platforms, such as HBO.⁴²

That is not to claim this film has a larger queer female reception than other mainstream Hollywood productions, nor is it my intention to make claims about the exact scale of it relative to other forms of reception. Rather, it is the fact that the film’s queer female reception was substantial enough for it to surface beyond queer female bubbles online that makes it such a suitable object of study for this thesis. In a reception landscape shaped by algorithms which typically prioritize ‘popular’ content and content targeted at the specific user, it is easy for content related to marginalized groups to become buried under more generic or dominant content – at least for users not a part of this bubble in the first place. Even with an in-depth investigation as this thesis, this greatly affects how much material can be retrieved, and how much can be concluded from such material in the first place. After all, if it is necessary to dig so deep and so far away from the materials algorithmically determined relevant enough to show to people, it becomes impossible to determine a social media post’s position within a greater context. The high visibility of the queer female reception of Ocean’s 8, then, enables access not just to individual responses, but also their specific position within greater networks that allow us to map the actual development of discourses, leading to a more accurate analysis of the different processes at work. Ocean’s 8 is but one Hollywood production that has been popular amongst queer female audiences, but its position as an extreme in terms of audience visibility makes it a helpful point of entry into a wider queer female discourse present in Hollywood reception.

Gathering of online reception data

The relative scale of Ocean’s 8’s online reception provides more access to the reception relevant to this thesis than films where such forms are buried under other forms of reception, but its online reception is still characterized by the complex and ever-changing nature of the internet. Retrieving relevant data for this thesis, then, demands a method specifically designed for accessing online spaces that are constantly changing and shaped by algorithms designed for interests other than online queer reception research. That is not to say such a method needs to negate or neutralize the nature of the internet, however. In fact, doing so would incorrectly position the internet as having a version of it that is somehow unaffected by algorithms. Instead, this thesis will acknowledge that data on the internet does not exist separate from

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the algorithms; rather, algorithms shape it in such a manner that the only way to understand the circulation of information online is to work with, rather than against, these systems.

In order to do so, this thesis will gather reception data through an adapted version of Braithwaite’s netnographic snowball method.43 This method aims to provide an illustrative account of the most noticeable features of a specific discourse by gathering the most visible – and thus most widely interacted with – materials. For the specific goals of this thesis, these are the responses that are most interesting to observe. Visibility generally relates to popularity: on platforms like Twitter, the amount of interactions with a specific post affects to how high is it ranked in its algorithms and, as a result, the number of users it reaches and the amount of future interactions it can influence from thereon forward. In this sense, it relates directly to commodification: a product needs a market, and in online spaces, the audience is the market.

In order to gather this material, I will use searches for the film’s title on social media platforms Twitter and Tumblr, as well as the film’s page on grass roots film review website Letterboxd, as starting points. After this, I will “snowball” through online spaces by unfolding conversations between users, following links across networks and websites, and tracing the circulation of references and linked materials as far back to the source as possible. This allows me to explore discourses that are “a slippery set of conversations,”44 widely varied in nature and not tied to particular platforms or users but only vaguely connected to each other through their relation to the film Ocean’s 8. Rather than providing an exhaustive account – something made impossible for any research documenting a discursive phenomenon because of the ever-changing nature of the internet – this will provide an illustrative account of the most noticeable features of the queer female discourse(s) surrounding this film.

Since the focus of this film is not necessarily on cinephilia (queer readings by online audiences are rarely included in formal film criticism), the platforms serving as starting point have been selected for the somewhat unprompted nature of their posts, allowing users to talk about a specific film but in manners that are not limited to film criticism. Twitter and Tumblr both serve as social media first and foremost, often prompting users to discuss the film on a more personal level. While Tumblr is of interest due to the wide range of fan content it offers and the popularity it has amongst queer female users,45 Twitter is relevant here for being the exact opposite as a more generic and diverse platform where queer content is constantly taking place in a more mainstream (albeit algorithmically categorized) space. The last platform, Letterboxd, although technically a film review website, encourages viewers to not focus

44 Ibid.
on formal film reviews per se, but rather discuss film, as their FAQ states, “however you like.” In practice this means many of the reviews go beyond the film text, instead focusing on user interpretations, audience experiences, meta-analyses of these experiences, and personal experiences not directly related to the film viewing. These platforms serve as a helpful starting point, not just because of the access to unprompted film responses they offer, but also because they frequently link to external platforms and websites, including those formal reviews and magazines articles that do relate to queer readings, allowing the snowball method to unravel the extensive networks existing within this form of film reception.

The specific designs of these platforms did call for some considerations of how to define their starting point. Letterboxd sorts posts by popularity (determined exclusively by the amounts of likes and comments a post receives) by default, making it easy to retrieve the most visible – here, the most popular – content as per the objective of this method. Twitter and Tumblr, on the other hand, sort either by time of publication or by “most relevant,” a category determined by an algorithm that takes many (unspecified) factors into account, included, but not limited to, time of publication, popularity, and the searcher’s specific profile which includes factors such as their location and browser history. To reduce – although not erase – the influence of these variables, bulk searches for the preliminary data have been conducted from two different countries at two different points in time (Sweden, April-June 2019, and the Netherlands, August 2019) using a clean browser in private mode. The two searches showed little difference, however. More helpful was Twitter’s advanced search function which allowed for searches to be limited by time, allowing for more detailed historic searches to balance out the algorithm’s tendency to prioritize newer content.

“Snowballing” is a continuous method, with threads being followed depending on the demands of the analysis, and results of primary analyses steering the next steps to be taken in uncovering further threads. While starting broadly with searches of the keywords “Ocean’s 8” and “Ocean’s Eight” on all platforms, searches were adjusted based on the demands and results found on each network: for instance, Tumblr users frequently used the hashtag #Loubbie (a portmanteau of the names Lou and Debbie) to refer specifically to the discussions of a romance between the film’s two lead characters, and following this hashtag allowed for a deeper understanding of this specific element of the analysis. In another instance, certain Tweets, such as one by HBO engaging with the queer readings of the film, proved to be a valuable hub of replies by other users and warranted a branching out on their own during the analysis. As a result, quantifying data is difficult, particularly in a platform such as Tumblr, where a single post may have thousands of replies and so-called “reblogs” (a repost of the post on a different Tumblr blog) that are of interest to this thesis. The bulk of social media data that was gathered through an initial search of the keywords “Ocean’s 8” and “Ocean’s Eight” alone and used as a starting point for

the method, however, existed of roughly 400 tweets and tweet-replies, 300 Letterboxd reviews plus comments on reviews, and 85 original Tumblr posts, each with over 5000 interactions (likes, comments, reblogs with or without added text, and comments to reblogs), not all of which were relevant to this thesis. 14 digital magazine articles/reviews and 22 YouTube videos also surfaced through this search. The actual amount of material studied for this thesis, however, was variable and extended well beyond the primary batch of social media posts. Selected examples from the dataset will be used as illustrative of greater trends within this large dataset throughout this thesis.

The film and its promotional materials

As addressed in the start of this chapter, this thesis uses the reception data as a starting point for discussions of the film’s promotional materials. In order to get a clear view of the promotional landscape the film was released into, I aim to be as exhaustive as possible in my search of promotional materials by combining manual searches of, amongst others, websites, trade magazines, video platforms and television appearances following the film’s announcement on October 25, 2015, with the snowball approach of the reception data. As a film primarily promoted through its star cast, materials of interest to this thesis related not only directly to the film, but also to the individual stars (Sandra Bullock, Cate Blanchett, Anne Hathaway, Rihanna, Mindy Kaling, Sarah Paulson, Awkwafina, and Helena Bonham Carter). Aside from Blanchett, whose stardom will be discussed more extensively and has been investigated beyond the production period of the film, star materials of interest were those released from the moment the (majority of the) cast was announced (August 10, 2016) onwards.47

While much of this material can be found through manual digital searches, the snowball reception search provided additional materials that had a great impact on the circulation of queer female discourses but which originally had not perhaps been meant for the global promotion of this film. The film itself was promoted in a rather global manner with little localization in the content it addressed, but audiences frequently brought in materials related to the stars that was more local in nature. Especially in relation to Cate Blanchett, a significant portion of the most widely circulated materials, often interviews connected to her previous films, stemmed from Chinese media and would not have turned up in my own English-language searches. Even though the source of these materials was specific to a certain location, their widespread circulation online (as fragmented clips or GIF sets)48 brought them to a significantly larger audience, impacting the queer meaning-making processes of audiences well beyond

48 GIF is an 8-bit image format used to share animated images. So-called “GIF sets” are especially popular on platforms such as Tumblr, which allows for multiple GIFs to be uploaded into a single post.
their original context. Moreover, the circulation of promotional materials in the reception allowed for elements that had been deleted from their original source to continue to be retrievable, albeit as a copy or in a different form (for example, short clips cut from longer videos), but, as evidenced by the mere existence of these copies, still impactful.

Where the reception data plays the largest role, however, is in the analysis of the promotional materials, where it directly guides the primary analysis of the film’s promotion. That is to say, I will essentially allow the audience to speak first, relying on their interaction with the film and its promotional materials to guide my analysis, rather than analysing the promotion independent from the audience first and then trying to find evidence in the reception data, a process at a high risk of confirmation bias. Discussions held by and statements shared by the audience will thus be tied back to promotional and textual materials in order to trace how the conclusions they drew could grow out of the material presented. In practice, this means that those promotional materials that are frequently referred to in the reception, such as specific television appearances, press photographs or even specific lines spoken by the film’s stars, will feature a more prominent role in this thesis than elements which have largely gone undiscussed, such as the film’s poster. That is not to say those undiscussed elements will not be considered in this thesis, however. The very purpose of being exhaustive in the collection of promotional materials is because the lack of attention given to certain promotional materials by audience is interesting in itself. Rather, a reception-guided analysis of promotional materials allows for an assessment of the weight certain elements play vis-à-vis others in the queer meaning-making process and highlights how, through circulation in reception spaces, even elements that seem minor or even irrelevant in an analysis of the film’s promotion may turn out to play a substantial role in the reception process. The weight given to materials in this thesis, especially highlighted examples, thus corresponds to the size of their role within the reception, rather than assumptions about how important certain promotional materials could theoretically become.

Blanchett’s stardom, which already in the early phases of gathering data turned out to be a major component in shaping the reception of the film, was investigated in a similar way as the film and promotional materials of the film, through a back-to-front approach. Starting with users’ discussions of Blanchett in connection to Ocean’s 8, I traced back many of the connections they made and largely re-constructed the image of Blanchett through star materials these users circulated. Most interesting to this was not just the material they circulated but also the way they interacted with it, and particular attention was paid to how Blanchett’s queer audience constructed a queer persona out of materials designed to appeal to a mainstream audience. Because of Ocean’s 8 viewers’ heavy emphasis on her involvement in Carol (Todd Haynes, 2015), a particular focus was placed on media discussions of her role in that specific film.

Often, the lines between reception and promotion are blurry, and separating some of these materials from the reception incorrectly gives the impression they are separate entities. For instance, a
review is as much a way an assessment of a film as it is a way to promote the film, especially when the reviewer is invited by producers to write a piece before or while the film is in theatres. Additionally, a lot of promotional materials are fragmented online, (re)surfacing in short clips, GIFs or fan edits of the material, turning promotion into reception yet also allowing it to continue its function of bringing in potential new audiences. These blurry lines, if anything, are of interest to this thesis; however, they pose an obstacle in the quantification of data in this section. Very roughly, then, the promotional materials retrieved through the initial search, in addition to the one already retrieved as part of the reception, included 62 magazine articles, 205 videos – both fragmented and whole – from the film’s press tour including (excerpts from) interviews, tv appearances and red carpet appearances, 65 set photos, two posters, two trailers, three tv episodes, and 44 social media posts by the film’s stars.49 In addition, the analysis of Blanchett’s stardom focused on additional promotional and reception materials including 58 further magazine articles, 112 social media posts, the film Carol and 35 (mostly fragmented) videos, including interviews and TV appearances.

Limitations and considerations

As has been evident throughout this chapter, the very nature of the internet provides a range of complications that prevent any study focusing on reception and promotion in the digital era from ever being completely exhaustive. Although data collection for this study started as early as a year after the film’s release, both promotional materials and reception data have undoubtedly been deleted or altered in the process, and the landscape today inevitably looks different from the way it did before and at the time of the film’s release. As such, this study is, and will be regardless of method, necessarily incomplete. At the same time, there is, of course, the question of whether any reception study is ever complete, and whether content disappearing from the web is inherently different from physical sources becoming lost. More than that, however, the internet also offers unique opportunities in the documentation of online reception. Internet users’ general disregard for copyright law, the widespread circulation and re-creation of materials well beyond their original context (both by internet users spreading promotional materials or screenshots of articles, and by journalists including social media posts in their articles) and the overall Wild West nature of the web provides a way to access materials even long after they have been deleted from their original source.

A second concern is the relatively anonymous nature of the social media platforms selected as starting points, making it difficult, if not impossible, to determine which users belong to a specific demographic. Even if users provide some indicators of who they are, such as listing their age or pronouns, it is impossible to determine the truth – if such a thing can even be said to exist – to such

49 Of the cast, only Awkwafina, Mindy Kaling, Rihanna, and Sarah Paulson have significant social media presences, meaning most social media posts was from their profiles.
statements in a study of this scale. Even if this were possible, there would be questions of what it means to engage online as ‘yourself,’ particularly in the context of closeted individuals who may experience life away from online spaces as more of a performance than their persona online. In the context of this thesis, then, the focus is not necessarily on the people behind the profiles, or conclusively determining or even policing who is or is not a queer woman. Rather, the focus is on users, their external performance, and the overall discourse they contribute to. As such, when speaking of queer female reception in the context of this thesis, the focus is not necessarily on members of the audience who identify as queer women, but rather on a greater discourse that relates to queer female cultural elements and experiences, which, ultimately, can be contributed to by anyone who aligns themselves online as being a part of said discourse. The assumption that this discourse is exclusive to queer women is an undesirable one; not only is it easily negated by research such as Hanmer’s dissertation on Xena: Warrior Princess (1995-2001) that shows that some straight women, too, enjoy queer readings of the material, but it also creates a false impression of a homogenous group of queer women who, in an almost essentialist manner, read texts in a specific way. In practice, this focus on discourse rather than members of the audience may mean that an article such as AfterEllen’s “Can We Stop Pretending ‘Ocean’s 8’ Is a Lesbian Movie?” can become strongly criticized and/or dismissed despite being authored by a queer woman on a platform “dedicated to discussions about lesbian/bi women in popular culture,” while the Vulture article “Which Ocean’s 8 Member Has the Most Powerful Lesbian Energy?” becomes widely circulated and almost illustrative of the most dominant parts of the discourse, even though the author is a man and Vulture is not a specifically queer website.

It is not my intention to define “queer women” or “queer female audiences” as being one way or another: this thesis will not gatekeep the identity markers, not suggest that everyone included in the reception aspect of this thesis necessarily identifies as a woman who is queer. Language, in many ways, is limiting, falling short to explain the vastness of data I work with here and/or falling short of capturing the complexities of many queer identities, composed by more than just the gender we are assigned, the gender we feel, our body parts, our states of transition, our relations to others and others’

52 “About,” AfterEllen, n.d., https://afterellen.com/about. the website AfterEllen itself is already an excellent example of how something edited by lesbian/bisexual women, about lesbian/bisexual women can be excluded from certain queer female discourses: although originally a popular lesbian site, it has in recent years seen a strongly criticized shift towards a trans-exclusionary course that has prompted responses that often quite literally declare it ‘un-lesbian,’ such as a tweet from lesbian comedian Rhea Butcher that states the website is “not a lesbian/bisexual website.” Rhea Butcher, “You’re not a lesbian/bisexual website, you are a TERF website,” Twitter, December 6, 2018, https://twitter.com/RheaButcher/status/1070458335827177473.
53 Jung, “Which Ocean’s 8 Member Has the Most Powerful Lesbian Energy? [Ocean’s 8 Is a Lesbian Movie].”
perceptions of us. Add to that the anonymity of the internet, and any categorization becomes near impossible.

Yet, that is also the very nature of this work: these discourses are not contained to the demographic categories we think in, nor can they be described as such. Thus, while some of the users included in this thesis may be women who identify as queer, or lesbian, or bisexual – some may be women who do not identify as such, while some may be queer but not identify as women. the phrase “queer women”, then, is broader than it suggests itself to be on the surface. While one solution would have been to adopt the term “queer” in its widest sense, as authors such as Doty have done, this would ultimately have denied any consideration of the way that societal understandings of gender intersect “to erase the intersections of sexuality with […] the gender histories that still situate queer men and women differently.” Additionally, in discussing audiences as consumers, it would have incorrectly reinforced the myth of a singular queer consumer market, while in reality the consumer behaviour of different groups captured by the “LGBT” acronym are entirely different. Concretely, it would have opened this thesis up for an entire second discourse that was present in response to the film: one that was more in line with notions of gay male culture and camp strategies, focusing not on the sexuality of the characters but on the fashion and the over-the-top Met Gala central to the film, and which was ultimately disconnected from anything that will be discussed throughout this thesis and well beyond the scope of this thesis.

At times, the words “queer,” “queer women,” “gay” and “lesbian” will be used interchangeably for the sake of readability, especially when referencing other authors or citing from the reception data. A lot of the previous literature, often dating from the 90s, speak exclusively of lesbians even when their arguments apply more broadly to women who are attracted to women. Internet users similarly use the terms “gay” and “lesbian” in ways well beyond the most basic understandings of them, often using them as interchangeable with, for instance, “bisexual” unless the specific context requires a clarification. I take no interest in gatekeeping or judging others’ usage of these terms, but rather to document the sometimes fluid definitions of specific labels both in scholarship and in popular usage.

In relation to this, there is the matter of positionality. Online platforms often optimize user experiences based on previously gathered data about the user. As discussed previously, I am choosing to work with the algorithmic nature of social media rather than against it, which means it is necessary to acknowledge my position as an internet user as well as researcher. While steps have been taken to minimize some of the most problematic variables, most notably time of publication, it is inevitable that

54 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, 2011), 17.
the data gathered shows a slight bias in other aspects. Location wise, I performed the same searches from both Sweden and the Netherlands to ensure location did not impact the access to materials too much, and the searches showed no differences that could exclusively be accounted to the change on location (time proved to be the bigger factor). Despite this, I do acknowledge there might be a slight North-Western European bias in the data, and that in discussing a Hollywood film that was not released in major film markets such as China there will ultimately be a Western bias in this discussion of queer meaning-making.

Furthermore, my own position as an internet user has undoubtedly affected the results I could access, and it is likely that another researcher using an identical method would have obtained a slightly different dataset. As a queer internet user myself, I have engaged, albeit passively, in the reception discourse central to this thesis. Although I have not actively contributed to the material I sought to gather, my own algorithmically determined profile - even after trying to minimize the influence by using a separate browser and creating social media accounts specifically for this purpose – is likely to have encouraged social media platforms to prioritize the queer female discourses central to this thesis over other forms of reception. Since I do not seek to compare the queer female reception to other forms of reception, this not a weakness per se. Rather, it helps replicate the experiences of users engaging in this discourse, allowing me, as a researcher, to see not just different posts disconnected from their context, but the very networks they are established in. In addition to this, it positions me simultaneously as an insider and an outsider to this study. An insider, in the sense that I have and continue to navigate queer female reception spaces myself, allowing me to understand the language used, references made, and cultural codes present both in the audience’s relation the text and the discussions that grow out of it. At the same time, with the exception of Letterboxd where my contributions were too insignificant to surface in this study, I was not a Tumblr or Twitter user in the time span this thesis covers (late 2015 – mid 2019) and thus find myself more on the side-lines of the actual reception central to this thesis, with no connections (to my knowledge) between the users whose content was picked up by my method, and myself.

