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# Whitewashing of the Stonewall Riots

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# Whitewashing of the Stonewall Riots

By  
Sam Stageman

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

CM Hall,  
Thesis Advisor

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## **ABSTRACT**

Roland Emmerich's film *Stonewall* was met with criticism for supposedly "whitewashing" the Stonewall riots, a pivotal moment in the LGBTQ+ community's history. These critics stated that the riots had been begun by transgender women of color and Emmerich's film made it appear that a white cisgender man started the riots. This paper determines if these criticisms were justified by reviewing historical accounts of the Stonewall Inn and riots, studying notable people associated with the riots, and analyzing the film itself. These findings are then analyzed through a queer theory lens to determine the message of *Stonewall*. It was ultimately determined that while *Stonewall* did have a number of inaccuracies, it did not necessarily warrant all the criticism it received.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there has been an increase in the representation of the LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> community in modern media. From having LGBTQ+ characters to depicting moments in the community's history, the public has become far more aware of this minority group. However, not all of these depictions are accurate and properly reflect the community. One example of this is the 2015 film *Stonewall* directed by Roland Emmerich. The film depicts the events of the Stonewall riots, which are considered one of the turning points in the history of LGBTQ+ rights. It was one of the first major instances of the gay and lesbian community fighting back against the discrimination they faced after the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City. One might think that a film depicting such a pivotal moment of LGBTQ+ history would be welcomed by the community. However, the film was met with harsh criticism online after its trailer was released. This response was due to the fact that the film had created a fictional white male who appeared to be the one to start riots by throwing the first brick of the riots. According to these critics, this is an inaccurate depiction of the riots and erases the real people who were there. They stated that the riots were actually started by trans women of color, not a cisgender<sup>2</sup> white male and that this film was whitewashing<sup>3</sup> LGBTQ+ history. What this means is that instead of making the film about these people of color, it was "whitewashed" by replacing them with a white character as the riot's initiator.

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct academic research of the Stonewall riots to determine if the criticism this film garnered was deserved, as well as create an accurate narrative of the riots themselves. This will involve researching the history behind the riots,

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+: Acronym for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community

<sup>2</sup> Cisgender: Identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, i.e. someone who is not transgender

<sup>3</sup> Whitewashing: Focusing only on white accounts in regard to historical events

including what the environment was like for the LGBTQ+ community in 1960's America, what populations frequented the Stonewall Inn, and who was involved with the riots themselves. Then, information gathered from this research will be compared with how the film *Stonewall* depicts the riots. The accusations of the film whitewashing the riots will be analyzed as well to determine if they were warranted. Finally, queer theory will be used to analyze the film to determine the impact of this film and the decisions the film director made. Ultimately, this thesis will create a cohesive narrative about the Stonewall riots, if the film *Stonewall* actually whitewashed them, and what message the film gives its audience.

There are a number of reasons why I have chosen this for my topic. First, I was intrigued by the backlash that the *Stonewall* film received. In the age of the internet, it is far easier to communicate with other people and it is amazing how quickly the film's controversy came about. It is unlikely that if the film came out years before the internet that it would have received the response it did in such a short amount of time. Another reason why this topic was selected was because I wanted to determine if these criticisms were warranted. Critical thinking is a key skill to possess and it is important to apply it when discussing this film. By conducting this research, I can determine if these critics had an accurate history of the riots or if they were perpetuating a false narrative. Finally, I am actively involved with advocating for the LGBTQ+ community, so I want to do something to help people gain a better understanding of the community's history. What I hope to accomplish with this thesis is to educate people about the importance of the events at Stonewall, draw attention to what demographics are depicted in LGBTQ+ media, and determine what really happened at these historical riots.

## **The Film**

The focus of the film refers to both what the film itself is about and who tends to be focused on the most during the filming. In regard to who the film is about, it is clearly about the character, Danny Winters. The entire film is about Danny's experiences as a gay male in Greenwich Village. The film utilizes flashbacks to explain Danny's past history while focusing on the current events happening to him.

*Stonewall* opens up with Danny coming into the Greenwich neighborhood, which was a central hub for the LGBTQ+ community. He eventually meets a group of young adults who are referred to as street kids. Street kids refer to people who identified within the community and lived on the street, usually due to being kicked out by their families for being queer. They also tended to work as sex workers to support themselves. Danny decides to join the cohort to learn about his new home and to start his new life. In the flashbacks, it is revealed that Danny had been a popular student who was going to go study at Columbia University. However, he was caught having oral sex with his friend Joe so his father and mother kicked him out of the house. His sister is still supportive and does not want Danny to go, but she cannot do anything to help.

