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*Rent:* Is Anyone In the Mainstream?

**Introduction**

Genre films operate within systems that serve to examine basic cultural foundations and conflicts. Therefore, changes in cultural attitudes can alter the way genres evolve over time. These changes can then become evident in instances where films are remade after a significant amount of time has passed (Schatz, 1991). For example, some popular remakes within the musical genre are Grease, Footloose, and Les Miserables. Each of these movies apply specific cultural contexts to small, yet familiar social communities in order bring to light particular problems in mainstream society. These threats to the dominant social order are what set one genre apart from another, and further, one movie apart from another (Schatz, 1991).

*Rent* originally hit the Broadway stage as a rock musical in 1996. Written by Jonathon Larson shortly before his death, the story is based on both Giacomo Puccini’s *La Boheme* and Larson’s personal experiences. The heart of the story surrounds a small group of struggling young artists trying to survive in the East Village of New York City during the days of Bohemia, where HIV/AIDS was running rampant.

Larson wanted to write a musical that could appeal to the younger MTV generations. Thanks to great playwrights of the past, such as Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, musicals had become significantly influential foundations of American pop culture throughout the twentieth century. In the 1980s, however, the theater struggled to appeal to younger generations with traditional run-of-the-mill classics such as Phantom of the Opera or Oklahoma. Thanks to the introduction of popular music and MTV, the younger generations in American society wanted material that was sharper, and more honest about what issues were actually plaguing their culture, such as drug addiction, disease, sexuality, and poverty.

**The Community: Us vs. Them**

It is no secret the *Rent* may be considered a risqué story, and therefore inappropriate for some audiences. Specifically, some viewers oppose the musical for having so many vividly “adult” themes. Filmmakers must create work that is true and honest, but they also have to appeal to what society deems appropriate. In other words, they have to maintain the status quo of American culture by conforming to the interests and suggestions of the ruling class (Wright, 1974). The original script of *Rent* does not value simple actions, but complex thoughts, social problems, and relationships. Specifically, the community within the film does not act as a simple backdrop for the main characters, but as a dramatic force that only helps their arguments against dominant society flourish (Wright, 1974).

The community in *Rent* is important because it becomes palpable when performed onstage. Any cast for this production must be diverse. Sexuality and race are topics that are rife with controversy in mainstream American culture because they emphasize the importance of difference in a society that perpetuates conforming to dominant social values. *Rent,* therefore, is controversial because it values the “Others.” This story is about the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. Alphabet City is filled with people that have been rejected by American society because they lack the cultural capital that those in higher social classes believe is essential for appropriate social living and interaction. The problem with *Rent,* therefore, is that Larson has written a musical that values nonconformist attitudes toward mainstream culture. Watching a production becomes powerful for audiences because what they see on the stage is so intensely realistic. The emotions, the unity, and the passion are all real emotions being felt by the actors, who have themselves become a community similar to the one belonging to the characters of the play. *Rent* is a story that can actually be lived by those onstage and in the audience.

**Editing Culture through Deleted Scenes**

In 2005 the Broadway musical was released is a musical drama film directed by Chris Columbus, who many might recognize as the director of the first two Harry Potter films. While the main story, of course, stays the same over the course of the movie adaptation, there are critical scenes missing from the film that changed its standing within American sociocultural contexts. Specifically, the movie adaptation changes Angel’s death scene, making it more conventional in the eyes of a general audience filled with individuals ascribing to dominant cultural values. Additionally, the screenplay cuts down “Goodbye Love” and makes Mimi’s lament about heartbreak, disease, and death a deleted scene.

**Contact: Confronting Death and Sex**

There are some topics that mainstream American society deems inappropriate for casual conversation. Death and sex are at the top of this list, so *Rent* became a trailblazer when it hit the stage by directly touching upon these very subjects, which the film adaptation eliminates from the plotline. Contact is a short, two minute scene from the original stage production about rampant sexuality, flaming desire, burning passion, and eventually, Angel’s tragic and untimely death.