As a final note, this thesis will omit the use of [sic] for the purpose of readability. All reception materials in this thesis are cited as they originally appeared online and misspellings in these posts can be assumed to be present in the originals.
Theoretical Framework

The reception study that is central to this thesis will be structured along the concept of commodification. At its most basic referring to the turning of something into a product, the commodification discussed here will be two-fold. On the one hand, there is the commodification of film and its role on reception, as theorized by Barbara Klinger. On the other hand, following the theoretical work by Danae Clark, there is the commodification of queer female sexuality or specifically lesbianism in order to appeal to queer audiences, a process through which sexual identity is turned into an individual lifestyle choice void of politics and community. After outlining these two theorizations, this chapter will conclude by merging these approaches, and this combination of Klinger’s commodification of film and Clark’s commodity lesbianism will serve as a guiding theoretical framework for this thesis.

The Commodification of Film

As illustrated in a previous research section, scholarly discussions of queer female reception have primarily focused on text-audience relations. Although occasional attention has been paid to the influence of stars, most notably in Weiss’ discussion of queer stars in the studio era, and Whatling’s chapter on Jodie Foster, further intertextual references in- and external to the text have largely gone unmentioned. This approach helps to construct queer meaning as being either inherent to the text or an “(in)appropriated” counter-reading by the audience, but ultimately fails to account for the fact that a film is more than just an isolated piece of art. Moreover, understanding queer readings as being inherently subversive due to their deviation from the text’s ‘primary’ or ‘dominant’ reading underestimates the interest producers might have in not just allowing, but actively encouraging queer readings to take place. It is necessary therefore to consider the film not just as an isolated text, but rather as a commodity existing within a complex promotional network designed to optimize the film’s profit.

As Klinger argues, the role of a film as a commodity significantly shapes a film’s social circulation. The industry designs a “consumable identity” for a film in order to define it as a product, and it is this identity which the viewer encounters when it enters into reception. This identity relates to the film text, but is established through what Heath refers to as “epiphenomena,” or those promotional materials which allow (parts of) a film to exist before the viewer enters the cinema, and long after the

57 Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film, 30–50.
film’s runtime ends.60 To Klinger, these epiphenomena create “not only a commercial life support for the film, but also a socially meaningful network of relations around it which enter into reception.”61 Specific filmic elements are turned into a “premeditated network of advertising and promotion,” designating them with an “inter-textual destiny” within the film’s promotional network. The industry’s goal here is not to create a coherent interpretation of the film, but rather to create multiple points of access into the text in order to maximize the film’s audience.62

Those filmic elements that have been lifted from the narrative are subject to frequent reworking to “[extend] a film into the social sphere as fully as possible.”63 In this sense, the element in the film is never just the element in the narrative, but a “polysemic extension,” subject to extra-signification through promotional networks.64 Within reception, these elements prompt what Klinger calls “digressions,” or brief, guided exits from the film text, causing the viewer to get distracted and momentarily move into the external narratives these elements have been endowed with. As a result, the text is fragmented and composed of other narratives.65 However, as Barker points out, Klinger’s wording implies a loss of focus by the viewer, a contrast with a (hypothetical) audience that is entirely “enthralled” by the text. Barker argues that we should think of epiphenomena as guiding and/or constructing the way in which we watch or read a film in a way that is not necessarily distracted.66 In this sense, the epiphenomena’s relation to the film text is to construct reasons and ways to view the film in the first place and/or how to reflect on the film after watching it.67 Epiphenomena can then be understood as not just guiding the audience away from the text to find information in intertextual connections, and/or disrupting the narrative, but also guiding the viewer into the text, shaping the reading strategies the viewer will employ while watching the film.

This approach blurs a line that Klinger draws in her work. Separating her work from that of scholars who discuss oppositional readings, Klinger argues that her “digressions” are different from, and do not preclude, oppositional reading strategies. However, by understanding her theory of commodification in a manner that does not just create viewer expectations, but also shapes the reading strategies a viewer employs, we can start to explore how even those readings frequently considered oppositional to the film text, such as queer readings, may in fact be prompted, or at least strongly inspired, by the film’s very own epiphenomena.

62 Ibid., 7–10.
63 Ibid., 11.
64 Ibid., 13–14.
65 Ibid., 15.
Commodity Lesbianism

Commodification does not only play a role in the definition of the film as product, but also in the way producers attempt to reach certain market segments – in this case, queer women. As mentioned, commodification does not lead to a single coherent understanding of the film, but rather stimulates a polysemy, speaking to as large (and thus diverse) an audience as possible.\(^6^8\) That is not to say, however, that all audiences are of equal interest or targeted by epiphenomena in quite the same manner. Producers can and do use promotional epiphenomena to influence the relationship between the film and the viewer,\(^6^9\) as well as which viewers are reached in the first place.\(^7^0\) Sometimes, this occurs in a manner that is popularly described as “queerbaiting,” with producers offering “a promise that will never be fulfilled” by suggesting, through strategic editing in trailer(s), previous installments, or statements coming from the producers, that a TV show or film franchise will contain queer representation, “and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility” in the text itself.\(^7^1\) More often, however, it is done more subtly, never even offering a promise but still appealing to queer female audiences by engaging with queer cultural elements in a way that is perceived as meaningful.

This engagement with queer female audiences is a relatively new phenomenon. Although queer audiences have always been present, they have not always been perceived as a viable market segment. As Clark points out, for most of history, queer female audiences especially were deemed unprofitable by producers: their invisibility made them hard to identify as a marketing group, while their relatively low spending power made them uninteresting consumers, and there was a constant fear that appealing to queer consumers in general could potentially repel other, more profitable, audiences.\(^7^2\) This changed significantly from the 80s onwards, with both the visibility and the spending power of this group increasing.\(^7^3\) More so, the 90s “saw ’gay’ [become] a warmer if not hot commodity,”\(^7^4\) and since then, “corporate interests [have been] delighting in the discovery of new markets.”\(^7^5\)

For a large part, this increased visibility was the result of a queer politics of visibility that itself relied extensively on a commodification of queer identities. As Hennessey points out, cultural representation can and has played an important role in gay civil rights protections, and affirmative

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\(^7^0\) Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism.”
\(^7^1\) The concept of queerbaiting is contested however, not in the least because of its wide and undefined application online, but also because it relies on malicious producer intent, something which is difficult, if not impossible, to prove; Emma Nordin, “Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying Your Queers to Pretending You Have Them,” in *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 35; Judith Fathallah, “Moriarty’s Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC’s Sherlock,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 5 (2015): 491.
\(^7^2\) Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 486.
\(^7^3\) Ibid.
\(^7^4\) Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 137.
\(^7^5\) Ibid.
images of queer people “can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation from the dominant culture.” It is with this reasoning in mind that organizations such as GLAAD lobby for the increased visibility of queer people and issues in media, which it sees as a means to accelerate acceptance for the queer community. Certainly, the positive effects of representation, particularly for acceptance amongst cisgender, heterosexual viewer has been documented as well as criticized. Yet, Hennessy reminds us, corporate ‘tolerance’ of the inclusion of queer representations is aimed at “producing new and potentially lucrative markets, [and], as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line.” It is in this sense that queer representations are rarely satisfactory, instead cultivating “a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool” which rarely aligns with the reality of queer consumers. White, feminine, individualized and fully assimilated into an anti-essentialist post-queer universe, affirmative images of queer women are disconnected from any real world politics or even a queer community of any kind. This visibility ultimately serves not to acknowledge, but rather to conceal the social dynamics that queer identities rely on.

In Hollywood, where representations of queer characters continue to be rare, even these limited – but named – definitions of queer identities seem to be a step too far in acknowledging queer people as social subjects. A clear take on the Marxist concept of Commodity Fetishism, Clark uses the phrase “Commodity Lesbianism” to refer to a specifically lesbian variety of the strategy of “gay window advertising,” a trend that gained particular traction in the 80s. Focusing on fashion advertising, Clark refers to those depictions targeting queer consumers without containing any representation that, to a non-queer audience, contains any queer meaning whatsoever. Appropriating lesbian styles or appealing to lesbian desires, this strategy aims to draw in lesbian consumers, while simultaneously disavowing any connection to the lesbianism to avoid potentially losing other customers.

This method relies strongly on what Ellsworth calls “lesbian verisimilitude,” or the representation of elements such as body language, facial expression and overall style that, with standards of style within lesbian communities in mind, can be coded as lesbian, even when it is not necessarily

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76 Ibid., 111.
79 Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure, 112.
80 Ibid., 140.
82 Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure, 115.
lesbian as such. While, for instance, wearing a flannel shirt, sitting with spread legs or appearing androgynous may have no direct connections to a queer sexuality, it may still be meaningful to consumers who understand these elements as a part of their queer cultural context. Producer awareness of this reading strategy allows advertisers to “[appropriate] lesbian subcultural style, [incorporate] its features into commodified representations, and [offer] it back to lesbian consumers in a packaged form cleansed of identity politics” – without ever having to mention its lesbian cultural origin. In this sense, queer audiences are welcome as “consuming subjects but not as social subjects,” their readings permitted but never acknowledged to avoid scaring off the primary (non-queer) audience segments.

Combining the notions of epiphenomena and commodity lesbianism helps to construct the position of queer readings within consumer culture. To fully understand the ramifications of these two processes synergizing in queer female reception, the following chapters will explore their workings throughout the reception process of Ocean’s 8, covering the time frame from the moment it was first announced to the very point the reception looped back into promotion of the film itself.

85 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 489–90.
86 Ibid., 494.
87 Ibid., 492.
From Loving Women to Women-Loving-Women: The Queer Ambiguity of the “Heist in Heels”

When *Ocean’s 8* was released on June 8, 2018, it was declared a “lesbian movie” almost instantly. Referencing the on-screen intimacy (or “sapphic energy”) between the film’s two lead characters, the posture and fashion of Cate Blanchett’s character, and a multitude of scenes relying on romantic innuendo, viewers quickly related the film to their understanding of a “lesbian culture.” These discussions did not abruptly appear at the film’s release, however, but rather formed a continuation of queer discussions surrounding the film which pre-dated the premiere by nearly a year and a half. Throughout this time, the film’s promotional campaign highlighted the film’s woman-centrism, separating it from the film’s narrative and using the film’s stars, primarily, to create a space focused on the positivity of relationships between women with enough ambiguity to leave the nature of these relationships open for the viewer to interpret as they pleased.

This chapter will explore the manner in which the film’s epiphenomena help to construct an identity for the film, referred to by the film’s creators as a “heist in heels” identity, characterized by its celebration of women. By discussing the promotional run and the film itself through the perspective offered by the film’s reception, I will place these three elements in dialogue to explore how their interaction allows for a queer reading to surface from the film’s polysemy. Intentionally or not, the epiphenomenal focus on women without the heteronormative ‘fix’ typically found in and around narratives focused on relationships between women allows for a blurring of the lines between the homosocial and the homosexual. In this female, but not exclusively heterosexual, space, viewers’ own frames of references, shaped by their identities and experiences, can easily tilt the balance in favour of a queer female space, prompting parts of the audience to approach the film from a queer perspective.

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88 Lucy (deathproof), “*Ocean’s 8,*** Letterboxd, June 11, 2018, https://letterboxd.com/deathproof/film/oceans-eight/; Interestingly, the descriptor “lesbian” is used not just by those who take an interest in reading it as such, but also viewers who are not interested in queer versions of popular culture, as illustrated by one reviewer who states that “This movie sucks. No one wanted a lesbian ocean’s 11.” See iAdrianShephard (iadrianshephard), “*Ocean’s 8,*** Letterboxd, May 18, 2019, https://letterboxd.com/iadrianshephard/film/oceans-eight/.

89 beth weeks (@ek_weeks), “sandra bullock and cate blanchett emit raw sapphic energy in ocean’s 8 you can @ me,” Twitter, June 13, 2018, https://twitter.com/bettsfic/status/1006766756986310657.

90 Squid (@sidmbennett), “cate blanchett gay sitting in ocean’s 8 is everything i’ve ever wanted in life,” Twitter, June 12, 2018, https://twitter.com/sidmbennett/status/100630376260705280

from the very beginning. Yet at the same time, the straight, platonic reading is never erased, sometimes even reinforcing the queer reading to the point where the two can coexist in a near perfect polysemy.

Female Friendship and the “Heist in Heels”

From the very moment it was first announced, Ocean’s 8 was characterized as something distinctly female. Indeed, well before Ocean’s 8 was even Ocean’s 8, it was known in the media as the “all-female Ocean’s Eleven.”92 A reboot of the recent Ocean’s franchise (Steven Soderbergh, 2001, 2004, 2007) – itself a remake of the Rat Pack film Ocean’s 11 (Lewis Milestone, 1960)93 – Ocean’s 8 had little promotion ahead of itself regarding the concept, genre, or franchise identity, all of which had already been established in the relatively recent memory of potential viewers and which could almost instantly be activated by simply mentioning the franchise it would be located in. The film’s novelty, rather, stemmed from its gender-swap, which became the driving force behind its promotion. From Argentina to Germany to Taiwan, interviews with the film’s stars focused on the positive relationships existing amongst them during and after the filming, the fun they had on set, and the challenges they – and other women – face within the film industry.94 Questions such as “what was the most fun part about working with so many women on set?” recurred frequently, and the film’s actresses were quick to connect answers to popular feminist initiatives such as Time’s Up and 50/50 by 2020, with Cate Blanchett firmly stating that “we have a responsibility and we have a platform” to address the issues women face in the film industry and beyond.95

This focus on female friendships and female empowerment did not appear out of the blue, but relates strongly to the creation of the consumable identity for the film.96 As expressed by director Gary Ross and writer Olivia Milch in the DVD extras, the film was supposed to be “a celebration of women coming together” and “off-beat and eclectic in the way the previous franchise was, but with its own

92 Perez, “Exclusive: All-Female ‘Ocean’s Eleven’ In The Works Starring Sandra Bullock, With Gary Ross Directing.”
93 Although the 1960 film was the first Ocean’s film, media typically referred to the Soderbergh franchise as the “original” that the new film was supposedly a “remake” of. Although Ocean’s 8 was never a remake of either film, but a spin-off of the Soderbergh franchise, the limited information available in the months after the film’s announcement caused media to report on the film as if were a remake of Ocean’s Eleven (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) almost exclusively.
identity.” It was not supposed to be just any heist film, but, like the title of the behind-the-scenes extra on the Ocean’s 8 DVD suggests, a “heist in heels.” What exactly makes a heist a “heist in heels,” to Ross and Milch, is the presence of strong, independent, or “badass” women who committed crime not because of a tragic backstory but because, as Milch states, “they’re criminals and they want to steal.”

Ross and Milch further emphasize the importance of these women coming together, joining forces, knowing how to take care of each other, and having fun together – all while overcoming the challenges they face as women in a patriarchal society.

Although the pair never explicitly talks about the manner in which the film was promoted, their “heist in heels” discussion provides a clear insight into the driving forces behind the film’s promotional campaign. As established in the theoretical framework, the part of the film that viewers encounter first is not the film text, but rather its “consumable identity” that is used to define the film as a product in the first place. For this identity to be created and communicated, certain elements are lifted from the film and turned into epiphenomena, which function as a premeditated promotional network that creates a “commercial life-support system” for the film. The elements discussed by Ross and Milch, then, are not just related to the creative process behind the creation of the film text, but also to the way the film should be understood: the identity that the film text itself should have, but perhaps even more so the identity that ought to draw in viewers to see the film in the first place. For this purpose, the “heist in heels” identity that is supposed to characterize the film is lifted from the film and circulated by its epiphenomena (including the “heist in heels” extra that discusses the identity, serving almost as meta-commentary), each which highlight some or all of the elements Ross and Milch emphasized (“badass” independent women, women having fun together, and women overcoming the challenges they face as women in a patriarchal society) and shape the expectations of the viewers-to-be.

Perhaps most evidently, the “heist in heels” identity is communicated through the film’s campaign by having only women promote the film in the first place. Nearly all promotion of the film was carried out by the eight actresses, who were placed in the spotlight not just in the official promotional package such as the poster, promotional photos and trailer (neither which granted much, if any, attention to male characters in the film), but also during red carpet appearances and interviews.

100 Klinger, “Digressions at the Cinema,” 5.
101 Ibid., 5, 9.
102 The poster as well as the official promotional photographs for the film feature only the eight women central to the film. Although the trailers do not exclude the male characters entirely, it does not grant them more than a few seconds of screen time each, often in quickly edited, blink-and-you-miss it shots – always together with the women. In both trailers, less than ten seconds are allocated to all the male characters combined.
Beyond a handful of interviews, only two of which were in video form and both of which came out only after the film’s release, the male director of the film remained in the background, with lead actress Sandra Bullock taking his place almost as an unofficial spokesperson. The first actress to be involved in the film, Bullock is interviewed about the film since its very announcement, often discussing the production of the film and creating the impression that she played a significant role in the film’s development. Like her character in the film, she takes on the role of leader, or the “mom” of the group, establishing herself as the go-to person for press when it comes to questions related to the creation and production process of the film that are typically reserved for a film’s director or writer.

During public appearances or video interviews, the other actresses – especially Cate Blanchett, Sarah Paulson, Awkwafina and Mindy Kaling – joined Bullock to answer questions from the press. Although the occasional reference to feminist politics was made during their appearances on the red carpet, television and filmed interviews, the main focus of the promotional campaign seemed to be on women having fun. Perhaps influenced by the heavy backlash against Ghostbusters (2016) around the time of Ocean’s 8’s production, the political statements were kept brief, shallow, and in-line with what audiences were already expecting from the actresses, many of which are outspoken about women’s rights in general. Instead, the first official trailer proclaimed that “having this much fun is a crime,” and ‘leaked’ photographs from the set focused on the women having fun together, with the actresses laughing, hugging, gazing at each other, and overall appearing to enjoy each other’s company. Television appearances and interviews were characterized by jokes and laughter, often to the point

103 Ross appeared in one video interview a month after the film’s release and in materials in the DVD extras, but otherwise only released a limited number of written statements. For his on-screen appearances, see Movie’n’co UK, “Gary Ross: ‘Ocean's 8’ is not just about women, but is not about men’,” YouTube, 4:59, July 4, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv6La4LU_P4; Gary Ross, “A Heist in Heels,” Ocean’s 8, Blu-Ray, directed by Gary Ross (Warner Brothers Entertainment, 2018).

104 Perez, “Exclusive: All-Female ‘Ocean’s Eleven’ In The Works Starring Sandra Bullock, With Gary Ross Directing.”

105 Nearly all of the early interviews about the film were conducted with Sandra Bullock, even after the rest of the cast was announced. Her role in interviews together with the other stars has frequently prompted audiences to describe Bullock as the “mom,” especially in reference to her remaining calm during interviews where her co-stars fail to answer any questions and instead joke and make fun of the interview. This is especially common in interviews where Blanchett is not present, such as the Today interview with Blanchett and Paulson, where the top comments reads: “this is what happens when sandy isn’t around to tell her children to calm down.” ashlyn michelle, comment on TODAY, “Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It | TODAY,” YouTube, 6:27, June 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNOVAQydvk; wallflowerwithwanderlust, “The ultimate friend group,” Tumblr, June 16, 2018, https://wallflowerwithwanderlust.tumblr.com/post/174943136469/van-dyne, “#Local mom tried,” Tumblr, July 12, 2018, https://van-dyne.tumblr.com/post/175824924859/local-mom-tried; Lynette Rice, “See a First Look at the All-Female Cast of ‘Ocean’s 8’,” EW.Com, December 6, 2017, https://ew.com/movies/2017/12/06/sandra-bullock-oceans-8-first-look/.


where actual discussions became impossible. During a widely circulated appearance by Cate Blanchett and Sarah Paulson on Today (NBC, 1952 - ), published online under the highly descriptive title “Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It,” the two actresses share inside jokes and playfully make fun of each other and themselves, causing host Hoda Kotb a laughing fit that lasts all throughout the six minute fragment. Pretending not to know each other, sitting on each other’s laps, making ‘your mom’ jokes, pulling each other’s hair, and inviting the hosts to be the ninth member of the Ocean’s team in a hypothetical sequel, the interview more closely resembles close friends hanging out together than it looks like actors promoting their latest film. As one commenter points out, “They’re like sisters with this banter!”