The film goes on to show Danny adjusting to his new life in the village while learning about the hardships he and his friends experience. He then eventually meets a man named Trevor who works for the Mattachine Society and they become a couple. The Mattachine Society is attempting to normalize LGBTQ+ people into society by showing that they are just like mainstream society. At first the relationship goes well for Danny but eventually it ends because Trevor cheats on him. On June 28, 1969, Danny is at the *Stonewall* when the police raid the bar. These raids were a regular occurrence but a raid had previously occurred that

week so this was unusual. This causes the patrons of the bar to become agitated and if furthered when a butch lesbian attempts to escape the police while shouting out for help. Eventually, one of the street kids named Queen Congo is about to throw a brick but Danny tries to stop her. Trevor appears on the scene to see what is happening and asking people to stop because this would make the community look bad. In response, Danny throws the brick and tells Trevor that resistance is what will really work. This incites the riots, which themselves only make up a small portion of the film. The movie ends with Danny visiting his family one year later after the riots. He had just completed his first year at Columbia University and was going to partake in the first gay rights march. The film gives some background information about the actual people involved with the riots and what happened to them. It finally concludes with some facts about some obstacles that the LGBTQ+ community still faces such a persecution in countries where homosexuality is illegal and the number of homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

As this brief synopsis suggests, *Stonewall* is not really a film about the riots themselves. Instead, it really is about Danny's story set against the riots as background. The audience only really learns about one character, Danny. No one else's story is detailed or explored. Instead, the characters are shown in relationship to Danny. Everyone else is just a background character compared to him.

The only other character who could possibly be considered another focal storyline is Ray. Ray is a street kid who dresses in drag and is Danny's mentor when he arrives to Greenwich Village. He is loosely based on Sylvia Rivera. We do not learn a whole lot about Ray and we only see Ray when it involves Danny. For example, Ray falls in love Danny, but Danny does not feel the same way so the film portrays Ray as a scorned lover for Danny.

Ray is basically a cultural guide for Danny, nothing more. The entire film and the cast of characters revolve around Danny, making him the focus of the film's story.

### **STONEWALL AND CONTROVERSY OF THE FILM**

When the trailer for the *Stonewall* film came out, there was considerable backlash on the internet. This was due to the casting of a white male character for the lead. This character is depicted throwing a brick, thus inciting the Stonewall riots. These opinion pieces asserted that that this film “whitewashed” the Stonewall riots. Whitewashing means depicting white people in the place of people of color. To these writers, the film was erasing important members of the riots like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera who were “real-life Latina and black trans protestors” (Schou, Solvej). One person, Ashley Love who is the coordinator with the education group Stonewalling Accurate and Inclusive Depictions, stated that the film was “once again white gay men reduc[ing] trans women of color down to historical, social, and political props” (Schou, Solvej). She also stated that the film was a source of “classism, transmisogyny, anti-blackness, Hollywood trans-face casting, misgendering, identity appropriation and transparent propaganda” (Schou, Solvej). One call of action in response to this film was to boycott it. An online petition garnered more than 20,000 signatures (BBC). Overall, these criticisms may have had an impact on the success of the film, which was considered a flop. The film made \$112,834 in 129 theaters, meaning it was \$875/theater (Mendelson, Scott). This failure was in hand due to the poor quality of the film, lack of known actors, and attention from the Oscars. However, it can still be assumed that if the film was more accurate, it would have garnered a greater response from the LGBTQ+ community who might have gone to see it.

To some people, including the director and lead character, these criticisms were justified. Roland Emmerich, the director, stated that he understands that his film raised concerns but the film was a labor of love and that it would honor those involved with the riots as he himself identifies as a gay man (BBC). As for the main character, the actor Jeremy Irvine wrote on his Instagram that the film “represents almost every race and section of society that was so fundamental to one of the most important civil rights movements in living history” (BBC). With these differing perspectives, it is important to analyze the actual riots themselves and determine if these were true criticisms or a misunderstanding of the events of the riots.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **What Were the Stonewall Riots**

The Stonewall Riots were a series of riots that began on June 28, 1969 after New York police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar. During this era, bars like the Stonewall Inn were havens for LGBTQ+ people to gather and drink. It was against the law at this time to serve alcohol to LGBTQ+ people, thus the police raided the Stonewall Inn frequently. These riots lasted for six days. When studying the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the Stonewall Riots are seen as a pivotal set of events as it was one of the first times the LGBTQ+ community fought back against discrimination in this way. The formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) were created as a result of these riots. Because of its headway into the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the Stonewall Riots are often seen as an important event to the LGBTQ+ community as one of its pinnacle moments in modern history.