The sex occurring between our main characters signifies the couples’ efforts to try and fix their struggling relationships with physical passion. However, since this kind of connection is not what they need to solve problems with miscommunication and differences of opinions, it is not enough to satisfy any of them. The problems that Maureen/Joanne and Roger/Mimi are experiencing present themselves through various problems during foreplay. The line “Rubber fire latex rubber latex bummer” is the point at which the encounters become frustrating instead of loving and compassionate. While fire and burning are things that can be associated with rampant sexual passion, they can also signify problems, such as STDs. In *Rent*, the fire and burning could very well be referring to the fevers and delirium associated with AIDS. Specifically, Angel’s and Collin’s mood-killer is not represented by a fumbled foreplay experience, but when Angel’s disease ultimately consumes him. Angel and Collins are not trying to use sex to avoid problems with miscommunication in their relationship. Instead, they are trying to prolong the inevitable: Angel’s death.

In the second Act of the musical Angel’s health quickly deteriorates. This is shown quite literally in the film, where Angel spends his last days in a hospital surrounded by his community of friends. The film takes Angel’s death scene and makes it soft, rather than direct and sharp. By changing the context of Angel’s death from the Broadway production to the film adaptation, the progression of Angel’s death is changed to meet dominant sociocultural standards.

The Broadway production depicts Angel dying at home enveloped by Collins’ passionate love. During their last sexual encounter, Angel’s character delivers his final lines in the show: “Take me!” and “Today me, tomorrow you!” His words serve two meanings: that Angel is surrendering completely to Collins love, and that he is surrendering his life willingly to God. Angel is ready to die (“Today me”), and he’s confident that in the end Collins and the rest of his friends will eventually join him in the afterlife once they’ve lived out the rest of their lives (“Tomorrow you”).

The film adaptation’s depiction of Angel’s death is conventionalized. Think about the majority of death scenes observed by viewers in mainstream media in dramas and many will reconcile death with hospitalization and lots of loved ones crying at the deceased’s bedside. In the film viewers can see how Angel’s disease rapidly takes over his body. He looks sickly, has no strength, and has to be fed and hydrated by others. He is completely dependent on his loved ones and his doctors (though none are shown) to support him. Death is not just supposed to feel sad in mainstream American culture, but it is supposed to look sad, as well. That’s how the film adaptation warps Angel’s demise. They leave him as a broken shell rather than filled with radiating light, power and influence.

Perhaps this suggests that the filmmakers moderated this scene in order to appease the ruling class. No longer do audiences say goodbye to Angel while he is still looking strong, bright, and powerful. No longer do viewers feel the relief and tranquility his acceptance of death leaves behind. The last line in “Contact” is “It’s over.” It’s spoken by each of the six characters, signifying the break ups of Maureen/Joanne and Roger/Mimi, and the death of Angel for Collins. We can feel his grief in how he voices the words, but we do not see him breakdown and cry, like we do in the film, where we see him sitting on Angel’s hospital bed rocking the now-dead Angel in his arms. Dying during sex would undoubtedly be seen as tasteless and insensitive by many individuals identifying with the dominant social classes ruling American social structure, so in order to appease the general audience’s attitudes and make the movie more appropriate for younger viewers, the scene is “cleaned up.”

**Goodbye Love:**

Christ Columbus maintains that he decided to split the Goodbye Love scene in the film adaptation of *R*ent because he felt it would create too much of an emotional overload. This drastically changes the meaning it has in the show overall. The song and the scene are supposed to be emotional, as Larsonalways intended his musical to be portrayed. In the film, the scene ends after the group has an ultimatum at the cemetery following Angel’s funeral service. It’s no secret that the death of Angel has been the last straw in sending the remaining characters over an emotional edge.

Angel’s purpose in the show is to teach the message of love, which is what causes the argument between Mimi, Joanne, Maureen, and Roger. Mimi and Joanne feel that they are being slighted because Maureen and Roger will not show them the kind of love they believe they are owed. Maureen is refusing to commit, and Roger is literally running away to New Mexico. For Collins, this represents a refusal to accept what Angel instilled in all of them before he passed: to measure their lives in love, not material possessions or wealth. Maureen and Roger are not focused on what he understands to be the most important aspects of life. They think they want fame and glory, when really all they need is love and someone to lean on. In essence, they are both fleeing what they are chasing in the first place. In the film, however, the scene ends with Joanne and Maureen reconciling once and for all.