This kind of dynamic returns repeatedly, both in places where it is expected, such as on The Graham Norton Show (BBC, 2007 - ) or videos of the cast playing games together on online media platform BuzzFeed, but also in press junkets, radio and magazine interviews where journalists are only offered a brief moment to get right to the point and where such ‘friendly banter’ gets in the way of actual discussion of the film. Journalists, here, come to play a vital role in the film’s promotion: although they often position themselves as part of the audience, they actively participate in the promotion of the “heist in heels” identity by picking up small elements relevant to the components of this identity, and magnifying it through extensive speculation. In perhaps the best example of this, one frequently recurring thread focuses on a supposed group text the main cast had, where they discussed, according to Bullock, subjects such as “being moms, working hard, aging, not aging and being fearful.” Supposedly deleted shortly before the film was released because the actresses were concerned about “being hacked,” the group text is frequently speculated about by interviewers, eager to find more details about what could have been discussed in it. Whether their questions concerned the

109 Cath Pascual, 2019, comment on TODAY, “Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It | TODAY.”
111 Examples include an interview in which the actresses steer the entire conversation to Awkwafina’s rap song “My vag” and vagina-related jokes and an interview in which they pretend all of them getting on the same menstrual cycle was the highlight of making the film, Rotten Tomatoes, “UNCUT ‘Ocean’s 8’ Cast Interviews - Rotten Tomatoes,” YouTube, 6:20, June 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZkqtYza7xQ; Joelle Garguillo, “‘OCEAN’S 8’ INTERVIEWS: Sandra Bullock, Sarah Paulson, Anne Hathaway & Awkwafina,” YouTube, 3:07, June 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBYilah_dis.
113 Ibid.
individual roles the actresses fulfilled the group text, they kind of things they discussed in it, or whether or not there will be a new one in the future, they all serve to reinforce the idea that these actresses are truly friends, even when they are not on camera. The actresses’ refusal to disclose further details about it further contributes to a sense of mystery around it, allowing audiences to imagine it as anything they want, or, as Meaghan Kirby reports it, as being “*just* chaotic as [those of all other women] – with the added A-list factor.”

The group text is by far the most prominent example, but similar situations occur around topics such as the women all sharing a trailer on set rather than each having their own, several of the actresses’ shared admiration for “cool girl” Rihanna, and shared experiences and challenges they faced as women in the film industry. The suggestion (regardless of whether there is a truth to it) that their friendship extends into the private sphere lends their public friendship an authenticity that helps sell the women having fun element of the “heist in heels” identity to the audience. The somewhat chaotic nature of this sales tactic, especially of those video interviews where not a single of the interviewer’s questions gets answered, may seem like a problem on the surface: the point of an interview is to get answers to

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114 Reporting on an interview with Sandra Bullock, one reporter writes, “Mindy Kaling was the go-to for GIFs, while Anne Hathaway served ‘great meme.’ Awkwafina, meanwhile, gave ‘great everything.’ And then there’s Rihanna, who would occasionally chime in with disarmingly witty comments or words of wisdom, according to Bullock, much like she did on set.” Patrick Ryan, “Sandra Bullock Held a ‘funeral’ for the ‘Ocean’s 8’ Cast’s Group Text,” USA Today, December 14, 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2018/05/31/sandra-bullock-hel...text/659971002/.

115 During an episode of The Ellen DeGeneres Show (NBC, 2003 - ), Ellen DeGeneres convinced Mindy Kaling to send a selfie in the group text, which supposedly led to immediate responses from some of the other actresses. Kaling’s reveal that the group text was chaotic, filled with emojis, and that she had never had an idea what Cate Blanchett was saying but, “it’s Cate Blanchett so I’m just going to add a heart to it,” offers the most detailed insight into the group chat journalists speculated about throughout most of the film’s press tour. See TheEllenShow, “Ellen and Mindy Kaling Text a Selfie to Her ‘Ocean’s 8’ Co-Stars,” YouTube, 4:13, June 4, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EG6sm5Ro_1E.

116 When asked about the group chat, Sarah Paulson reportedly stated that “We may or may not have another one somewhere, [somewhere] in the universe at some point.” See Jennifer Drysdale, “‘Ocean’s 8’ Cast Reveals Why Sandra Bullock Had Them Get Rid of Their Group Text (Exclusive),” Entertainment Tonight, May 24, 2018, https://www.etonline.com/oceans-8-cast-reveals-why-sandra-bullock-had-them-get-rid-of-their-group-text-exclusive-103002.

117 Whether or not they actually are friends off-screen is irrelevant for the film’s promotion, but the idea that they are is what is necessary for their on-screen friendships to feel authentic to the audience.


questions, after all. However, it actually helps with the circulation of these themes amongst online audiences. Not in the least because women having fun speaks more strongly to the viewer than women talking about women having fun (As a YouTube user reflects in a comment on the previously mentioned TODAY interview: “Is it just me or is THIS kind of fun actually more effective at capturing people’s interest in the film than any of the serious or contrived interviews?”), but also because it lends itself well to a particular form of circulation popular on the internet: reducing a video to a screencap or a GIF or a set of those and circulating it in this fragmented form. Due to the limitations imposed by showing only a single (briefly animated) image, such reductions have to be short outtakes from videos, often featuring only a single shot with subtitles added to make up for the absence of sound. Extensive informational conversations are difficult to share in this format, but short, playful moments are captured and distributed well beyond the original video sources more easily. Jokey one-liners and playful interactions, such as Awkwafina question, “is that a banana in your pocket or are you just wearing it?” in response to a bright yellow suit Cate Blanchett is wearing during their interview, or a GIF set of Sarah Paulson, Cate Blanchett and Sandra Bullock acting as, in the words of the GIF creator, “weirdos,” are easily taken from their original context and circulated widely. Just like journalists become a part of the promotion by speculating about seemingly minor elements like a group text, audiences are encouraged to join the marketing game through their sharing of clips and images that reinforce, more than anything, the friendship sentiment.

More than just reinforcing the friendship narrative, the audience circulation of these sentiments helps lend it an authenticity. Audiences are often aware of production teams’ interests in selling the product, potentially making any of their statements feel like nothing but hollow sales tactics, and the press is criticized more often than it is praised for the way it covers any topic related to women. Additionally, celebrity friendships are often perceived as highly artificial or, at the very least, far removed from the reality of regular people like those composing most of the audience. Meanwhile, a regular internet user’s post referring to the stars’ performance of friendship as them being “the ultimate friend group,” or viewers relating television appearances by the stars to their own lives or life goals

120 Stacey Smith, 2019, comment on TODAY, “Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It | TODAY.”
121 greatcateblanchett, “Is that a banana in your pocket or are you just wearing it?,” Tumblr, May 31, 2018, https://greatcateblanchett.tumblr.com/post/174441494090/x.
123 In the only other genderswapped film to date, Ghostbusters (2016), the media was frequently accused of adding fuel to the fire, and the role of gender in film criticism was criticized sharply, with many fans and celebrities, including the Ocean’s 8 cast, blaming the overwhelming maleness of the film criticism profession for the film’s lack of success at the Box Office.
124 wallflowerwithwanderlust, “The ultimate friend group. Helena Bonham Carter is the chill friend, Rihanna is the effortlessly cool friend, Sarah Paulson and Cate Blanchett are the weird energetic ones and Sandra Bullock is the ‘please give me alcohol to deal with them’ friend,” Tumblr, June 16, 2018, https://wallflowerwithwanderlust.tumblr.com/post/174943136469.
suggest that whatever is depicted at the very least resonated with the actual experiences of the audience. Audience circulation, then, serves as an endorsement, a reinforcement of the promotional tactic but with an added authenticity that tells new audiences that what they are seeing is real – regardless of whether it actually is.

The efficiency of the focus on positive relationships between women is evident, with the bulk of responses focusing strongly on the relationships that exist between the actresses and/or their characters. The aforementioned TODAY video is amongst the most widely circulated television appearances, especially in GIF sets on Tumblr, with users expressing that “this is how all interviews should be like,”¹²⁵ they “need their friendship,”¹²⁶ and demanding that Blanchett and Paulson just keep doing movies together forever.”¹²⁷ In response to other epiphenomena such as press junkets, the women are referred to as “the ultimate friend group,”¹²⁸ and a common response to any kind of image or video of the women together, whether in the promotion or the film itself, is “goals,” a term used to indicate the friendship discussed or depicted is one to aspire to.¹²⁹

More than just effective as promotion, however, the construction of the friendship narrative prior to the film text is also vital to understandings of the film. Although the basic premise of the film is eight women working together to commit a heist, the film spends relatively little time on character development or the construction of relationships amongst the women. While the film explains that Debbie (Sandra Bullock) and Lou (Cate Blanchett) have been partners in crime for a long time, it does not offer any histories for the other characters whatsoever. In fact, Constance (Awkwafina), Rose (Helena Bonham Carter), Nine Ball (Rihanna) and Daphne (Anne Hathaway) come in as complete outsiders, with Nine Ball never even revealing her real name, and Daphne only becoming a part of the team by essentially blackmailing the other women into letting her join.¹³⁰ Until the film’s big reveal, only Lou and Debbie, and Constance and Amita (Mindy Kaling) are shown hanging out in ways that do not relate to the job at hand, and after the film is over all the women go their separate ways, not even talking to each other on their final metro trip together, as if they had been strangers all along.

¹²⁵ greatcateblanchett, “This is how all interviews should be like,” Tumblr, June 5, 2019, https://greatcateblanchett.tumblr.com/post/174598844100/this-is-how-all-interviews-should-be-like.
¹²⁸ wallflowerwithwanderlust, “The ultimate friend group. Helena Bonham Carter is the chill friend, Rihanna is the effortlessly cool friend, Sarah Paulson and Cate Blanchett are the weird energetic ones and Sandra Bullock is the ‘please give me alcohol to deal with them’ friend.”
¹²⁹ Hirsh, “How Anne Hathaway’s ‘Ocean’s 8′ Co-Stars Supported Her When She Had To Pump Is #FriendGoals”; maggiedarling, “G O A L S ! !”
¹³⁰ Daphne is originally the victim of the heist, tricked into wearing the Cartier necklace the team sets out to steal. She eventually discovers what the women are doing, and the team is forced to let her join to make sure their plan remains a secret.
Yet, after a long promotional run focused on friendship audiences enter the film with expectations of seeing female friendship on screen, and the film offers just enough connections to the satellite texts of its promotion to prompt audiences to discuss the film as being “friendship goals.” In a brief scene, Constance shows Amita how to use a dating app, offering a brief but widely recognizable moment of bonding between the two that is not relevant to the film. Interactions between Debbie and Lou, even when related to the heist, often serve to show a familiarity between the two, with Lou stating she has borrowed some of Debbie’s clothes while Debbie was in prison, or the two laughing about Debbie’s run-in with her former partner Claude during which she threatened him with a shiv and snapped a button off his shirt. Yet, one moment in the film that resonated especially strongly with audiences was the only one in which friendship was explicitly mentioned. Daphne’s decision to join the team because she wanted to develop more female friendships (DAPHNE: “I don’t have that many close female friendships, and book clubs are the worst, so I thought this could be something fun to share!” TAMMY: “You’re becoming a criminal because you’re lonely?”) prompted responses such as users saying that “to be friends with these ladies [they] would go to the same lengths.” and that “the realest moment in cinematic history is anne hathaway’s character admitting she participated in the ocean’s 8 heist be she didn’t have enough close female friendships.” Although ultimately a very minor moment, existing of only a single sentence, it is enough to bring in the friendship narrative that dominated the film’s promotion and turn the film, despite barely dealing with the subject of friendship, into a friendship narrative of its own.

Reading Friendship in a Queer Context

Audiences responding to the element of female friendship by declaring the film “friendship goals” and praising strong platonic relationships between women is perhaps the most expected outcome of the “heist in heels” identity of the promotion. However, it simultaneously prompts a slightly different reaction: one that takes the very elements used to communicate female empowerment, friendship and women having fun and turns it into something queer. Social media users are quick to comment on the friendship between the women, directly or indirectly comparing it to flirting, romance, or other non-platonic behaviours. @MjAllennnn responds to pictures of Cate Blanchett and Rihanna hugging on set with “You can feel the sex tension,” @DYKESPIC3 describes a photo taking during filming of Sandra

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133 https://twitter.com/autumn_tg/status/1007487241801719808
Bullock, Sarah Paulson and Rihanna as “lesbian moms with their cool daughter,” and, reflecting back on the press tour, @paulsie4pres states, “Remember Ocean’s 8 press where we got ten interviews a day that was just Sandy and Cate flirting and outright saying they’d have sex with each other. WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE.” Similarly, the aforementioned appearance by Sarah Paulson and Cate Blanchett on NBC’s Today gives way to a queer translation that reinterprets these moments as being something other than a purely platonic form of intimacy. In a Twitter thread of “top 20 favorite on-screen lesbian, bi, and queer moments of 2018” by entertainment writer Jill Gutowitz, the Today episode is featured amongst a list of explicitly queer on-screen moments as the “best lesbian flirting on a talk show.” YouTube commenter J.L. also compares the interaction between Cate Blanchett and Sarah Paulson to flirting (“they are really flirty. Would make a great couple.”) and, when a commenter states that “there’s literally nothing lesbian about girls having fun, laughing, etc literally nothing.” user rafdcps responds that, “If you don’t think that Cate Blanchett and Sarah Paulson having fun together isn’t lesbian heaven then you’re obviously not a lesbian,” implying that the connection between these two women having fun and being lesbians is obvious.

As discussed, the film’s promotion itself focuses strongly on the homosocial – that is, friendship amongst women. None of the interactions by the actresses that are meaningful to a queer female audience necessarily and exclusively refer to a relationship that is romantic or sexual in nature: cosying up on a sofa, endlessly expressing their admiration for each other, touching each other’s hands, knees, faces – all of these are behaviours generally considered acceptable expressions of platonic friendship, particularly amongst women. Yet, as has widely been pointed out by queer reception scholars, depictions of friendship amongst women are some of the most fertile grounds for queer female readings. Although their focus is typically on the film text, there is little reason to suggest the same does not also apply for epiphenomena, each of which consist of small texts on their own. Most influentially, Doty explains the queer potential of portrayals of female friendships through Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum”: a wide range of “woman-identified experiences,” shared by women regardless of their sexual orientation, which includes the “sharing of a rich inner life,” “bonding against male tyranny” and “the giving and receiving of practical and political support.” The lesbian continuum’s redirection of queer female experiences

136 Annabella (@paulsie4pres), “Remember Ocean’s 8 press where we got ten interviews a day that was just Sandy and Cate flirting and outright saying they’d have sex with each other. WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE,” Twitter, December 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/paulsie4pres/status/1075739624692113408.
138 J.L., comment on TODAY, ‘Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It.’
139 Rafdcps, comment on TODAY, ‘Sarah Paulson And Cate Blanchett Talk About ‘Ocean’s 8’ And Make Hoda Lose It.’
as being inherently female provides fertile ground for Doty’s argument that “those situations in which [the viewer] identifies with or takes pleasure in the ‘many […] forms of primary intensity between and among women’” would lead to lesbian-charged spaces which do not necessarily read as queer to everyone but may “allow for, or even encourage, readings of most of the women characters as ‘really’ lesbian”.

Doty’s application of the lesbian continuum is an approach that has been highly influential within queer reception and queer fan studies, but the theoretical underpinning emphasizing commonalities between women of all sexualities, glosses over the simple reality that within a queer female context, friendship typically holds a different position than it does in a straight female context. I would suggest that perhaps more so than commonalities, it are the specificities of friendship both in queer female communities and media representations of queer women that embed depictions of queer women on screen with a potential queerness. Like in the wider queer community, friendship is often a substitute for family, especially amongst individuals whose birth families have been less than accepting of their identity. In addition to this, many queer women date former friends, and remain friends with their ex-girlfriends, and platonic and romantic/sexual relationships can be intertwined and fluid, the blurry lines between them making it difficult to separate them into clearly distinct categories. The relative acceptance of forms of intimacy amongst female friends regardless of sexuality (touching, hugging, and increasingly often sexual experimentation) blurs those lines even further, and the experience of not knowing whether you are friends or dating is so common for queer women that it has given way to a range of internet memes by itself.

147 Ibid.
The lines between friends and lovers is further blurred by mainstream media, which continue to struggle with the reality of queer female lovers. In what McBeal refers to as the “gal pal epidemic,” media reports on queer female (celebrity) couples often fail, or flat-out refuse to acknowledge the suspected or confirmed romantic/sexual nature of their relationship, instead referring to them in friendly terms: “like sisters,” “BFFs” and “gal pals.” Even celebrities whose sexuality is well-known to the public have had their relationships reported on as friendships, such as the bisexual actresses Cara Delevingne, whose (ex-)lovers have almost exclusively been referred to a “gal pals” and Kristen Stewart, whose girlfriend was described as a “BFF” and even a “live-in gal pal” in favour of calling her Stewart’s girlfriend. Although tabloid magazines participate in this “gal pal epidemic” most strongly, similar (and often unintentional) erasures happen on social media, where users declare photographs of two brides “BFF goals” (presumably suggesting the brides are not getting married to each other, but hold a joint wedding where both of them marry their male partners), review the videoclip for the song “girls like girls” by lesbian singer Hayley Kiyoko as being “a solid story of friendship,” or define ‘National Girlfriend Day’ as being about “the special bond of friendship.”

This erasure – intentional or not – of female lovers in favour of female friends can be found in film as well, where adaptations of lives and/or works featuring queer female themes often adapt queer relationships into friendships, isolate the queer character into one without a love life, or go out of their way to erase the story altogether. Although this practice of ‘straightwashing’ reminds perhaps most

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151 In perhaps the best example of how far gossip press will go to avoid referring to a female lover as a lover, the Daily Mail refers to Stewart’s girlfriend as bestie and gal pal while simultaneously detailing the intimacy of their interactions. Mailonline reporter, “Kristen Stewart Gets Touchy-Feely with Her Live-in Gal Pal Alicia Cargile as They Celebrate Star’s 25th Birthday at Coachella,” *Daily Mail*, April 20, 2015, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3046645/Inseparable-Kristen-Stewart-enjoys-Coachella-live-gal-pal-Alicia-Cargile-three-days-25th-birthday.html.
154 By one definition, National Girlfriend Day even concerns girlfriends that “fall into many categories,” although never lovers: “While many grew up together, others meet through work or college. Still, others share a bond much deeper; sisters and mothers meet the definition of girlfriends, too.” “NATIONAL GIRLFRIENDS DAY - August 1,” National Day Calender, n.d., https://nationaldaycalendar.com/national-girlfriends-day-august-1/.
155 Derived from the term ‘whitewashing,’ ‘straightwashing’ refers to the practice of turning queer characters straight or removing their sexuality altogether. In popular discussions, it is used widely, including both those

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strongly of the Hays era (where it affected films such as *These Three* (William Wyler, 1936), the heterosexuality adaptation of the play *The Children’s Hour* (Lillian Hellman, 1934)), it is one that characterizes most of Hollywood past and present. From the titular role in *Queen Christina* (MGM/Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), to the central relationship in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), to a wide range of characters in *Marvel* productions, including *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017) and *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2018), polysemy is often used as an argument against the depiction queer sexualities, while heterosexuality is never deemed a threat to polysemy in the same manner. With the source material and/or discussions thereof often circulating widely, the change from lesbian or bisexual woman to straight or entirely asexual woman quickly becomes common knowledge amongst queer audiences and the different treatment of queer and straight character adaptations does not go unnoticed amongst them.