## **The Climate of the 1950's and 1960's for LGBTQ+ Americans**

In the years before the Stonewall Riots, being gay was not socially acceptable. According to David Carter, author of the book *Stonewall*, during the 1960's "homosexual men and women... found themselves in the worst legal position they had been in since the republic's birth" (Carter, David). A number of policies in the government led to this oppression. During the 1950's, the Defense Department began discharging homosexual veterans, which stripped them of any benefits. North Carolina senator Clyde Hoey called for an investigation into homosexuals working for the government and urged for the removal of homosexuals from civilian agencies. In April 1953, Dwight Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, adding "sexual perversion" as grounds for government investigations and dismissal. Police and military records were shared with private employers, which resulted in the termination of many people.

Gay people were not only legally oppressed, they were looked down on socially. The Puritan heritage of America created hysteria over child molestation and gay people were believed to be culprits. Many gay people were also thought to be communists, making them the nation's scapegoats. As a result, many anti-homosexuality laws were passed that either increased the penalties for same-sex behavior or created new categories to criminalize. The penalty for same-sex behavior had a wide range from a fine to years in prison. However, there were other punishments. In 1941, California's Atascadero State Hospital was authorized to give electroshock and pharmacological shock therapy, lobotomies, and castrations for men convicted of consensual sodomy. According to *Gay Law* author William N. Eskridge Jr., "[the] homosexual...was smothered by law" at the beginning of the 1960's

(Carter, David). While numerous laws were passed against gay people, laws against transvestism<sup>4</sup> were being implemented. In New York, people wearing fewer than three articles of clothing belonging to their sex could be arrested (Carter, David).

An example of these attitudes towards gay people can be seen in the short film *Boys Beware*. This is an “informational” short produced by Sid Davis, who produced a number of educational films during the 1950’s (Fox, Margalit). The short, released in 1961, was shown during the film *Stonewall* when Danny and his classmates must watch it (“Boys Beware (1961)”). It warns young boys of predatory homosexual men who could either rape or murder them and that need to stay vigilant. This relates back to the idea that gay people were child molesters. Throughout the film, the gay men are often called “sick” and that they are mentally ill. During this time period, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness by psychologists. The short film was actually shown during the *Stonewall* film in a scene set in the main character Danny’s classroom. The class watches the film to learn about the “dangers” of homosexuals with Danny being visibly uncomfortable throughout its playing because he himself is gay and afraid of coming out. Afterwards, Danny’s classmates make homophobic comments which furthers his discomfort. This scene can be seen as a way media, especially film, can impact the views of its audiences. While Danny’s classmates use the film as a way to continue mocking gay people, Danny sees it as a sign of his town in Indiana becoming unwelcoming for him and that he does not belong there. It also has an impact on how he sees himself as he starts to ask his clandestine partner if they’re sick, relating back to what the film said about gay men. While the views in this film are now

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<sup>4</sup> transvestism: wearing clothes deemed “appropriate” for the opposite gender and the person’s own gender ex. a man wearing a dress

considered outdated, they reflect what the public thought about the LGBTQ+ community during the 1960's.

### **The Importance of Bars**

A reason why bars like the Stonewall Inn were critical for the LGBTQ+ community was because they were one of the few places where they could gather together and drink. After the end of Prohibition in 1933, laws for the regulation of alcohol were implemented. This led to the creation of the State Liquor Authority (SLA). They considered gay people as “lewd and dissolute,” so the mere presence of gay people could make a bar disorderly and subject to closure. This essentially made it illegal to serve LGBTQ+ people. In 1960, Mattachine-New York, a homophile<sup>5</sup> rights organization, had an attorney do a detailed study of New York's Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Law. The attorney found that there was no provision that flatly prohibited LGBTQ+ people from gathering and being served alcohol. However, a licensee's premises could not become disorderly, which was interpreted to mean serving LGBTQ+ people. The SLA eventually clarified that homosexuals could be served but only if they acted heterosexual. All of these restrictions allowed the Mafia to become involved with running gay bars as LGBTQ+ people had no where else to go and none of them would speak out against the mob. The Stonewall Inn was one of these bars. It allowed LGBTQ+ people to be themselves, connect with others, and drink even though the police constantly raided it. This is why these bars were so important to members of the LGBTQ+ community.

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<sup>5</sup> Homophile- A term used as an alternative to “homosexual” to combat the stereotype of LGBTQ+ people being obsessed with sex.