Cutting the rest of the scene from the movie leaves gaps in the story. Yes, it is an emotional scene, but it is through these emotions that the characters have revelations about their lives. Back at the loft, Roger and Mark have it out by trying to bring up each other’s deficiencies. For Mark this means distancing himself from his friends even when he is preaching for them to stay loyal to one another. He uses his role as cameraman to escape from realizing the fact that he is the only one of the group who is HIV negative. He’ll be the only one left after AIDS takes the rest of his friends. For Roger, this means giving up on Mimi because he’s afraid of watching her die. Roger’s situation is unique because he has been in this type of situation before. He’d had a girlfriend, April, who’d contracted HIV and later slit her wrists in the bathtub. Her suicide is never made apparent in the movie, where the audience is left simply thinking that she succumbed to her disease. So, by entrusting his entire heart to Mimi, Roger is letting himself be okay with the fact that she may very well end up dying on him, as well, whether by her own hand or from natural causes.

Mimi’s lament in the end of the scene is interesting because here the audience sees their female lead welcoming in a life of disease, and eventually, death. Mimi has never been fooled about what her ultimate fate is. She knows she’s sick, she knows she’s an addict, and she knows that in the end one or the other will be the cause of her death. Still, she reconciles her beliefs with Angel’s: that love is life. Mimi wholeheartedly throws herself into her relationship with Roger because she knows time is short, and that they should live their lives as fully as possible while they can. Mimi is not consumed with false hope, and she knows she needs to protect and appreciate what she already has in front of her, instead of going searching for some new-found glory like Roger is trying to do.

**Stage to Film: How to Criticize Society without Really Criticizing Society**

Columbus’ decision to take away these emotional interactions once again reflects the filmmakers’ needs to conform to dominant sociocultural beliefs. In American media and popular culture strength is aligned with bravery and stoicism. *R*e*nt*, on the other hand, is saying that real strength actually lies in being honest with others. This, of course, means letting emotions show, because it is the emotion that makes the experiences on screen feel so vividly real for viewers. This brings us back to *Rent’s* insistence on building an onstage community that is real, palpable, and influential. Columbus’ decision to take away scenes because he thought they would make the movie too emotional only serves to completely undermine Jonathon Larson’s overall vision for the show in the first place.

While initially identifying with the musical genre, *Rent* is special because it also fits into many subgenres. After asking various friends and family members how they would categorize the musical I received answers such as: tragedy, musical, rock musical, drama, and lastly, social commentary. A film, play, musical, or television show categorized as being social commentary must form a criticism on mainstream society. This criticism can be on social behavior or human nature, or can refer to specific sociocultural institutions or trends over time.

Social commentary can come in direct or figurative forms. While direct forms of social commentary include things like sermons or political speeches, it is through things like film, books, art, and the stage that convey social commentary through symbolism, imagery, or storytelling. This means that it is up to the audience to realize what aspect of mainstream society is being criticized. In the context of genre, this is how viewers are encouraged to “rise up against the injustices perpetrated by the present system upon its members (Wright, 48, 1974).”

**Conclusion**

For Jonathon Larson the concept of *Rent* was to rid mainstream society of the AIDS stereotype. His focus on society’s “rejects” meant to help him point out the not only can people with AIDS live full lives, but that it can happen to anybody, not just drug users or homosexuals. Larson believed that we live in a “desensitized culture,” meaning that “the ones grappling with life-and-death issues often live more fully than members of the so-called mainstream (Larson, 1992).” In other words, we live in an age where being different can very easily lead to being isolated from the ruling classes, which Larson references directly during the song “What You Own.”

Perhaps some of Larson’s ambitions were simply lost in translation during the process of adapting a script made for the stage into one appropriate for a major motion picture. While the play was meant as an institution for cultural education on AIDS, the focus of the film seemed to center more on the fundamental relationship drama of Roger, Mimi, Maureen, and Joanne. In essence, in order to make the story more appealing to a mass audience, the themes of the original play were romanticized. For example, we can return to Angel’s death scene in the movie, which happens after a long decline from his AIDS. In the play, however, his death is much more sudden, and therefore, probably much more realistic and intense for audience members.

To take away the emotion in *Rent* is to take away the musical’s sociocultural influences. It seems that as America has progressed into the 21st century, the ruling class has decided that it is better to sugarcoat the hard parts of life in order to protect those who are overly “sensitive.” In essence, today’s mainstream society has likened intense emotional displays with weakness or mental instability. Therefore, the transformation of *Rent* from a stage musical to a film changes how the script executes its use of social commentary. Ultimately, it changes what overall aspect of mainstream society is being criticized by the work.

References:

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