Although the goal of erasure is, of course, to erase – it often has the opposite effect. When viewers *know* that a depicted friendship is queer, but has been forced into a category of friendship by the media representing it, retrieving the queer origin becomes a matter of reverse translation: if a female lover is a female friend, couldn’t the same be said to be true vice versa? With viewers essentially trained to read queerness back into the narrative, the general lack of on-screen queer female representation in Hollywood makes any friendship narrative suspect. As a result, the process of reverse translation can easily be extended to original narratives or narratives that did not have a queer origin per se – especially in a context where the lines between friends and lovers can be blurry to begin with. This is evident in the reception of *Ocean’s 8*, where this connection – from friend, to coded ‘gal pal,’ to lover – has been clearly, often literally, present since early in the film’s production timeline. The words “friends,” “gal pals” and, the only one originating from the film itself, “partner,” are all used by viewers to suggest a double meaning: on the one hand, what is shown on screen (whether in the film, or in press junkets and television appearances) is a friendship, but at the same time it *could* be romantic/sexual in nature as well. In just a few of many examples, Letterboxd user eclectic_em states “female friendships are beautiful,” immediately after declaring that Cate Blanchett’s character must be a lesbian because her

instances where it concerns a purposeful act and instances where audiences believe a specific character *should* have been queer but producers took it into a different direction.

156 *The Children’s Hour* was later adapted by the same director, this time with the lesbian theme intact, as *The Children’s Hour* (William Wyler, 1961).

157 In the case of *Marvel* productions, there is often discussion regarding the degree of straightwashing, due to the wide range of comics featuring different versions of the same character that could be considered to be the source material. Regardless, film producers’ choice to pick precisely those comics that feature the character as straight, rather than the ones in which the character is queer, needs to be regarded critically.

158 Although focusing on elements other than friendship, Patricia White expands on how the censorship of queer elements, such as a star’s sexuality, can actually encourage queerness within a text. See Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

159 The year in which *Ocean’s 8* was released saw a record number of major studio films featuring queer female characters, but at only eleven films, most in which the character was a minor supporting characters, it remains rare to see queer women on screen. Townsend and Deerwater, “2019 GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index.”
nails are short,\(^{160}\) @triscut9 tweets “#galpals #friendship” in response to a Vanity Fair article about the film’s queer subtext, and a tweet promoting that very article uses the word friend in a similarly ambiguous way by putting it between quotes: “Let’s talk about that obvious, vexingly unexplored sexual tension between Sandra Bullock’s Debbie Ocean and her best friend—‘friend’?—Lou.”\(^{161}\)

This friend/lover ambiguity serves as an effective form of lesbian verisimilitude: it is meaningful to audiences reading within a queer context, but simultaneously fits perfectly within a heterosexual framework, not once requiring non-queer audiences to second-guess the nature of these friendships. To the queer viewer, the double interpretation is hard to avoid, but for the non-queer viewer, the queer reading can easily be ignored, or go unnoticed entirely. In many cases, the queer potential of the film’s focus on relationships between women is even unintentionally reinforced by users not directly interested in discussing the film as being queer – and who may not even be aware of a potential queer reading. One of the most common responses to the film, “I love women,” can easily be understood in both an empowering, feminist sense (I think women are amazing!) and a queer way (I am attracted to women!) – or even both at the same time.\(^{162}\) Without specifying the fact that they mean their response in a purely platonic way, even viewers who do not read the film as a queer text but who simply reproduce promotional narratives help establish and reinforce an ambiguous space that is open to queer readings. Vice versa, queer viewers responding “I love women” is as safe as response as the narrative itself is, never confronting non-queer viewers with the film’s queer potential. In this sense, even where the friend and lover narratives collide, the queer reading never has to be acknowledged, and the production team – including the actresses promoting the film – can safely position the friendship narrative as the most prominent one, while simultaneously reeling in queer viewers who find meaning in the queer reading of the text.

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\(^{161}\) Tee (@Triscut9), “#galpals #friendship,” Twitter, June 12, 2018, https://twitter.com/Triscut9/status/1005616295664318592; VANITY FAIR (@VanityFair), ”Let’s talk about that obvious, vexingly unexplored sexual tension between Sandra Bullock’s Debbie Ocean and her best friend—‘friend’?—Lou in #Oceans8,” Twitter, June 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/VanityFair/status/1005616295664318592.

Polysemy without Neutralization

Even though friendships are valuable in opening a text up for queer readings, having multiple women appear together does not necessarily lead to the large-scale queer readings as found in the reception of *Ocean’s 8* by default. Contemporary films such as *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011), *Girls Trip* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2017) and the *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008/Ol Parker, 2018) films, which also featured female ensemble casts and popular messages about female empowerment in a male-centric world, have generated considerably fewer queer female responses. And while the gender-swap film that predated *Ocean’s 8*, *Ghostbusters* (2016), did come with a significant queer response – buried deeply underneath a misogynist backlash – responses to that film focused more strongly on Kate McKinnon and her character as an isolated element than it did to the bonds between women in the film. Certainly, the early queer responses to *Ocean’s 8* – at a time when the only thing that was known was that the film would feature a female ensemble cast – illustrate how meaningful women in the company of other women are in the context of queer female readings. At the same time, the extent to which narratives of female bonding were allowed to flow freely – without being neutralized, or ‘fixed’ as heterosexual – was necessary in order to develop such readings from the individual viewer’s wishful thinking to a more collective response.

A few elements are key here. While films such as the previously mentioned *Bridesmaids* and *Mamma Mia!* emphasize female bonding, both in their text and as part of their consumable identity, what sets *Ocean’s 8* apart is the absence of heterosexuality as a defining trait of what it means to be female, and of what female friendships should look like. Rather than discussing the stars’ relationships or even interest in men, most references to love and relationships remain gender neutral. Even those jokes that are sexually tinted (such as Anne Hathaway joking that all the fun stories about life on set are X-rated, and Cate Blanchett saying she has played “cops and robbers as a sex game”) never bring up heterosexuality as a prerequisite. When men are mentioned, it is typically done in a manner that reinforces the power of female friendship. In the film’s promotion, this most typically occurs in the form of shared jokes at the cost of men, most frequently the lead actor of the Soderbergh *Ocean’s* franchise.

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163 *Mamma Mia!* And its sequel have enjoyed a significant queer following, in particular due to the film’s strong reliance on ABBA’s discography, many of which have gained the status of gay anthems. Despite this, it has been the subject to relatively few queer readings, and its queer appeal seems to be more in its over-the-top camp performances than in excitement over (potential) romance between the female characters.

164 Media and social discussions of the *Ghostbusters* remake centered strongly on the presence of actress Kate McKinnon, an out lesbian, and Paul Feig’s frequent suggestions that the actresses were playing “versions of themselves.” Meanwhile, the other characters were not collectively discussed as being queer. Clarisse Loughrey, “Paul Feig Confirms Ghostbuster Is Gay but Studio Stopped Him from Saying So,” July 14, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/ghostbusters-paul-feig-confirms-kate-mckinnon-character-jillian-holtzmann-gay-studio-stopped-him-saying-so-a7136051.html.


166 BuzzFeedVideo, “The Cast Of "Ocean’s 8" Tries To Play Never Have I Ever.”
George Clooney. Parodying a backlash against feminism that claims women are after superiority rather than equality, Sandra Bullock frequently discusses how she has slowly been working on replacing her “longtime celebrity best friend” Clooney altogether: killing his character in Gravity (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), replacing him as the lead in Our Brand is in Crisis (David Gordon Green, 2015) and “taking over” his franchise in Ocean’s 8 – along with the joke that she might consider letting him play a cameo in a potential sequel, but only “if he’s good.”

The film, similarly, downplays heterosexuality, most notably by avoiding the heterosexual romantic subplot typical for Hollywood productions. Unlike in the case of queerbaiting, where characters suggested to be queer during the promotion typically end up with male love interests, Ocean’s 8 does not include heterosexual romance as a substantial part of any of the female characters’ storylines. Although the film does contain some mentions of heterosexuality (Debbie dated Claude before the start of the plot; Daphne dates Claude so the team can frame him; Tammy has an off-screen, unnamed husband; Constance comments that Debbie’s brother is “hot”; Amita uses her part of the heist payout to take an unnamed man on a trip to Paris) it never restores “heterosexual symmetry […] with a vengeance.” Instead, the only substantial heterosexual storyline in the film is entirely deniable. At no point is Debbie and Claude’s relationship referred to as being explicitly romantic in nature: they met to “work out a hustle,” Debbie tells the rest of the team that Claude was “great in the kitchen,” and when a police interrogator at the end of the film asks Claude if he and Debbie were dating, all he responds is, “what?” Claude and Daphne’s brief fling, meanwhile, is an essential part of the heist plan, a means to an end more than something genuine or desirable, while Tammy’s life as housewife is one she is escaping for the excitement of the all-female heist. Smaller instances, such as Constance teaching Amita how to use a Tinder-like dating app, only exist to reinforce the friendship narrative in the film: even though Amita is actively looking for a man to pursue, and Constance is commenting on which men are attractive, it is ultimately an act of bonding amongst the two women.

In addition to the absence of serious heterosexual relationships in both the film and cast interviews, the film’s official promotional materials make no reference to potential romantic subplots in the film. Although the film contains a subplot in which Debbie’s ex Claude is framed for the heist the women are committing which includes scenes referencing their (arguably) romantic past, this is largely


excluded from the film’s promotion: Claude only appears briefly in the official trailers, once being threatened with a shiv by Debbie and once being slapped in the face by Daphne, neither which implies a romance in the classical Hollywood tradition. Instead, these narratives depict what Doty refers to as “lesbian lifestyles” (understood as women living together without men) as a possibility, and much of the entertainment in these narratives relies on the positioning of men as a threat to female connections. Of course, independence from men and/or making fun of men is by no means an exclusively queer element, and the vast majority of these statements and jokes relate rather closely to popular feminist messages that burst into the mainstream with the popularization of the #MeToo movement. Yet, the parallel between men being bad in one way or another and women being queer, specifically lesbian, is one of the most frequently returning threads in the film’s reception. Responses such as wexlers’ “I LOVE WOMEN! I’M SO GLAD I’M NOT STRAIGHT! MEN ARE PIGS!”, a quote from a widely quoted Vulture article that states, “while ocean’s 8 is technically a heist movie, it is actually a movie about how men are boring and peripheral and women are fun and should have sex with each other,” or a Letterboxd list that features Ocean’s 8 titled, “Movies where lesbians rightfully ruin the lives of men” all indirectly connect a dislike of men to not being straight.

Although polysemy, or a diversification of the text is necessary for a film to resonate with as wide an audience as possible, the extent to which queer readings of this film are allowed to take place in relation to Ocean’s 8 is not one to be taken for granted. In his discussion of lesbian narratives, Doty hints that the press reporting on the relationships between actresses is frequently used to neutralize depictions of close friendship: depicting actresses as rivals who hate is each other is a commonly used tactic to balance out the intimacy (even if platonic) of their relationship on-screen. Often, this is desired on the producers’ (or even the stars’) end, but, as Ellsworth discusses in relation to the press materials for Personal Best (Robert Towne, 1982), it also stems from the media and public, who take pleasure “in seeing pairs and groups of women characters in intense and enjoyable relationships [...] be tempered or undermined somehow by news about how the women who play these characters have problems with each other.” Although both Doty and Ellsworth’s accounts were written over two decades ago, it is still common to pit female actresses against each other even when they appear in films

171 The list’s description further expands: “These movies aren’t necessarily good but bad things happen to the men and the lesbians are safe which is all that matters in the end. [...] I love lesbians and I love men getting their lives ruined.” See ThisisSnazzy (pea_dreadful), “movies where lesbians rightfully ruin the lives of men,” Letterboxd, 2019, https://letterboxd.com/thisissnazzy/list/movies-where-lesbians-rightfully-ruin-the/.
and TV shows that celebrate female friendships. In just a few of many examples, Reese Witherspoon forgetting to hug her *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-2019) co-star Laura Dern after the show won an Emmy led to a brief controversy suggesting that she ‘snubbed’ Dern, while discussions of Constance Wu’s rumoured “divalike behaviour” towards other actresses on the set of *Hustlers* (Lorene Scafaria, 2019) only toned down after co-star Jennifer Lopez stood up for her. The prominence of the behind-the-scenes belief that women cannot work together also became evident once again when during the promotion of the all-female *Ghostbusters* remake, Paul Feig stated how fellow male producers had repeatedly warned him against working with a woman-heavy cast, telling him that it would inevitably lead to “catfights.”

Early discussions of *Ocean’s 8* were no exception to this, with rumours that a therapist was present on set to avoid catfights and speculation of a “rift between Oscar winners Cate Blanchett and Anne Hathaway” found their way into the press in early 2017. During the following months of promotion for the film, however, the media’s tendency to pit women against each other was not just reduced by performing the friendship discussed earlier in this chapter, but also by refusing to leave any space to speculate about conflicts between the women on set. In line with the popular feminist, ‘girl power’ narrative of the film and promotion, these questions are instead redirected to statements pointing out the way media treats men and women differently, such as Sarah Paulson’s statement that “I promise you [this would not be asked] if a bunch of boys would get together — ‘bro fights,’ and frequent references to the “atrocious, male-dominated reception” of *Ghostbusters* (2016). Countering rumours


of in-fighting, Bullock specifically referred to their cooperation as “a great love-fest” and expressed that “we all really value [each] others’ support because they try to keep us ladies apart for so many years. […] We’re sort of hanging on tightly because we don’t want it to be where they pull us apart again.”

Tackling rumours up-front, and adding to it the performance of friendship that was largely perceived as authentic, any negative speculation was repressed before it could find a solid footing.

In addition to this, any doubts regarding the friendship between these women that could potentially have risen from some of the stars’ absences during the press tour are pre-emptively avoided by filling their absence with positivity towards them. Helena Bonham Carter, who is often absent, is frequently referred to as an eccentric but lovely figure who brought baskets of meat to set to ensure everyone was being fed, while Anne Hathaway’s occasional absence is filled with compliments focused on her beauty, such as Cate Blanchett wishing she could “steal” her lips. Even Rihanna, who is an outsider to the acting industry the other actresses have already established themselves in, is allowed to be absent without her position amongst these women being questioned. Instead of leaving space for interviewers to speculate about Rihanna’s absence, her co-stars discuss her as having an almost mythical status, with her absence being excused because, as her co-stars unilaterally agree, she is simply on a different level than them. In relation to this, one frequently recurring thread focused on Sarah Paulson acting as, as described by her co-stars and interviewers alike, “the ultimate Rihanna fangirl,” describing how she repeatedly embarrassed herself in front of Rihanna: dancing to a “running Rihanna soundtrack of every hit she has ever had” in her brain, singing Rihanna’s songs, and otherwise acting in ways that are jokingly brought up as fangirl behaviours that are supposed to be relatable to the audience, who are likely more familiar with Rihanna’s ‘cool girl’ persona than they were with Rihanna as an actress prior to, and arguably after, the film’s release. Similarly, Sandra Bullock expresses that all of


Staff, “Partnered Post: Sandra Bullock Speaks About The ‘Ocean’s 8’ Cast - The Knockturnal.”

Ryan, “Sandra Bullock Held a ‘funeral’ for the ‘Ocean’s 8’ Cast’s Group Text.”


The only other exception is Awkwafina, whose acting career had only just started taking off at the time of the film’s promotion. However, unlike Rihanna, she does not quite hold major celebrity status in any other industry else either, and her continuous presence during the press tour more easily established her as a part of the group.

Associated Press, “‘Ocean’s 8’ stars work for Rihanna’s attention,” YouTube, 1:12, June 1, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhyhmlB5UI0.

the actresses “secretly wanted to be Rihanna’s favourite,” the actresses refer to Rihanna as “the goddess,” and mentions of how much “cooler” Rihanna was than the rest of them dominate nearly all conversations about her. Rihanna’s only television appearance during the press tour on The Graham Norton Show only strengthens this image, with the actresses – again – expressing their admiration and appearing visibly starstruck, while Helena Bonham Carter’s declares Rihanna a “queen” and Graham Norton’s suggestion that she “owns” the Met gala (an image widely shared by fans of Rihanna and the Met gala alike). All of these contribute to a sort of larger-than-life image of Rihanna, an iconic figure who may not be a part of the friend group (or even the group text chain) but who still fits within a sphere of positive relationships amongst women – if not friendship, then admiration.

Not contradicted through the presence of heterosexuality, nor neutralized through the suggestion of conflict amongst the women, the potential queerness of the friendship narrative is allowed to exist all the way from the film’s initial announcement until well after its eventual release. Peacefully coexisting with straight-platonic readings, the queer reading is part of a perfect polysemy with the purpose of reaching as wide an audience as possible, including those interested in reading the film queerly, those indifferent to it, and even those that are strongly opposed to watching queer content. With both straight-platonic and queer readings relying on exactly the same material, just with a different meaning in different contexts, they even have the potential to reinforce each other, with a straight viewer’s popular feminist “I love women!” inadvertently feeding into the women-loving-women sentiments voiced by the film’s queer female audiences. By having these two readings exist side-by-side, not just co-existing but even reinforcing each other in their ambiguity, Ocean’s 8 effectively reaches multiple market segments without having to risk losing one due to the presence of the other.

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188 Associated Press, “’Ocean’s 8’ stars work for Rihanna’s attention,” YouTube, 1:12, June 1, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhyhmlBSUl0.


All (Queer) Roads Lead to Blanchett: Commodity Lesbianism in the “Cate-Blanchett-is-a-Lesbian-Cinematic-Universe”

As established in the previous chapter, the emphasis on female friendship and women’s independence from men creates an ambiguous narrative that opens up possibilities for queer readings to take place. Extended into the social sphere well before the film’s release through the prominent position of the female actresses and the focus on their (performance of) close friendship, the “heist in heels” identity creates a reception space that is open to, rather than resistant to, queer readings. This allows for a polysemy in which the text can both be read in the context of purely platonic friendship, as well as a queer(er) interpretation that allows for the lines between friends and lovers to be blurred. For some viewers, this friendship narrative is enough to read all characters as queer, such as @crellinspeaker who suggests that “Twitter” has analysed the trailer to the point where “every single character, despite having ten seconds of screen time, now has a full lesbian backstory,” or @gretafromspace, who tweets, “the sheer lesbian energy that every character exudes in ocean’s 8…astounding….powerful.”

Throughout most of Ocean’s 8 reception, however, the queer meaning appears to be much more unevenly distributed: not merely shaped by the queer potential of the friendship narrative and the viewer’s own frame of reference but steered into specific and somewhat predictable directions, making some queer readings more likely to occur than others.

A particularly notable concentration of queer meaning in the film is located around actress Cate Blanchett as Lou. In a widely circulated Vulture article titled, “Which Ocean’s 8 Character Has the Most Powerful Lesbian Energy?” E. Alex Jung declares Cate Blanchett in Ocean’s 8 a lesbian, stating that “Cate Blanchett playing ‘Lou’ (lol) in Ocean’s 8 is easily the most lesbian thing to have happened since Cate Blanchett played Carol in Carol or the summer Kristen Stewart spent gazing at Cate Blanchett at Cannes.” In Jung’s ranking, Sandra Bullock as Debbie makes a close second as Lou’s alleged girlfriend, while Mindy Kaling/Amita and Helena Bonham Carter/Rose dangle at the bottom with a

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191 In this context, Twitter refers not to the platform itself but to (a segment of) its userbase.
192 (@crellinpreaker), “i’ve never seen twitter analyze a trailer to the point where every single character, despite having ten seconds of screen time, now has a full lesbian backstory, before ocean’s 8. REVOLUTIONARY,” Twitter, December 22, 2017, https://twitter.com/crellinpreaker/status/944171096718241793.
193 CEO of misandry (@gretafromspace), “the sheer lesbian energy that every character exudes in ocean’s 8.... astounding....powerful,” Twitter, January 12, 2019, https://twitter.com/gretafromspace/status/1083867827826843651
194 Jung, “Which Ocean’s 8 Member Has the Most Powerful Lesbian Energy? [Ocean’s 8 Is a Lesbian Movie].”
description that gives little explanation as to how they can possess any “lesbian energy” at all.\textsuperscript{195} Although only one example, the \textit{Vulture} article clearly reflects the manner in which viewers have engaged with the film since its very announcement, making Lou the film’s centre of queer meaning, or foregoing the film’s characters altogether and focusing on Cate Blanchett. Starting with an investigation of Blanchett’s becoming of a lesbian icon, this chapter will trace the manner in which Blanchett’s stardom is engaged with by the \textit{Ocean’s 8} promotion to shape the way in which queer audiences are encouraged to read the text. Constantly interacting with the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy of \textit{Carol}, \textit{Ocean’s 8} enables queer readings of the film as much as it contains them, ultimately keeping them in a place that offers little to no threat to any of the dominant ideological structures of the Hollywood machinery.

**Establishing the Blanchett-as-Lesbian Fantasy**

Queer interest in Cate Blanchett pre-dates \textit{Ocean’s 8} by several decades, and before investigating the way in which her presence impacts reception it is necessary to consider the extensive queer persona developed in connection to the Blanchett name throughout her career. Breaking through with the film \textit{Oscar and Lucinda} (Gillian Armstrong, 1997) and rising to fame with the role as the British monarch in \textit{Elizabeth} (Shekhar Kapur, 2001), Blanchett had been a household name for over two decades by the time \textit{Ocean’s 8} was released, bringing a long history of image construction to the film. Although having had a queer following of sorts since at least the early 2000s (A 2001 article states that “the enchanting Blanchett,” at the time starring in \textit{The Lord of the Rings} (Peter Jackson, 2001), does not “[need] mythical jewelry to overpower even the strongest human heart – gay, lesbian, or otherwise”\textsuperscript{196}; in 2007, she was elected “coolest straight person,” with Todd Haynes calling her “so cool she calls ‘straight’ into question”; and in 2010 her name was featured on a list of “celebs that gay hearts wish would change teams”\textsuperscript{197}), much of her filmography, by her own admission, has been designed to avoid her being associated with too much of the same thing.\textsuperscript{198} Indeed, it is difficult to find concrete trends in her role choices, with much of her image instead being tied to the quality stamp that comes with working extensively with directors recognized as auteurs, such as Jim Jarmusch, Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese. This diversity of roles has led to her being described as an “actor’s actor,”\textsuperscript{199} or, a

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\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{196} Bruce C. Steele, “The Knight’s Crusade,” \textit{Advocate}, December 25, 2001, 41.


\textsuperscript{199} Keil, “Kate Winslet and Cate Blanchett: The Performance Is the Star,” 190.
term she herself much despises, a “chameleon,” her perceived talent presiding over her fame.\textsuperscript{200} Off-screen, Blanchett reinforces the emphasis on talent rather than fame by openly expressing her dislike for “the media-led circus” of celebrity culture, and keeping most of her personal life private and away from the spotlight, stating that “you make a decision when you walk onstage into this arena -- the public arena -- about what you’re prepared to wholesale and what’s not up for sale. And the lives of the people I care about are not up for sale.”\textsuperscript{202} Steering conversation away from her personal life, interviews with Blanchett are typically characterized by discussions of her profession, the directors she works with, or particular causes she fights for, leaving her audiences with little information regarding the person behind the characters she plays.

As a “chameleon,” Blanchett is highly polysemic: she offers something for everyone. For the \textit{Lord of the Rings} fans who meet her through her role as the elf Galadriel, a character described as the “most beautiful of all the house of Finwê,”\textsuperscript{203} her image of beauty easily extends itself through her status as a style icon. Frequently gracing the cover of \textit{Vogue},\textsuperscript{204} having close relationships with fashion houses including Givenchy and Alexander McQueen, being the face for skincare brand SK-II for fifteen years, and becoming the first global beauty ambassador for Giorgio Armani, her name has become strongly tied to beauty and fashion industries.\textsuperscript{205} At the same time, the range of fierce, independent female characters she has played ties in with her open support for movements such as #MeToo to construct a feminist image, while her involvement with Woody Allen and refusal to disavow him has simultaneously raised scepticism towards the authenticity of it.\textsuperscript{206} To yet other audiences, it is a desexualized innocence of youth – even as she continues to age – that stands out, while at the same time


\textsuperscript{202}Cate Blanchett in Giltz, “COOLEST STRAIGHT PEOPLE.”


\textsuperscript{204}Blanchett appeared on the cover of \textit{Vogue} 21 times between 1999 and 2020: five times in the US edition, ten times in Australia, three times in the UK, and once in the German, Korean, and Mexican editions.


her ability to play larger-than-life figures like Queen Elizabeth I in Elizabeth and Elizabeth: The Golden Age (Shekhar Kapur, 2007), a reincarnation of Bob Dylan in I’m Not There (Todd Haynes, 2007), and Katherine Hepburn in The Aviator (Martin Scorsese, 2004) creates an image of a star who, herself, is larger-than-life as well. Ultimately, her image has been highly dynamical, shifting and transforming with every role she plays, and near impossible to pin down for most of her career, so much that Keil has suggested that “her own persona […] is precisely what a skilled shapeshifter such as Blanchett cannot supply [to a film].”

Although her persona may be hard to pin down as one way or the other, the “skilled shapeshifter” or “chameleon” quality are a key aspect of the significance she holds to queer audiences. Particularly meaningful, to them, is her ability to turn into anyone, even crossing binary gender lines that are rarely crossed in film. Taking on male roles in I’m Not There, Manifesto (Julian Rosefeldt, 2015), and theatrical plays such as Shakespeare’s The War of the Roses (Benedict Andrews, 2009), Blanchett does not prescribe to ideas of what she can or cannot do based on her gender. Off-screen, she similarly crosses gender boundaries through her choice of fashion: frequently compared to historical gay icons including Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, she is sometimes glamorously feminine, at other times dapperly masculine, but always elegant and fashionable. In addition to this, she is unafraid to be associated with queer communities: she is outspoken about her support for gay rights movements, enthusiastically appeared with drag queens for a performance of lesbian singer Dusty Springfield’s You Don’t Own Me at the Stonewall Inn, and often mentions her ties to gay movements.

207 Keil, “Kate Winslet and Cate Blanchett: The Performance Is the Star,” 197.
neighbourhoods in Sidney, London and Brighton.\footnote{Blanchett: “We moved to London, and my husband and I said to each other, ’What is it about us and gay communities?’ Because we moved to Islington, to North London, which between that and Soho is the gay center of London. Then we moved to Brighton, which has a great gay population as well. And I’m from Melbourne originally, but I’ve lived my adult life in Sydney, which is a fabulously gay city.” In Giltz, “COOLEST STRAIGHT PEOPLE.” Jackson McHenry, “Cate Blanchett Lip-Synced ‘YoU Don’t Own Me’ at a Drag Show; Praise Be,” Vulture, n.d., https://www.vulture.com/2017/02/cate-blanchett-lip-synced-you-dont-own-me-at-a-drag-show.html.} This extends into her filmography as well, with two films by the openly gay director Todd Haynes (\textit{I’m Not There}; \textit{Carol}), two films based on novels by lesbian author Patricia Whitesmith (\textit{The Talented Mr Ripley Ripley} (Anthony Minghella, 1999); \textit{Carol}), as well as multiple films tackling queer themes, including \textit{Notes on a Scandal} (Richard Eyre, 2006) and \textit{Carol}.

Queer audiences have shown an interest in Blanchett since at least as early as 2001, but discussions of Blanchett in the \textit{Ocean’s 8} reception seem to focus almost exclusively on a much more recent aspect of her persona: the version of Blanchett that came to the forefront during, and especially after, the promotion and subsequent release of \textit{Carol}. Audiences frequently discuss both of them as existing in the same universe, often described as the “Cate-Blanchett-is-a-lesbian-cinematic-universe”\footnote{Robert Kessler (@robertkessler), “just so we’re all on the same page / OCEAN’s 8 takes place in the CAROL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE / thank you, god bless,” Twitter, December 11, 2017, https://twitter.com/robertkessler/status/940292720739876866.} or “The \textit{Carol} Cinematic Universe,”\footnote{F. (@effortlwssly), “No I’m still not over this carol (2015) and ocean’s 8 (2018) parallel,” Twitter, February 21, 2019, https://twitter.com/effortlwssly/status/1098618466855276545; oceansk8erdog, “@ GARY ROSS PLEASE EXPLAIN WAS THIS ON PURPOSE,” Tumblr, June 13, 2018, https://oceansk8rdog.tumblr.com/post/174853437820/gary-ross-please-explain-was-this-on-purpose.} despite how different the films are. This idea of a shared cinematic universe is further extended through discussions of parallels between the film, most notably the fact that both films contain a visually similar scene inside a car,\footnote{F. (@effortlwssly), “No I’m still not over this carol (2015) and ocean’s 8 (2018) parallel,” Twitter, February 21, 2019, https://twitter.com/effortlwssly/status/1098618466855276545; oceansk8erdog, “@ GARY ROSS PLEASE EXPLAIN WAS THIS ON PURPOSE,” Tumblr, June 13, 2018, https://oceansk8rdog.tumblr.com/post/174853437820/gary-ross-please-explain-was-this-on-purpose.} and through jokes about imagined parallels, such as a user who claims their “favorite part is when Rooney Mara gets on at the next stop to return Cate’s gloves.”\footnote{Rooney Mara is Blanchett’s co-star in \textit{Carol}; Mara’s scharacter returning Blanchett’s character triggers the romantic plot in the film. laura dern ordering a kale salad (@fitgirlprob), “My favorite part is when Rooney Mara gets on at the next stop to return Cate’s gloves,” Twitter, December 15, 2017, https://twitter.com/fitgirlprob/status/941462130288623616.} Even when not drawing direct parallels, the connection to \textit{Carol} is present, such as in babydog’s Letterboxd review stating, “biggest lesbian energy i’ve ever seen (and i’ve seen carol),”\footnote{natacha (babydog), “Ocean’s 8,” Letterboxd, July 21, 2018, https://letterboxd.com/babydog/film/oceans-eight/1/;} \footnote{..appelée Lili (@RealMspowers), “Anytime, i see ’Cate Blanchett’ character on any movie all i see is ’Carol’,” Twitter, June 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/RealMspowers/status/1005622847501471745.} and the wide range of \textit{Carol}-related images used to respond to the film, most popularly a
screenshot from a spoof of Carol in which Kate McKinnon, playing Carol Aird, states “I’m a frickin’ lesbian, okay?”

Looking purely at the two films, the high frequency with which Ocean’s 8 is tied to Carol may seem surprising. An independent melodrama based on a lesbian pulp novel could not be more different from a spin-off a Hollywood blockbuster franchise, with only Blanchett’s (and to a lesser extent, Sarah Paulson’s) involvement in both connecting the two. However, zooming out on Blanchett’s persona, it is clear that Carol was not just any other film in her filmography, but rather one that marked a clear turning point in Blanchett’s position amongst queer female audiences. While Blanchett has always had somewhat of a queer appeal, Carol lead to the creation of a strategically panaccessible star, making her a lesbian icon without having to be perceived as a lesbian. “Panaccessibility,” as used by DeAngelis, refers to a strategic construction of a star as relevant to both straight and gay audiences, not by declaring anything about the star’s sexuality (per se) but by presenting them as being receptive to both heterosexual and homosexual desire. Like commodity lesbianism, this panaccessibility does not turn away straight audiences, but rather co-exists with the straight understanding of Blanchett: the straight understanding, then, is never erased, nor are queer audiences unaware of its existence. The same is not necessarily true vice versa, however, and panaccessibility can be ignored or denied by straight and/or homophobic audiences who are not interested in understanding the star in any queer capacity. Although arguably not an entirely new development in her persona, the promotion and subsequent aftermath of Carol saw a significant increase in the interaction between Blanchett and queer female audiences that would transform almost seamlessly into the promotion and reception of Ocean’s 8.

From its premier at the Cannes film festival in mid 2015 to spring 2016, when it lost all six Academy Awards it had been nominated for, Carol was promoted in roughly two different ways: first, by denying it a position as a specifically lesbian text and instead highlighting the universality or “genderlessness” of its plot, and later, by playfully engaging with the film’s significant queer female

218 Laura Conway (@LauraConwayFix), “[I’m a frickin’ lesbian, okay?” Twitter, December 21, 2017, https://twitter.com/LauraConwayFix/status/943953058396016640.
220 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism.”
221 Blanchett had already played with a potential openness to lesbian desire in a 2007 interview where she stated “you might not be too far from the truth,” when asked if she has ever flirted with women. However, published in a magazine with a primarily gay male readership, it is questionable how much of this should actually be considered an engagement with queer female audience’s desire for her. See Giltz, “COOLEST STRAIGHT PEOPLE.”
222 Haynes has stated that “Of course, it’s a story about a lesbian relationship, but it’s really about how love itself makes you feel at a loss for language, and every gesture is weighted with anticipation and meaning.” Blanchett, similarly, told press that: “We have to have the conversation that it’s a love story about two women, because we haven’t moved past that yet as a society. […] But the actual content of the film and the experience of watching the film is more universally human than that.” Joe McGovern, “Prepare to Swoon for Todd Haynes’ 1950s Romance ‘Carol,’” EW.Com, August 17, 2015, https://ew.com/article/2015/08/17/carol-cate-blanchett-
following. Early on, the film, the first approach was prioritized, with director Todd Haynes going on the record to state that, “Of course, it’s a story about a lesbian relationship, but it’s really about how love itself makes you feel at a loss for language, and every gesture is weighted with anticipation and meaning.” In line with the film’s lack of discussion of identity politics and the push for an Academy Award nomination, the potential politics of the romance being between two women was constantly downplayed, with Rooney Mara stating the film has no political message and that “people who aren’t as open-minded or open-hearted aren’t going to feel defensive,” and Blanchett, similarly, telling press that “The fact that the women are the same gender isn’t important ... it becomes an epic love story just like Romeo and Juliet and that’s the way we thought about it. It’s love, love is love no matter who it is between.”

Some reviewers echoed the message of universality of the film, but for the most part press and audiences alike were not so easily convinced of the downplayed lesbianism. In fact, the main effect of the director and stars’ attempts to shift the focus from lesbianism to a depoliticized universality was a push towards the very topic they had attempted to steer away from. In a way, the attempt to treat the film’s romance as identical to a heterosexual one became a political statement in itself that generated both praise and criticism. On the one hand, queer voices in the film’s reception praised the film’s wide appeal for causing it to be as high profile and critically acclaimed as it was, such as Autostraddle’s Heather Hogan, who called it “maybe the best lesbian movie ever made,” because it was universal enough to be appealing to critics but still meaningful to lesbian audiences, unlike other critically acclaimed lesbian such as Blue is the Warmest Colour (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013). On the other hand, 


223 McGovern, “Prepare to Swoon for Todd Haynes’ 1950s Romance ‘Carol.’”
226 The Daily News wrote that “mostly the word ’lesbian’ doesn’t come up because this isn’t just a lesbian story. It’s a human one,” while The LA Times reviewed the film as “This is a love story between two women set at a time and place when that relationship was beyond taboo, but as its bravura filmmaking unfolds, those specifics fade and what remains are the feelings and emotions that all the best movie love stories create.” Kenneth Turan, “Review: The Beautiful and Thrilling ‘Carol’ Belongs among the Best Movie Love Stories,” Los Angeles Times, November 19, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-carol-review-20151120-column.html; Stephen Whitty, “Movie Review: Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara Play Lovers in Nearly Perfect ‘Carol,’” Nydailynews.Com, November 18, 2015, https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/cate-blanchett-rooney-mara-lovers-great-carol-article-1.2436197.
227 Blue is the Warmest Colour, as well as a number of other lesbian films, have frequently been criticized for catering towards the male gaze and fetishizing lesbians. Kate Aurthur, “'Carol' Offers A Rare Ending For A Lesbian Romance,” BuzzFeed, November 25, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/therese-wait-carol-spoilers; Moze Halperin, “The Brilliant Subversiveness of 'Carol's' Conventional Ending,” Flavorwire, November 23, 2015, https://www.flavorwire.com/548483/the-brilliant-subversiveness-of-carols-conventional-
the ‘universal’ discourse was strongly criticized, with Patricia White arguing it erases the sexualities of many of the people involved in its creation. A large part of the audience interested in the film, and the very film itself. Equally critical, Stephanie Fairyington calls out Blanchett specifically, stating that her focus on the universal comes across as a “contempt […] toward gays who, in her [Blanchett’s] view, make their sexualities too public and central to their identities” and that her comments are “ignorant—even, ironically, homophobic.”

Although on opposing sides of the discussions, each of these responses take the focus from the ‘universal’ and re-politicize it, with universality either standing for progression or for a more, perhaps unintentional, homophobic point of view.

At the same time, the director and stars’ apparent unwillingness to discuss the lesbian specifics of the film only made the topic more appealing to press, who frequently pushed interviews into the direction of the film’s sex scene between its two female leads. Ranging from comments about how rare it was for Blanchett to appear in sex scenes prior to Carol to inappropriate, borderline fetishizing or even homophobic remarks, most of the interviews focus on what it was like for Blanchett—nearly always assumed to be straight—to be involved in a lesbian sex scene as if it was something inherently different from a heterosexual sex scene. Although early on Blanchett frequently dodged the question by calling interviewers out on the fact that they would not have asked the same question if it concerned a heterosexual sex scene, later interviews include snappier answers that allowed the subject to linger a bit longer on the subject of lesbian sexuality. Appearing on Jimmy Kimmel Live (ABC, 2003 - ), she told the host “Yes Jimmy, girls have been having sex with girls and boys have been having sex with boys for a long, long time” after Kimmel called the sex scene a “tricky subject” and refused to call it by name.

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228 Openly queer people involved in the making of Carol include director Todd Haynes, Patricia Highsmith, the author of the book the film was based on, scriptwriter Phyllis Nag, and actress Sarah Paulson.


232 The Hollywood Reporter, “Cate Blanchett & Rooney Mara on Their Sex Scene in ‘Carol’ - Live From Cannes 2015.”
and after being pressed about whether *Carol* was “her first turn as a lesbian” by a *Variety* reporter, she reportedly responded, “Yes. Many times,” in what she later claimed was a misquote.233

The shift away from the universality of *Carol* marks an important change in the way Blanchett interacted with audiences and is essential in understanding how she went from an actress playing a lesbian, to a lesbian icon. Certainly, as a film focused on a lesbian romance that was not primarily catered towards straight male audiences,234 a large part of the audience could be expected to exist of queer women, but the sheer size of it still stood out. Nicknamed the “Cult of *Carol,*” the film attracted what has been described as a “Marvel-style fandom,” resembling more closely the kind of fandom expected with major sci-fi franchises than with an independent melodrama. Based primarily online, the “Cult of *Carol*” enthusiastically created fan art and videos, hosted extensive discussions (still active in 2020, five years after the film’s release) on message boards,235 and one fan who claimed to have seen the film over 400 times appeared in a Netflix promotional video, listing her “*Carol super-fandom*” as evidence that she was gay.236 In their usage, *Carol* came to be synonymous with lesbianism: its soundtrack or the text “*Carol* (2015) dir. Todd Haynes” added to images or videos of any two women appearing together to suggest they were lesbians,237 and a viewer’s experience of watching the film in a cinema and hearing a fellow audience member whisper to her husband, “Harold, they’re lesbians!” turned into a meme where

233 The full fragment from the *Variety* interview states: “When asked if this is her first turn as a lesbian, Blanchett curls her lips into a smile. ‘On film — or in real life?’ she asks coyly. Pressed for details about whether she’s had past relationships with women, she responds: ‘Yes. Many times,’ but doesn’t elaborate. Like Carol, who never “comes out” as a lesbian, Blanchett doesn’t necessarily rely on labels for sexual orientation.” Whether or not it actually was a misquote is unclear, with interviewer Ramin Setoodeh tweeting “When I asked Cate Blanchett if she’d had lesbian relationships in real life, she said: ‘Many times.’ She was accurately quoted.” The statement may instead have been sarcasm or, as one report speculated, “a publicity stunt on CB’s part.” See Ramin Setoodeh (@RaminSetoodeh), ‘When I asked Cate Blanchett if she’d had lesbian relationships in real life, she said: “Many times.” She was accurately quoted. #Cannes2015,’ *Twitter*, May 17, 2015, https://twitter.com/RaminSetoodeh/status/599900779122569216; Jack Malvern (@jackmalvern), ‘@RaminSetoodeh Do you think this might have been a publicity stunt on CB’s part?’ *Twitter*, May 17, 2015, https://twitter.com/jackmalvern/status/599942769906417665. Setoodeh, “Cate Blanchett Opens the Closet Door with Lesbian Romance ‘Carol’”; Jada Yuan, “Cannes: Cate Blanchett Explains What She Meant When She Said She’d Had ‘Relationships With Women,’” *Vulture*, May 17, 2015, https://www.vulture.com/2015/05/cate-blanchett-explains-relationships-with-women.html.

234 The film has been criticized for being made for heterosexual audiences rather than queer ones, but not for specifically straight male audiences, a criticism that most other critically acclaimed lesbian films have received. 235 “Discussion Forum,” *Carol Movie*, n.d., https://carolmovie.proboards.com.

236 *Netfilx Film Club*, “Inside the Biggest Carol Fan’s House | Film Fanatics | Netflix,” 5:16, September 3, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHFE49vULY.

merely the name “Harold” became code for lesbian (sub)text, something also widely used in reviews *Ocean’s 8*.  

To the audience interested in *Carol* for its allegedly universal love story and the critically acclaimed quality of the film – that is to say, the majority of critics – Blanchett defensively telling Kimmel that lesbian sex is normal, or sharing with the audience that she has had “many” relationships with women (then immediately going on the record to say it was a misquote and that all these relationships were platonic) may have been relatively neutral statements, well in line with the expected responses of a heterosexual, self-proclaimed ally of the queer community playing a lesbian character. For its enormous queer female audience, especially the online “Cult of *Carol*” however, these statements were easily ‘lesbianisable.’ Especially for a star who had already flirted with lesbianism by playing a lesbian, these statements easily extended a Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy beyond the film text and into the image of Blanchett outside of the Todd Haynes film.  

It is relevant here to briefly consider the mostly online nature of the “Cult of *Carol*” and the impact thereof on the shaping of Blanchett’s image post-*Carol*. The online circulation of materials in the construction of star images should not be underestimated. As Shingler & Steenberg point out, contemporary star images are circulated “far and wide over the Internet and only partially controlled (or controllable) by the stars themselves.” Even for stars without a social media presence, such as Blanchett, social media play a key role, with fan-run accounts being created in their name (not to be mistaken with impersonation) and every single appearance being dissected and potentially magnified at the users’ will. In addition to this, the internet offers ways for casual fans into materials previously only accessible to journalists, such as press junkets that are being recorded and published on YouTube, allowing statements that journalists would potentially not have seen as important to be seen by audiences regardless. With access to more information than ever before, star reception is increasingly a process of selective reading and willful forgetfulness. Despite this, it is not an exclusively audience-driven act by any means: stars can easily feed the process through their selection of what to share with the world in the first place.

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240 Social media accounts using Blanchett’s name or variations thereof surfaced frequently in the data for this research, including but definitely not limited to Twitter users @cateblanchett_0, @catexblanchett, and @lesbianblanchett. Many of these, such as @lesbianblanchett or @dykeblanchett, specifically reference the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy. Ibid.
For Blanchett, the online circulation of press materials in social media-appropriate formats has been as, or arguably even more, relevant to the construction of her image as the appearances themselves. Seemingly meaningless one-liners are taken from press junkets and circulated far outside of their original context, taking on a life of their own informed by and simultaneously reinforcing the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy. In a kind of chicken and egg situation, it is difficult to say if queer audiences’ growing interest in Blanchett came before or after Blanchett started dropping lesbianisable statements, but what is clear is that the combination was highly effective. As a prominent example, the aforementioned statement that she had had many relationships with women was refuted within a few days’ time and forgotten about in mainstream discussions, but had a much longer afterlife amongst queer female audiences. Despite Blanchett’s claim that she was misquoted being widely accepted even amongst these audiences and speculation about her sexuality stopping rather quickly, it still fed into the fantasy. Especially so in combination with other statements, such as Blanchett’s confession that she read lesbian love letters and banned “girl-on-girl” books in preparation for her role, her extensive knowledge of The Price of Salt, the lesbian pulp novel Carol was based on, and an increasingly frequent discussion of sexual topics, lesbian or not.241

During the Carol promotional campaign, the release and circulation of easily lesbianisable statements had an obvious marketing goal, not in the least because the growing queer female interest in Blanchett was profitable: a superfan who goes to see Carol in theatres twelve times and then streams it every day for a year, like the one featured in the Netflix promo, is exactly the kind of viewer producers and distributors like to see.242 Much like the commodity lesbianism in ‘gay window advertising,’ reaching new markets to bring in more consumers was an important aspect of continuing the appeal to queer female audiences.243 Not surprisingly, then, the circulation of the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy was never discouraged, and the scale at which it took place quickly grew well beyond the context of the film itself, lasting long after the film’s theatrical run was over. Although Blanchett’s previous chameleonistic image was tied to her shedding roles as soon as a film’s promotion was over, post-Carol Blanchett continued the interaction with queer female audiences she had built up during the Carol promotional run until well after the film had left theatres.

The high visibility of her queer female audience contributed strongly to the intensification of this. In one particular instance, a subtitled screenshot of Blanchett saying “a whole nation would go gay for me,” gained a life of its own, frequently being used in a manner that suggests Blanchett herself

241 On Demand Entertainment, “CAROL: Cate Blanchett on Rooney Mara, 50s underwear & 'Madonna boobs',' YouTube, 6:05, November 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpjgdy8W_v0; Setoodeh, “Cate Blanchett Opens the Closet Door with Lesbian Romance ‘Carol.’”
242 Netflix Film Club, “Inside the Biggest Carol Fan’s House | Film Fanatics | Netflix.”
243 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism.”
invented the statement. Its original context, however, was a Chinese interview in which influencer Gogoboi (Ye Si) told Blanchett that Chinese girls have a nickname for her that he claims roughly translates to “an expert at making girls flip out. Go crazy for you. Like they would go gay for you.” Blanchett, with an exaggerated disbelief responded, “would they? A whole nation would go gay for me?!”

Difficult to trace back—the interview exists only on the Chinese video site Tencent Video (v.qq.com), making it accessible only to speakers of Mandarin—it’s original context becomes entirely irrelevant, and Blanchett’s statement that she prefers one of the other nicknames given to her in the interview is lost in translation.

Yet even without removing statements from their original context, Blanchett’s lesbianisable statement can be extracted from a greater context that is not necessarily queer. Appearing on an episode of The Ellen DeGeneres Show (NBC, 2003 - ) in 2017, Blanchett promptly answered the question “which of your co-stars was the most fun to kiss?” with Carol co-star Rooney Mara. While the answer itself is obviously full of lesbian potential, strongly feeding the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy, the fragment lasts only five seconds and is never mentioned again, while the rest of the 3:27 clip uploaded on YouTube frequently references back to Blanchett’s innuendo-heavy statements about her husband. Despite this, the majority of comments under the YouTube clip show a willful forgetfulness, focusing almost exclusively on the Rooney Mara-kiss and the viewers’ excitement over it.

In a queer culture where gossip constitutes the unrecorded history, and things are not necessarily as they seem, the fantasy can ultimately be more important than the (presumed) truth. Just like the lines between friend and lover are blurry within queer female cultures, desire for a star can easily turn into a type of stardom where audiences essentially will the star to be a lesbian because “her filmic status is so easily recuperable into a certain lesbian or gay fantasy erotic.”

The truth about a star’s sexuality is entirely irrelevant here, not because it does not exist—but because it does not matter for the

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244 For examples, see the-sad-lesbian-clown, “yes. wes we would. (i mean i already am but i would go double gay for cate blanchett),” Tumbr, August 20, 2018, https://the-sad-lesbian-clown.tumblr.com/post/177202345546/yes-yes-we-would-i-mean-i-already-am-but-i; JAY MET BRIE (@cateblanchetjay), “cate blanchett signed on #oceans8 contract [A whole nation would go gay for me],” Twitter, June 19, 2018, https://twitter.com/cateblanchetjay/status/1009223795763269632.


247 Comments include “Cate mentioned Rooney and immedietly all my feelings came back,” “Screaming when Cate said that Rooney was the most fun co-star to kiss!!! I mean she’s been in a lot of movies and kissed a bunch of people and yet Rooney was the most fun to kiss. Okay bye. I think I had a heart attack,” and the self-aware “We are all here for that Rooney Mara answer XD.” Comments on The Ellen Show, “Cate Blanchett and Ellen Answer Ellen’s Burning Questions.”

248 Weiss, Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film, 30.


250 Whatling, Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film, 120.
fantasy. Indeed, queer female audiences are not naïve selective readers, blind to what occurs around the material they focus on, but rather show a strong awareness of the fact that their understanding of Blanchett-as-lesbian is a fantasy. In fact, a lot of the circulated materials are obviously fake, from images that are clearly edited (such as a photo of Blanchett holding up a sign that has the text “I’m gay” unrealistically layered on top of the image, or a poorly photoshopped picture of Blanchett wearing a shirt that says “nobody knows I’m a lesbian”), to ones containing fake closed captioning (a photo of Blanchett with the subtitle “I’m gonna give the gays everything they want” or one of Blanchett clapping her hands with the caption “[gay applause]”). Simultaneously relying on the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy and reinforcing it, these audiences are more than happy to blur the lines between what is real and what is not. As Heather Hogan wrote in response to Blanchett claiming she was misquoted: “Goodbye, sweet dreams of Lúthien and Galadriel locked in a sweaty tangle in Rivendell. (LOL, JK. I’m still going to dream that.).”

Writing in the context of gay male audiences and male stars, DeAngelis argues that these audiences’ fantasies may become political statements, “demonstrating that the workings of the individual imagination are capable of exceeding whichever restrictions the Hollywood film industry may impose on the representations of its characters in film narratives in the contemporary period.” To a degree, the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy displays a rejection of what is deemed acceptable or prescribed by audiences, and making a decision like Hogan to continue to dream about Blanchett’s Lord of the Rings character being “locked in a sweaty tangle” with another female character certainly offers empowerment through a feeling of having agency. At the same time, the deliberate and willful forgetfulness of queer female audiences is key in the separation of different parts of Blanchett’s star persona: her panaccessibility. Although being nicknamed a lesbian icon, Blanchett has a significant straight following as well, and to audiences not ‘in the know’ the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy is not necessarily so obvious. Despite Blanchett’s lesbianisable statements occurring almost exclusively in mainstream spaces where straight audiences can encounter them as well, they are often neutralized in a manner that allows audiences not interested or aware of the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy to shrug them off.

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@dykeblanchett, “happy lesbian visibility day to all the dykes, the butches, the futches, the femmes, the sapphists, the activists, the tops, the bottoms, the switches, the u-haulers, the middle-aged actresses, the bois, the studs, the stones, the lesbians who paved the way for us to follow and everyone who is still working it out,” Instagram, April 26, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_dKp6KgEOC.

roma (@larrozaromina), “[gay applause],” Twitter, June 1, 2019, https://twitter.com/larrozaromina/status/1134835408070688768; Michael Swartz (@MrMichaelSwartz), “The #Oceans8 reviews are in! [I’m gonna give the gays everything they want],” Twitter, June 9, 2018, https://twitter.com/MrMichaelSwartz/status/1005450212113076224.


DeAngelis, Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves, 234.

Hogan, “Sorry Y’all, Cate Blanchett Didn’t Actually Have Many Relationships With Women.”


off as irrelevant. In the aforementioned Gogoboi interview, Blanchett follows up her “a whole nation would go gay for me?!?” statement by pointing out that she prefers the other nickname Gogoboi claims Chinese girls have for her, the “devil king,” while her *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* appearance constantly reminds the viewer of her husband through the many jokes about her husband’s penis size.

To the non-queer viewer, the lesbianisable statements can easily go undetected: no matter how often she flirts with the potential of lesbianism, the statements’ wider context ultimately remains heterosexual.

It is in this way that her panaccessibility relies on the same commodity lesbianism as that of ‘gay window advertising.’ While Blanchett is not a product to be purchased in the exact same way a fashion item is, she is still a brand, a commodity to be marketed towards as profitable a market as possible. She enables and even acknowledges her queer female audiences, happily throwing them a bone every now and then, but at the same time makes sure to never give them so much that the fantasy can come to embody any kind of lesbian identity politics. Rich, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and considered attractive by both heteronormative and queer beauty standards, she is far removed from the lived realities of her queer female audiences, few of which, if any at all, will ever be able to be like – or be with – her. As such, her queer female audience is allowed to think of her as a lesbian and fantasize as much as they want, but once the fantasy starts to get too real – as best illustrated by the alleged misquote about her past relationships with women – it needs to be corrected almost instantly. As a star, Blanchett is allowed to be a lesbian icon – but never just a lesbian.

**Ocean’s 8 and the “Cate-Blanchett-is-a-Lesbian Cinematic Universe”**

With the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy well established before her involvement in *Ocean’s 8* was even announced, it becomes easier to see how Blanchett turned out to be a concentration of queer meaning within *Ocean’s 8*. As an epiphenomenal “constellation of narratives,” Blanchett’s role in any film is an extensive one: informed by past roles, interviews, public appearances, audience fantasies and desires, debunked rumours, fan-edited images, *Carol*-related lesbian memes, and so forth, she brings with her a multitude of information before she even becomes a character. That is not to say any and all roles she played after *Carol* were subject to queer readings, however. Certainly, it is possible to find individual fans who have read all of Blanchett’s roles as lesbian, but most of the work she has done post-*Carol* has not generated a collective queer response of any kind. *Ocean’s 8*, however, came to be an almost

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256 Gogoboi, ‘凯特·布兰切特：全国人民都为我变弯．’
257 *The Ellen Show, “Cate Blanchett and Ellen Answer Ellen’s Burning Questions.”*
258 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 492.
259 Ibid.
seamless extension of the panaccessible Blanchett persona with its roots in *Carol*, both relying on and reinforcing the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy in order to reach and resonate with queer female audiences.

At its most basic, *Ocean’s 8* and *Carol* had a temporal vicinity that caused for the film’s promotion to connect itself back to *Carol*, even in ways not necessarily on purpose. With Blanchett’s involvement in *Ocean’s 8* announced only eight months after *Carol* premiered, it was *Carol* and its promotional run that was still fresh on audiences’ minds, and *Carol* which was the source of images that media used to give Blanchett’s involvement in the film a face before any pictures connected to the film were publicized. As the highest profile film she had played a substantial role in since *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (Peter Jackson, 2013), *Carol* had become one of her signature roles, and *Carol* which, from roughly December 2017 onwards, would be featured on her IMDb page in the highlighted “Known For” section, as well as in the video section next to her biography. Not surprisingly, then, the earliest of responses to *Ocean’s 8* tied the film immediately back to the 2015 melodrama, with @cumberblanchett pointing out that Blanchett and Paulson had played lesbians ex-lovers in the melodrama and @elphablanchett stating that “After surviving Carol I thought I was safe. Now Ocean’s 8 is threatening my life again. Great.”

More significantly than that, however, *Ocean’s 8* offers a space already embedded with a queer potential through its very concept, as discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than filling this space with rather closed character narratives to balance out any epiphenomenal information brought in by the stars, the film is a star vehicle at its very core, relying strongly on the fame and previously established personas of its star-studded cast to promote the film and shape the characters within its narrative. Indeed,

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263 The earliest archived version of Blanchett’s Wikipedia page to show this, retrieved through the Wayback Machine, dates from February 2018. The page was not crawled by the WayBack Machine in the three months before that, so the change is an estimate and may have occurred anywhere between November 12, 2017 (the last archived version without *Carol* in the highlighted sections) and February 11, 2018 (the first version with the changes visible). At the time of writing, *Carol* is still the most visible film on her IMDb page. “Cate Blanchett,” IMDb, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000949/.

264 millie (@elphablanchett), “After surviving Carol I thought I was safe. Now Ocean’s 8 is threatening my life again. Great,” Twitter, October 26, 2016, https://twitter.com/elphablanchett/status/791377740654055424; Mari (@cakeblanchett_), “2015 gave us Carol and Abby / 2016 gives us whatever the fuck are the names of sarah paulson and cate blanchett ocean’s 8 characters,” Twitter, December 13, 2016, https://twitter.com/cumberblanchett/status/808715146365280256
with four major film stars (Sandra Bullock, Cate Blanchett, Anne Hathaway and Helena Bonham Carter) and music superstar Rihanna amongst its eight-headed ensemble cast, the announcement and subsequent promotion of and through the actresses is an essential aspect of its marketing strategy. Immediately reeling in audiences before so much as a synopsis has even been released, the announcement of the cast appeals to the stars’ often extensive fanbase, and simultaneously brings in a multitude of epiphenomenal information to the screen via the stars’ individual personas. Although having frequent action protagonist Bullock play the cool and collected type of leader she has played many times before, Anne Hathaway a diva that closely aligns with the image that was frequently painted of her in the past, and Helena Bonham Carter a character as eccentric as herself shows this was the case for all characters, the connection between Blanchett and her character was especially strongly emphasized. In one of his few interviews, director Gary Ross expressed that, “Cate, we always wanted. In fact, we wrote the character and named her ‘Cate.’” Explicitly blurring the lines between character and star, Ross’ statement encourages viewers to rely on their knowledge of Blanchett to fill in any gaps in her character, lending significance precisely to the version of Blanchett that is relevant to the particular viewer.

Certainly, Ross’ statement about Blanchett is a very explicit connection, and regardless of whether it was true or just a marketing tactic, it effectively blurs the lines between the character of Lou and Blanchett’s persona by suggesting the first was based on the latter. Yet, long before Ross went on the record to speak about the connection between Blanchett and Lou, the connection was already established in more subtle ways through the choice of information provided about the characters prior to the film’s release. As one of the first aspects of the film audiences gained access to, costume design

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265 Mindy Kaling and Sarah Paulson, although established television actresses in their own right, were not necessarily the household names some of the other stars were at the time of Ocean’s 8’s release. Additionally, at the time of Ocean’s 8’s announcement, Awkwafina was relatively unknown: best known for a YouTube hit titled “My Vag,” she had played a handful of minor television and film roles and a recurring role in the Girl Code (MTV, 2014-2015) but was far from a household name. Ocean’s 8 was her first high profile role and arguably boosted her film career, with the film’s development placing her on the radar for more substantial roles in blockbusters such as Crazy Rich Asians (John M. Chu, 2018), Jumanji: The Next Level (Jake Kasdan, 2019) and a lead role in the critically acclaimed comedy-drama The Farewell (Lulu Wang, 2019).

266 The list of Bullock vehicles in which she plays a calm, intelligent, and able protagonist is long, but includes her breakthrough film, Speed (Jan de Bont, 1994), Gravity (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), and The Heat (Paul Feig, 2013).


proved to be especially relevant in activating the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy, with the bulk of responses, all the way from the earliest released images from the film until well after the film’s release, focusing on the way that Blanchett’s character is dressed. This, of course, is unsurprising, considering the promotion’s heavy emphasis on the element of fashion. The styling of each character is frequently highlighted throughout its promotion, with costume designer Sarah Edwards discussing how each character’s style was designed to underline their personality. Instructed by director Gary Ross to make Lou look “chic, confident, and unfazed,” Edwards drew on New York fashion of the seventies and eighties (“that kind of new wave meets rock’n’roll era”) to create a look that referenced rock stars of the time.269 With the sources of inspiration including both men and women (Edwards mentions The Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards and Blondie singer Debbie Harry as the most important ones) this look was bound to be highly androgynous and, arguably, queer, as Edwards hints in a BuzzFeed interview: “you know, I think early on, there was an idea that that [making Lou look queer] might be the case.”270

While it makes sense to discuss characters’ fashion as a textual element, it needs to be noted that fashion was also key to the film’s promotion, with much of the early promotion relying entirely on the release of context-less set photos. In what appears to be the earliest article to analyse these set photos, released a month before the film’s synopsis was even revealed, Autostraddle’s Kayla Kumari Upadhyaya instantly draws the connection between Blanchett’s then still unnamed character, and her role in Carol: “We need to talk about the set photos that have been popping up that show Cate Blanchett wearing what can only be described as ‘Carol Aird’s wardrobe if Carol Aird were a modern-day rockstar and not a 1950s housewife.’”271 Pointing out that each of Blanchett’s Ocean’s 8 outfits “combines undeniably queer aesthetics,” Upadhyaya goes on to analyse each of the seven outfits that were featured in set photos of Blanchett at the time. The names given to each outfit, including “Cheetah Girls, If Cheetah Girls Were More Explicitly Gay And Not Just Subtextually Gay” and “Modern-Day Queer Willy Wonka” leave no doubt about the connections to queer cultural elements, both in fashion and pop culture references.272

While custom-made pieces by high end fashion brands such as Burberry and Givenchy, like Blanchett and her character are wearing, are unlikely to be found in the wardrobe of the average queer

272 Ibid.
woman. Lou’s specific, highly androgynous style ties in strongly with understandings of queer or specifically lesbian culture. To Upadhyaya as well as others, three aspects of Lou’s outfits stand out as particularly queer: her tendency to wear suits regardless of occasion, the many different vests she wears, and the combination of often clashing patterns, textures, or fashion items. While lesbian fashion is notoriously difficult to capture for marketers – with it often being driven by a rejection of consumerism – it is an important part of signalling sexuality, with specific fashion items or combinations serving as a way for queer women to recognize each other. Regardless of whether the costume designer wanted Blanchett to look queer, the specific design choices speak strongly to an audience that has learned to recognize sexuality through fashion and which links these specific fashion elements to their own queer cultural frame of reference. With statements such as, “name me one straight women who wears vest jackets & 6 necklaces at once. that’s right YOU CAN’T because only dykes do,” and “the blue suit... all the vests... if she isn’t a lesbian that’s a Crime,” Lou is pulled into queer female viewers’ understandings of their own culture(s), with viewers recognizing her as queer more than making her queer.

More than just wearing outfits recognized as queer when dressed as Lou, Blanchett blurs the lines between herself and her character by continuing the fashion choices made for her character when appearing as herself, outside of the context of the film. Like her character, the style icon has long been known for being stylish and daring in her fashion choices, and not afraid to embrace an androgynous style that has led to Harper’s Bazaar’s Shermin Ng calling her the “queen of suits.” No stranger to traditionally masculine wear in general, Blanchett abandoned dresses and skirts altogether during the promotion of Ocean’s 8, appearing exclusively in chic suits during interviews and red carpet appearances alike. This choice definitely did not go unnoticed, with BuzzFeed compiling “A List Of All The Suits Cate Blanchett Has Worn On The "Ocean's 8" Press Tour, For Science,” Vice playing into

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273 In the United States, the incomes of queer female households is relatively low, with 29% of bisexual women and 23% of lesbians living below the poverty line. While the spending power of LGBT households is generally high, this can mostly be attributed to the incomes of gay men. Oakenfull, “Lesbian Consumers and the Myth of an LGBT Consumer Market,” 113; American Psychological Association, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons & Socioeconomic Status,” n.d., https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/lgbt.


276 tessa / shep enthusiast (@rachlduncanseye), “I still can’t get over this I’ve watched the trailer like 7 times now & the blue suit... all the vests... if she isn’t a lesbian that’s a Crime,” Twitter, December 20, 2017, https://twitter.com/rachlduncanseye/status/943258158230732800.


the popularity of astrology amongst (queer) women online by listing “The Signs as Cate Blanchett’s Suits”279 and Twitter and Tumblr users creating photo collages of Blanchett in suits in every colour of the rainbow.280 Almost without exception, the discussions of Blanchett’s suits took place within queer contexts, either by specifically tying it to queer culture such as Jill Gutowitz’ tweet, “don’t say you ‘wish’ you were gay—it totally trivializes the taxing, everyday hardships that LGBTQ people face. like last night i had a stress dream that i couldn't find a picture of cate blanchett wearing a suit in every color of the rainbow & i woke up sweating and screaming,”281 by including it in the magazine’s pride coverage, or by specifically pointing out queer aspects of the suits, such as BuzzFeed’s commenting on the rainbow stripe down one of them.282

Regardless of whether Blanchett’s (stylist’s) choice to connect herself to the character was related to her panaccessibility, the press’ emphasis on the queerness of her suits does tie it back to the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy. Moreso, the obvious connection between her character and off-screen appearances prompted audiences to discuss the film through a ‘star-as-auteur paradigm,’ positioning Blanchett an active agent in the creation of a lesbian image. As early as December 2016, when only the first set photos were available, @gretchenatwood tweeted, “Even if the character wasn’t queer Cate would queer her up just for fun.” Reviews of the film similarly suggest that “Cate Blanchett thinks she’s in a modern-day Carol,”283 or that “ever since carol came out cate blanchett has been having a competition with herself to see how gay she can make every character she plays,”284 and an imagined dialogue between Blanchett and the director, reblogged over 30,000 times on Tumblr and frequently reposted on other platforms, states:

**Cate Blanchett:** I can’t believe I will be playing another lesbian character.

**Ocean’s 8 director:** You’re not.

**Cate Blanchett:** No, I’m gonna.285


280 Jill Gutowitz (@jillboard), “don’t say you ‘wish’ you were gay—it totally trivializes the taxing, everyday hardships that LGBTQ people face. like last night i had a stress dream that i couldn't find a picture of cate blanchett wearing a suit in every color of the rainbow & i woke up sweating and screaming,” Twitter, June 6, 2018, https://twitter.com/jillboard/status/1004170590574399488; merelybeing, “I would like to personally thank Cate Blanchett for wearing only suits for the Ocean’s 8 press junket,” Tumblr, June 5, 2018, https://merelybeing.tumblr.com/post/174614356186/i-would-like-to-personally-thank-cate-blanchett.

281 Jill Gutowitz (@jillboard), “don’t say you "wish" you were gay.”

282 Bate, “A List Of All The Suits Cate Blanchett Has Worn On The Ocean’s 8 Press Tour, For Science.”


285 themgaystuffs, “Cate Blanchett: I can't believe I will be playing another lesbian character. / Ocean's 8 director: You're not. / Cate Blanchett: No, I'm gonna,” Tumblr, April 30, 2018, https://themgaystuffs.tumblr.com/post/173458892094/cate-blanchett-i-cant-believe-i-will-be-playing; Sarah Joy (@SuupremeElise), “Cate Blanchett: I can't believe I will be playing another lesbian character. / Ocean's 8 director: You're not. / Cate Blanchett: No, I'm gonna,” Twitter, June 5, 2019,
The idea of Blanchett as an active agent in the creation of a lesbian character relates strongly to
the continuation of her panaccessible image outside of the film. As already mentioned, Blanchett’s subtle
engagement with queer female audience that was vital in feeding the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy
extended after the Carol promotional run was over, strongly overlapping, and even reinforced by, the
promotional run of Ocean’s 8. Indeed, the aforementioned The Ellen DeGeneres Show appearance in
which she calls Rooney Mara the most fun co-star to kiss took place in October 2017, more than a year
after Blanchett’s involvement in Ocean’s 8 had been confirmed. The Ocean’s 8 promotional run
specifically saw a similar side of Blanchett as well, simultaneously relying on and reinforcing the
fantasy. There is a frequent use of innuendo amongst Blanchett and her co-stars that engages the
Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy in much the same manner as during the Carol promotional run. Asking
Bullock, “I would ‘do’ you in the name of art, would you do me?,”286 (talking about) touching her co-
stars breasts,287 and telling Bullock “you can dip into me anytime,”288 Blanchett is not afraid to use
sexual innuendo in relation to her co-stars, always protected by the safety of her out-of-reachness and
heterosexuality. Even kissing can be done within these confines, with a set photo of Bullock and
Blanchett pushing their faces together circulating widely, safely protected from becoming too lesbian
by having both actresses wear a mask of Anne Hathaway’s face.289 Even when not using any innuendo,
there is still plenty for queer audiences to find, some of it driven by how easily lesbianisable the
statement is, while at other times the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy changes the meaning entirely.
Blanchett saying, “There was a lot of women, and I like that…” in a Twitter interview circulates as a
relatable statement, with viewers expressing that they, too, like women, but certainly not in a platonic
way.290 Similarly, In an already somewhat sexual interview filled with vagina-related jokes, Blanchett
explains how her character “rides a bike,” but when her co-stars erupt in laughter, she exclaims “she
rides a dyke?! Did I say she rides a dyke?!.”291 Whether it was a misunderstanding or a Freudian slip

https://twitter.com/SuupremeElise/status/1136299302442037248; Mrs. Organa (@LtAndrogynous), “Cate
Blanchett: I can’t believe I will be playing another lesbian character. / Ocean’s 8 director: You’re not. / Cate
Blanchett: No, I’m gonna,” Twitter, July 10, 2018,
https://twitter.com/LtAndrogynous/status/1016601400606851072.
286 Lemon, “Cate Blanchett would do Sandra Bullock for money..and art,” YouTube, 3:29, June 15, 2018,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWuF5ZsqkY.
287 Marie Claire, “The Cast of ‘Ocean’s 8’ Play How Well Do You Know Your Co-Star | Marie Claire,” YouTube,
288 The queer double meaning of these statements if frequently pointed out by users adding the name
“Harold,” to posts, referring to the Carol-related “Harold, they’re lesbians” meme. Merelybeing, “HAROLD,”
Tumblr, May 28, 2018, https://merelybeing.tumblr.com/post/174338031961/harold; Entertainment Tonight,
“Ocean’s 8’: Sandra Bullock, Cate Blanchett and Awkwafina (Full Interview),” YouTube, 8:09, May 28, 2018,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ep_2MZMuvlc.
289 Dailymail.com reporter, “Sandra Bullock and Cate Blanchett Share Silly Kiss While Wearing Anne Hathaway
Masks on Set of Ocean’s 8,” Mail Online, December 2, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~/article-
3995890/index.html.
290 eliz (@rachelweizz), “Ocean’s 8 [There were a lot of women, and I like that...],” Twitter, June 9, 2018,
https://twitter.com/rachelweizz/status/1005564353654018050; Twitter, “#Fantweets with Cate Blanchett,”
291 Lemon, “Cate Blanchett would do Sandra Bullock for money..and art.”
ultimately does not matter to the audience; the mention of the word “dyke” is enough to add further fuel to the fantasy.  

Keeping Queerness Safe through Queering-by-Proxy

Within an already ambiguous narrative and with Blanchett, especially the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy, merged with the character of Lou, Ocean’s 8’s epiphenomena have, as Barker suggested they would, effectively provided a specific way for audiences to move into the text. Accessible especially for audiences with a specific queer cultural capital, Ocean’s 8 was queered well before it was released, with many users not being afraid to announce their expectations, such as @itslauranyap’s statement that “Oceans 8 is gonna be the best gay movie in years without even trying,”@catexblanchett sharing, “just a reminder that lou is gay in ocean’s 8,” and a near-endless amount of users stating “me arriving this year at the movie theatre to watch ocean’s 8,” with a screenshot of Ellen Page saying “I am here today because I am gay” attached to it, all months or even more than a year before the film was released. The gradual release of further information about the film’s content, such as the characters’ names, only contributed to the expectations, with a ten second clip introducing Blanchett with the text “Cate Blanchett is Lou,” prompting responses such as, “This is perhaps the gayest news to come out of the movie so far. A straight woman going by Lou? Sounds fake,” and the trailer inspiring users to dissect every single potentially queer element the film could offer them. In some cases, the

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292 Tess (@isabellehuppert), “She really tried to call Lou and Debbie buddies then thought she had “accidentally” said she rides a dyke. Her subconscious JUMPED out,” Twitter, June 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/isabellehuppert/status/1007539047076466688.
297 Oceans8movie (@oceanns8movie), “Cate Blanchett is Lou. See the new #Oceans8 trailer tomorrow,” Twitter, April 11, 2018, https://twitter.com/oceanns8movie/status/9841038050873731265.
299 Evie (@spiralofcolors), “me the second I heard cate blanchett’s voice in the ocean’s 8 trailer: that’s gay activity,” Twitter, December 19, 2017, https://twitter.com/spiralofcolors/status/943118397956431873; tessa / shep enthusiast (@rachlduncanseye), “I still can’t get over this. I’ve watched the trailer like 7 times now & the blue suit... all the vests... if she isn’t a lesbian that’s a Crime,” Twitter, December 20, 2017, https://twitter.com/rachlduncanseye/status/943258158230732800; r (@crellinpreaker), “i’ve never seen twitter analyze a trailer to the point where every single character, despite having ten seconds of screentime, now has a full lesbian backstory, before ocean’s 8. REVOLUTIONARY,” Twitter, December 22, 2017, https://twitter.com/crellinpreaker/status/944171096718241793.
expectations were so high that members of the audience jokingly threatened to sue or burn Warner Bros.
to the ground if the film did not contain any queer characters, and that “if cate blanchett isn't gay in ocean’s 8 im— im still gonna swoon whatever my gay ass is ready.”

With these expectations in mind, viewers enter a text not necessarily needing to be introduced to the queer meaning in the film, but rather to find ‘evidence’ to support the queerness they are already expecting. For viewers with the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy in mind, ambiguous situations are easily tilted in favour of a specifically queer reading with the film – intentionally or not – clearly structuring the fantasy through specific scenes. Some of these serve simply to reinforce the argument that Blanchett’s character is a lesbian, with viewers pointing out masculine-coded elements of her character, such as her body language (“sitting like she has the biggest dick of ‘em all.”), the energy she exudes (“big dick energy” or “big dyke energy”), and her interest in motorcycles (“Butch Biker Blanchett,”). In addition to these, however, viewers frequently point out that feeding someone food with your fork, as Debbie does with Lou in a scene where they are having dinner together at a diner, is not a platonic act, with @natshalyonnes stating that “there was no heterosexual explanation for debbie needing to feed lou off her fork,” jose describing the scene as “sandra bullock fed cate blanchett food like they were on a date,” and indi (isi) declaring that “spoon feeding your crimes partner in the middle of a dingy new york diner while u discuss robbing the rich BLIND and framing an assholë dude for the crime ........... LADIES IT JUST DOESN'T GET GAYER THAN THAT.” Likewise, Lou kissing Debbie’s head after she is released from jail made, as van goth described it, “the Carol jump out,”

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303 JAY MET BRIE (@cateblanchetjay), “lesbian culture is watching Ocean’s 8 over and over just to see cate blanchett eye fucking sandra bullock with her big dyke energy,” Twitter, August 22, 2018, https://twitter.com/cateblanchetjay/status/1032077164546609152; jaymie (simmosixter), “cate blanchett serving big DYKE energy in ocean’s 8 thoooo, i was literally wheezing in my seat when she stepped out in that sparkly green jumpsuit what the FRICK,” Twitter, June 30, 2018, https://twitter.com/simmosixter/status/1013164752502214656; Kami Renee (@ReneeKami), “Ocean’s 8 may be the feministic movie of the century but I will never know cause I am far to distracted by the big dick energy of Cate Blanchett what is this movie about?,” Twitter, June 14, 2019, https://twitter.com/ReneeKami/status/1139641031958388737.


while Lou calling Debbie her “partner” and the two joking about a proposal (LOU: “Oh, honey, is this a proposal?” DEBBIE: “Baby, I don’t have a diamond yet!”) played key elements in the construction of elaborate theories into a relationship between the two.\textsuperscript{307}

As these elements already indicate, nearly all of the scenes bearing a particular queer significance to audiences involve the relationship between Lou and Debbie. Theories about the nature of the Lou/Debbie relationship are amongst the most common discussions by audiences, with users such as @dorseyhorsey asking if they “are supposed to be lovers or if Cate herself just brings an undeniable lesbian energy to everything,”\textsuperscript{308} while others forego any speculation and simply declare them a couple.\textsuperscript{309} With very little of the queer discussion of Ocean’s 8 featuring Bullock/Debbie prior to the film’s release, Debbie’s queering occurs not through epiphenomenal information Bullock carries into the text, but rather through her proximity to Blanchett/Lou. This queering-by-proxy occurs almost simultaneously in the film and the final stages of the film’s promotional run, at the same time or shortly after the film’s release. As already discussed earlier, Blanchett appeared unafraid to use sexual innuendo around her co-stars during much of the promotion. While she did not necessarily discriminate between any of her co-stars, Blanchett and Bullock’s lead roles in the film caused the two of them to be interviewed together more frequently than with any of the other stars, inadvertently making Bullock the most frequent recipient of the innuendo. Whether it was Blanchett calling Bullock “hot” or telling her she would “do” her for art,\textsuperscript{310} Bullock was frequently on the receiving end of Blanchett’s lesbianisable statements – even if they were clearly stated in a joking manner.

\textsuperscript{310} Lemon, “Cate Blanchett would do Sandra Bullock for money..and art”; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhFCsfbs6k.
More importantly, however, is the two women’s receptiveness towards queer readings that were prompted by Bullock’s proximity to Blanchett in the film text. In many ways, Blanchett is the lesbian fantasy of the film, activated through the synergy between the star and her character. As a result, any relationship she finds herself in, then, is doubly suspicious: on the one hand, because friendship so easily translates into something more, and on the other, because if Lou is understood as a lesbian, her relationships with other women are not necessarily platonic. While scenes such as the two women jokingly talking about a “proposal” and Debbie feeding Lou food with her fork clearly tilt that balance even further in the text, others rely more strongly on highly specific audience knowledge of epiphenomenal elements which have fed into the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy. One scene in particular stands out here. After the women have completed the heist and are, one by one, shown to exit the Met gala in extravagant dresses, Lou – who smuggled out her piece of stolen jewelry via a back entrance – meets up with Debbie. Although there is no reason for Lou to be dressed up in this scenario, Lou is shown in a sequined jumpsuit in this scene, walking down the street towards Debbie, who lovingly gazes at her ‘partner’ as she nears her. With the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy stemming at least partly from audience’s desire for Blanchett, Debbie, here, offers a welcome spot of identification for viewers as she stares at Blanchett in much the same way as the audience does – and has, ever since her role as Carol Aird, which positioned her as the object of desire.

More than just referencing Carol, however, it plays into an event that strongly reinforced the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy separate from Ocean’s 8 just a month before the film’s release: Blanchett’s appearance alongside Kristen Stewart in May 2018 that quickly went viral online. Serving as members of the jury at the 2018 Cannes festival, the two women were spotted together on multiple occasions, with several photos showing them, as Keely Flaherty describes, “clearly starring in their own version of Carol 2.”

In most of these photos, Stewart, who does not label her sexuality but is currently dating a woman and widely recognized as queer, was seen gazing at Blanchett in a way that was quickly identified online as a look of desire. Although seemingly unrelated, the connection between Stewart gazing at Blanchett and audiences gazing at Blanchett in Ocean’s 8 was quickly drawn by viewers, who in May declared the Cannes-photos “a tantalizing glimpse into what Ocean's 8 Twitter will be like next

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312 berrie (@sckberry), “Kristen Stewart staring at Cate Blanchett as if she can't decide between being Cate Blanchett or being WITH Cate Blanchett is the biggest 20gayteen mood,” Twitter, May 8, 2018, https://twitter.com/sckberry/status/993862373718089728; Hafeezah Nazim, “Can We Talk About The Way Kristen Stewart Looks At Cate Blanchett?,” Nylon, May 9, 2018, https://www.nylon.com/articles/kristen-stewart-cate-blanchett-adorable-looks.
month,”313 and after watching the film shared that, “I get it now, Kristen. I totally get it.”314 With gazing at Blanchett being declared as a highly relatable queer female act, the scene in which Debbie looks at Lou walking down the street does not only tell the viewer something about Blanchett’s position in the film. It directly implicates something about Debbie’s sexuality as well: on her own she may rarely be read as queer, but when seen gazing at Lou, she easily becomes a “dyke mood.”315

While the Cannes-connection, established so shortly before the film’s release, could not have been anticipated by the producers, the way the Debbie/Lou relationship is treated in the film is very obviously open for queer readings prompted by such unplanned epiphenomenal influences. Although the details of Debbie and Lou’s supposed long history together never made it into the film itself,316 the film clearly enables a specific narrative regarding their relationship by placing it in parallel to the relationship between Debbie and the former partner who wronged her, Claude. As discussed in the previous chapter, Claude, like Lou, was Debbie’s “partner,” never described in more concrete terms than that and only suggested to be Debbie’s ex through connotation. Furthermore, as viewers are eager to point out, Debbie’s relationship with Claude is described as having taken place while Debbie and Lou were “going through a rough patch,” implying the nature of the Debbie/Claude relationship was similar to the Debbie/Lou relationship. Of course, a heteronormative reading of these parallels can exist, and the dialogue can easily be understood as referring to them working together – quite literal partners-in-crime – rather than being in a relationship. Yet, this parallel is interesting when considering the film within its Hollywood blockbuster context, where queer readings typically “require a convenient forgetfulness [...] of what happens to these images” because even when the films open up for a potential queer reading at one point, “heterosexual symmetry is usually restored with a vengeance.”317 Unlike the bulk of Hollywood productions, Ocean’s 8 does not demand the viewer to forget anything for the text to be read queerly – and never positions heterosexuality as the appropriate resolution. Rather, the queer

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313 Gavia Baker-Whitelaw (@hello_tailor), “Kristen Stewart/Cate Blanchett Cannes Twitter is a tantalizing glimpse into what Ocean’s 8 Twitter will be like next month,” Twitter, May 11, 2018, https://twitter.com/Hello_Tailor/status/994939786195537923.
314 Others pointed out that, “cate blanchett is really gonna promote ocean’s 8 after all the cannes chaos she is feeding the gays so good,” and that “Cate Blanchett playing “Lou” (lol) in Ocean’s 8 is easily the most lesbian thing to have happened since [...] the summer Kristen Stewart spent gazing at Cate Blanchett at Cannes.” Maloja Snake, “I’ve just seen #Oceans8. I get it now, Kristen. I totally get it; “Twitter, June 23, 2018, https://twitter.com/MajolaSnake1/status/1010623312584638466; panchii (@catexblanchett), “cate blanchett is really gonna promote ocean’s 8 after all the cannes chaos she is feeding the gays so good,” Twitter, May 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/catexblanchett/status/997475370956800001; Jung, “Which Ocean’s 8 Member Has the Most Powerful Lesbian Energy? [Ocean’s 8 Is a Lesbian Movie].”
316 Blanchett and Bullock have repeatedly stated that many scenes focusing on their backstory were shot, but did not make it into the final cut of the film. See Access, “‘Ocean’s 8’: Cate Blanchett, Awkwafina & Sandra Bullock Reveal Which Co-Star Stanned Over Rihanna,” YouTube, 6:52, May 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhFCSfFbS6k.
317 Mayne, “Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship.”
reading can co-exist with the heteronormative reading; arguably, the heteronormative reading even enables the queer reading. Indeed, while both relationships can be understood heteronormatively, doing so pushes the heterosexual relationship into the platonic as well, making “partner” Claude, like Lou, merely a professional partner. Meanwhile, if the Debbie/Claude relationship is understood as romantic/sexual, its equation to the Debbie/Lou relationship leaves enough openness for Debbie to be constructed as bisexual – having dated both Claude and Lou – with relative ease. The previous literature, which – as a product of its time – focuses strongly on lesbian readings encounters a problem here. While reading Debbie as a lesbian would absolutely require what Mayne described as a “convenient forgetfulness,” reading her as bisexual in this context fits perfectly with the narrative as is. Not surprisingly, then, the parallel has resonated extensively with audiences, who state that “lou and debbie were/are lovers and the rough patch was a brief break up those are the facts,” and even develop extensive theories regarding their history.

Discussions of the text with the stars after the film’s release only serve to reinforce this further. Whenever interviewers ask about queer readings of the film, Blanchett and Bullock leave the question open-ended but combine this with a lot of innuendo-driven jokes between the two of them. When the two women are asked if there was anything romantic going on between their characters, Bullock responds “not in Ocean’s 8, but maybe in Ocean’s 9?” followed by the two actresses teasingly calling each other “hot.” Similarly, when an interviewer by the Gay Times (often re-uploaded under titles such as “Sandra Bullock and Cate Blanchett being gay for almost 2 minutes straight”) addresses how fans “sensed a chemistry” or a potential romantic past between their characters, the two state, “it’s just that we have such a good chemistry” and that they are “just so sexual as beings in general.” Most of the conversation after that continues between openness and flirting with the idea of them/their characters being a couple:

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319 As one Letterboxd user describes in a list titled “Films with actually bisexual characters”: “Sandra Bullock admits to hooking up with Richard Armitage when she was "going through a rough patch" with Cate Blanchett. She's technically talking about having done heists with him, but she also has a romantic relationship with him - and given that Blanchett’s character is coded as lesbian in everything from her motorcycle riding to her innuendo-riven dialogue (“She’s the best pair of hands I know”, she drools over Awkwafina's street magician) it’s fair to make an assumption here.” Graham Williamson (gdw), “Films With Actually Bisexual Characters,” Letterboxd, n.d., https://letterboxd.com/gdw/list/films-with-actually-bisexual-characters/.


BLANCHETT: We were playing old friends, Debbie has been inside for a long time, and-
BULLOCK: Inside jail
BLANCHETT: Inside j- not inside me!
[…]
BULLOCK: We’re gonna break up
BLANCHETT: Yeah, we’ve broken up. It’s over.
[…]
INTERVIEWER: If there is a sequel, do you like the idea of that [romantic] relationship being explored?
BULLOCK: If it was right for the plot, if it was something organic.
BLANCHETT: Depends on what you’re wearing.  

Rather than de-escalating any queer readings, the film and the press junkets are engaged in an endless cycle of openness – never fully confirming anything, but at the same time never denying anything. The lack of denial when asked about queer readings of the film does not mean that all queer readings are equally welcome, however. Just like Blanchett’s star image, there is an important distinction between queer readings that are encouraged by the text, and queer readings that are ultimately deemed too queer. In one of the interviews in which Bullock and Blanchett are asked about a potential romance between any of the characters, Bullock starts off an answer by saying “you have eight of us who are LGBT…” Before Bullock can take a pause to think about the rest of her answer, Blanchett immediately jumps in to add the word “friendly” in a sharp tone that is quite distinct from the giggly nature of the conversation. Where Bullock’s pause could accidentally have served as a full acknowledgement of the queerness of their characters – especially in contemporary online space where videos are easily cut up and distributed in fragments – Blanchett’s immediate intervention ensures the ambiguity of the statement remains intact.

Like Blanchett stepping in to prevent Bullock’s statement from becoming too queer, the concentration of queerness around Blanchett also serves to keep queer readings limited to a form of queerness that poses no threat – either to the ambiguity of the text, or the dominant ideological structures of Hollywood. White, rich, able-bodied, only political on a surface level, and most importantly heterosexual, the queerness of Lou, like that of Blanchett, is always safe. No matter how often users declare her a lesbian, her queerness will never acknowledge the existence of a lesbian community, and, through its reliance on a commodity lesbianism entirely removed from an actual lesbianism, never refer

to identity politics in any meaningful capacity. The same applies to the elements she is allowed to queer-by-proxy. Bullock, without any significant queer connections, brings in no further epiphenomenal information that would ever threaten to push the fantasy into the real. By making her character’s queerness entirely reliant on her proximity to Blanchett/Lou, she is also unable to spread this queerness in any meaningful way, with none of her interactions with other characters collectively being read as queer.

Meanwhile, Blanchett’s ability to queer-by-proxy is not allowed to take place in a manner that could threaten the perfectly consumable commodity lesbianism she embodies. She is rarely featured alongside actresses other than Bullock in press appearances, and her character is effectively cut off from any recurring interactions with any of the women in the film, operating either together with Debbie or entirely on her own. This is especially notable when considering Paulson’s role in the production. Like Blanchett, Paulson brings to the film an extensive network of queer epiphenomena, most closely tied to her own sexuality. Although hesitant to label herself, Paulson is open about her real-life relationship with actress Holland Taylor, has a significant queer female following, and has played lesbian characters on multiple occasions, including the very film that birthed the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy, Carol. The queer significance she holds is not as easily separable from Paulson as a person, however, due to the widespread knowledge of her sexuality, and integrating it in the text would take away from the deniability of Ocean’s 8’s queerness. Queer female audiences are often highly invested in “real lesbians” play lesbian characters, and the emancipatory significance of attaching a potential lesbian fantasy to an actress in a relationship with a woman would be unlikely to go unnoticed.

Not surprisingly, then, the epiphenomenal information about Paulson is engaged with relatively little, and arguably even rejected. While the earliest responses to the film saw viewers point out that Blanchett and Paulson had played (ex-)lovers before in Carol, and expressed hope that Paulson would play a lesbian character, these had effectively been simmered down by the time the film was actually released. It is not difficult to see how the increasing amount of promotional materials prompted queer readings of Paulson to tone down. Aside from the Today appearance that has been widely discussed in the previous chapter, Paulson rarely appears in the company of Blanchett during the film’s promotional

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324 Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 494.
327 Mari (@cakeblanchett_), “2015 gave us Carol and Abby / 2016 gives us whatever the fuck are the names of sarah paulson and cate blanchett ocean’s 8 characters,” Twitter, December 13, 2016, https://twitter.com/cumberblanchett/status/808715146365280256.
run, often featuring alongside Awkwafina, Mindy Kaling, who are both rarely the subject of queer readings, in press junkets and media appearances instead. Her character’s fashion, which, as established, was used to communicate a personality from the earliest set photos onwards, is toned down and feminine, perfectly evoking the image of the type of conservative housewife few people would associate with an out-and-proud lesbian. In the film, her husband never appears on screen, but he is mentioned (DEBBIE: “How do you explain all this to your husband?”) to leave no doubt about the gender of this invisible partner, and the contrast between the suburban housewife Tammy and a lesbian is even played with in a scene where Tammy mispronouncing “gala” as “gay-la” is the butt of a joke. While the joke resonated with audiences, it did so in a way separate from Sarah Paulson, often being used to refer to the general queerness of the film rather than her character specifically. Even for audiences who are aware of Paulson’s sexuality, this clear disconnect between Paulson the actress and her character Tammy that is never re-activated by a proximity to Blanchett greatly reduces the extent to which Tammy can be read as queer. As one user expresses quite literally: “the fact that sarah paulson is an openly gay woman (shoutout pride yas) & cate blanchett's character was STILL so radiantly the gayest thing in ocean's 8.”

Paulson’s position in the film clearly shows that while Ocean’s 8 is open to interacting with elements of queer culture in order to encourage a lesbian fantasy, it can never too close to the real; too close to having an undeniable queerness. Through its reliance on commodity lesbianism, the film never actually creates a space for real queer politics of any kind. Indeed, as Clark already wrote back in the 90s, in commodity lesbianism “there is no lesbian community to come out to, no lesbian community to identify with, no indication that lesbianism or ‘lesbian style’ is a political issue.” By relying almost exclusively on the pre-existing Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy to bring queerness into the ambiguous narrative, Ocean’s 8 can steer queer readings in a way that allows them to flourish while simultaneously ensuring they never flourish beyond the producers’ control. Most importantly, in Ocean’s 8 there is never any queer politics, no queer community – just a lesbian fantasy.

329 sonja (@leiaschuyler), “the fact that sarah paulson is an openly gay woman (shoutout pride yas) & cate blanchett’s character was STILL so radiantly the gayest thing in ocean’s 8,” June 16, 2018, https://twitter.com/leiaschuyler/status/1008153169791275008.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the “(in)appropriateness” or the resistant nature of queer readings through a case study of *Ocean’s 8*. Using a netnographic reception method, I have placed reception, promotion and the film itself in conversation with each other to explore the role of commodification in the queer female meaning-making process. In understanding the film as a commodity more than just a text, this thesis was able to analyze the generation of queer female meaning in a popular film text as a complex interaction between the film, its epiphenomena, and the film text, rather than something that is inherent to the text or brought in entirely by the audience.

In the chapter *From Loving Women to Women-Loving-Women*, I looked into the film’s use of ambiguity to maximize its audience by simultaneously appealing to queer and non-queer audiences. As an all-female reboot of a pre-existing franchise, gender was strongly connected to the film’s promotional identity, referred to by the director as the “heist in heels.” Placing its female stars at the heart of the film and its promotion, the promotional run of the film focused on the performance of a friendship that felt authentic to the audience. This friendship narrative prompted not just responses about friendship per se, but also ones that turned the relationships between the women into something more *queer*. While, for a straight-platonic reader, this narrative could perfectly well be seen as a *homosocial* one, the specific perspective of queer female viewers, for who the lines between friend and lover can often be blurry, easily turned it into something *homosexual*.

Rather than attempting to negate such readings, the film and its epiphenomena allowed them to flow freely by leaving out the heterosexual resolution that is typical for Hollywood productions and therefore keeping the polysemy perfectly intact. During the promotion, men were rarely discussed, and if they were it was usually to make fun of them, something which queer female audiences were quick to tie back to lesbian politics of independence from men. The film, similarly, downplayed heterosexuality, going as far as to make its only substantial heterosexual subplot completely deniable. Additionally, the common promotional tactic of pitting actresses against each other in the media to negate the intimacy they display in the film is absent in *Ocean’s 8*, emphasizing the positivity of relationships amongst women – regardless of their specific nature. With a love for women, whether in a feminist or a romantic/sexual way, at the forefront, queer and straight-platonic readings of the film could not just peacefully coexist, but even unknowingly reinforced each other, creating a perfect polysemy in the text, promotion and reception that allows the film to resonate as widely as possible.

The chapter *All (Queer) Roads Lead to Blanchett* identified Cate Blanchett’s stardom as a major contribution to the queer readings of the film. As a star vehicle at its very core, the film relied strongly on the “constellation of narratives”\(^{331}\) Blanchett brought into the film before she even became a character.

\(^{331}\) Klinger, “Digressions at the Cinema,” 15.
in the film text. Although having had a certain queer appeal for more of her career, particularly relevant to readings of her character was Carol, a film which promotional run prompted the creation of a Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy which extended well beyond the lesbian melodrama it originated in.

This Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy was drawn into Ocean’s 8 through the blurring of lines between Blanchett and her character, Lou. Fashion, especially the way Lou’s style was recognized as being lesbian by queer female audiences, played a particularly relevant role here, with the androgynous outfits of Lou being reflected in Blanchett’s fashion choices during the film’s promotional run. Effectively encouraging viewers to bring their knowledge of the Blanchett-as-lesbian fantasy into the character of Lou, the already ambiguous narrative of Ocean’s 8 was easily steered into particular queer directions. Using Blanchett as an active agent of queerness, certain aspects of the film were queered-by-proxy while others saw any epiphenomenal queerness denied. In this sense, Sandra Bullock, who does not hold much of a particular position amongst queer audiences, was welcomed into these queer readings through her interactions with Blanchett, with the text going as far as to equate the Debbie/Lou dynamic to that of the only heterosexual subplot in the film. Meanwhile, their co-star Sarah Paulson, who brought the threat of making the queerness too real because of her own queer sexuality, saw any queer epiphenomena negated in the construction and promotion of her suburban housewife character.

The findings of this thesis indicate that queer readings of the kind we find in response to Ocean’s 8 are not actually countering the film text, so much as they align with the purposely ambiguous nature of the film and its promotional identity. Their consumption is perfectly in line with the interests of the producer by extending the potential size of the audience to include queer female audiences without scaring away non-queer or homophobic audiences. This is considerably different from previous assumptions that queer readings are counter-readings or “(in)appropriations” of a text. By positioning the film as a commodity, surrounded by promotional epiphenomena that influence the way a film is understood, we are more accurately able to see how producer interests play into the queer meaning-making process. In a media landscape in which queer women are increasingly visible as a market segment, it only makes sense that producers attempt to appeal to them as well, making it more and more important to critically observe the processes of commodity culture at work.

That queer readings of Ocean’s 8 are not counter-readings does not mean that queer female audiences are mere victims of producers interests, however. As is already alluded at throughout this thesis, these viewers are not just naïve consumers but are often aware of the processes used to appeal to them. If there was nothing meaningful in this process for them, they would likely not be engaging with it on the enormous scale on which they have. Further research will be necessary to look into why queer female audiences choose to participate in this process. Some of the aspects to be considered here include the social pleasures queer reading offers when done collectively, as well as the way in which reception is used to inform identities just as much as viewers’ identities inform their readings. I suggest starting this from the very dataset acquired for this thesis, which offers a large number of self-reflective
responses on users’ willing interactions with the queer marketing of *Ocean’s 8*. This should offer a helpful starting point for analyzing not just why this film proved so meaningful to audiences, but also why in many other cases, such as the many media products accused of ‘queerbaiting,’ strategies used to bring in queer viewers without turning away non-queer viewers are not celebrated in quite the same way.

In addition to this, there is the question of variation within the community studied here. Queer female audiences are far from homogenous, and it is likely that these collective readings resonate differently depending on the intersections between their gender/sexuality and other aspects of their identity, such as race. As a film that has three characters of colour but still embeds all of its queer meaning into its white characters, *Ocean’s 8* presents queerness as something *white*, and arguably does not offer quite the same meaning to queer women of colour as it does to white queer women. While I would argue the meaning analyzed in this thesis is *visible* to online queer female audiences in general, not all of them will engage with it in or derive meaning from it in identical way. Such research could benefit greatly from making a greater use of algorithmic ‘filter bubbles’ than this thesis has, in order to zoom in further on the specific viewing experiences of users on the margins of the community studied in this thesis.

By challenging the dominant assumption that queer readings are counter-readings, this case study has opened up for a much greater field of inquiry. While *Ocean’s 8* was an exception in the size and proportion of its queer reception, it has been far from the only film to have resonated so extensively with queer female audiences. Other recent woman-centric productions such as *Captain Marvel* and *Ghostbusters* (2016) have been interacted with in similar ways, and the films’ directors’ and/or stars’ open acknowledgement of these readings suggests the conclusions of this thesis may be applicable to a wider trend. It will be necessary to look into whether this is a phenomenon limited to the ‘girl power’ kind of film which gained popularity – and controversy – in the last few years, or whether these developments are part of a much larger trend connected to the increasingly visible queer female consumer market. Much work is left to be done before we can fully hope to understand the complex processes at work, but by opening up the subject of queer female reception and providing a new method for approaching the subject, I hope to have offered the right tools for embarking on this new and exciting journey. As the audiences studied in this thesis would say it: “let’s go, lesbians, let’s go!”
Filmography

Films

*Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018)
*Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013)
*Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011)
*Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2018)
*Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015)
*Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 2001)
*Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007)
*Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991)
*Ghostbusters* (Paul Feig, 2016)
*Girls Trip* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2017)
*Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013)
*Hustlers* (Lorene Scafaria, 2019)
*I’m Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007)
*Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008)
*Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again!* (Ol Parker, 2018)
*Manifesto* (Julian Rosefeldt, 2015)
*Notes on a Scandal* (Richard Eyre, 2006)
*Ocean’s 8* (Gary Ross, 2018)
*Ocean’s 11* (Lewis Milestone, 1960)
*Ocean’s Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001)
*Ocean’s Twelve* (Steven Soderbergh, 2004)
*Ocean’s Thirteen* (Steven Soderbergh, 2007)
*Oscar and Lucinda* (Gillian Armstrong, 1997)
*Our Brand is in Crisis* (David Gordon Green, 2015)
*Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933)
*The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004)
*The Good German* (Steven Soderbergh, 2006)
*The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001)
*The Talented Mr Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999)
*These Three* (William Wyler, 1936)
*Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017)
Television

Big Little Lies (HBO, 2017-2019)
Jimmy Kimmel Live (ABC, 2003 - )
The Ellen DeGeneres Show (NBC, 2003 - )
The Graham Norton Show (BBC, 2007 - )
Today (NBC, 1952 - )

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The Children’s Hour (Lillian Hellman, 1934)
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