## **The Riots**

The following accounts of the riots have been taken from Carter's book *Stonewall*. The Stonewall Inn was raided at 1:20 a.m. on Saturday, June 28. Four plainclothes police officers, two patrolmen, Detective Charles Smythe, and Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine approached the door announcing the raid while there were four undercover officers already inside the bar. Numerous patrons tried to escape the police but they were detained. The police inspected everyone's IDs, even though there were customers who resisted. Some lesbians who were at the bar were being harassed by the police which made everyone else quite uncomfortable. When the police wanted to "examine" the cross-dressers, the cross-dressers refused. This, according to Pine, gave the raid a broader scope than just the bar's owners and employees. The police then decided to take people in for arrest and seize the alcohol.

The Stonewall patrons were escorted out of the bar but instead of leaving, they formed a crowd. Tension was building as the police had raided Stonewall earlier that week along with other bars. A number of patrons, particularly the popular ones, exited the bar in camp fashion as if they were putting on a show, but the police kept rushing them out as quickly as possible in a rough manner. All of this attracted the attention of people passing by. The first hostile act that happened outside of the club was when a cross-dresser hit a police officer with her purse and was then clubbed by the police. This and the loading of people into paddy wagons starting to incite the crowd even more. What finally incited the crowd to act was when a butch lesbian was trying to escape arrest, escaping the police car twice. While being chased by the police, she shouted out to the crowd "[why] don't you guys do something"(Carter, David)! After this, the crowd started to push back against the police.

Different objects started being thrown from the mob, such as money to symbolize the pay-offs to the cops. The police retreated back into the Stonewall Inn for safety.

When the police went into the Stonewall Inn, the height of the riots began. Anything the crowd could get their hands on was used to try to break into the bar. Everyone was involved with this from drag queens and hustlers, who did most of the fighting, to street youth. The police started to look for an escape route and found one in the back near the roof. One of the policewomen were sent out to call for backup. In the meantime, the police used a fire hose inside the bar to keep the rioters outside until help arrived.

These new cops tried to put the cross-dressers into paddy wagons, but they continued to resist and the crowd continued to riot. The police tried to then chase the rioters away but they would loop the block and come back to the cops to yell and throw projectiles at them. The people who the police caught were beaten, including people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The threat of brutality did not stop the rioters as they started trash can fires and broke store windows. These actions continued into the night and ended by daytime but that did not mean everything had ended.

On Saturday night, people had already formed small groups on the sidewalk to protest the police and other injustices the LGBTQ+ community faced. People were openly expression affection with each other. More and more people gathered to the point the sidewalks could not contain the size of the crowds. Blockades were formed to prevent vehicles without gay people from being admitted. Violence erupted again among the crowd and they began to target police officers. Eventually the police had to be called in again to contain the crowd. They had a new method for corralling the crowd which was relatively effective. However, the rioters were able to use the same tactic of chasing the police from the

previous night. Order was restored by 2:30 A.M. but the crowd was not dispersed until around 3:30 A.M.

The Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday following these two nights were relatively calm but protests were still being held. The police had learned how to better interact with the LGBTQ+ community by begging people to go into the Stonewall Inn and when doing sweeps of the area, not wearing police helmets and calmly doing it. While Sunday was a slow day, Monday and Tuesday were even slower in comparison. However, the occasional police officer and gay person still wanted to incite something.

On Wednesday night, riots started up again due to *The Village Voice* publishing accounts of the events which used very derogatory language and terminology towards the LGBTQ+ community and the rioters. Another reason why the riots started again was because radical Left groups came to the area to protest who were trying to use the previous riots for their own agenda. These riots were different from the other ones as different groups were involved, including straight allies. They were also more 'serious' as at the previous riots, the street youth had taunted the police with chants and kick-lines. At around 10:00 P.M., the riots began as a motorcade of police drove down the street. Protestors threw bottles and by around 10:30 P.M. some queens lit some trash on fire, which led to more fires being set. Many of the protestors were injured due to the police's frustration and equipment. Effeminate men did most of the fighting at these riots as the people who wanted to exploit the riots for their own causes let them take the hits. Five people were arrested that night: The charges against four were harassment and the other one is unknown. Shops were looted, but surprisingly they were the ones with sympathetic owners and not the stores where the owners took advantage

of the LGBTQ+ community. This particular riot ended within an hour, ending the Stonewall Riots (Carter, David).

## **PROMINENT RIOT PARTICIPANTS**

### **Marsha P. Johnson**

Marsha P. Johnson is possibly one of the most well-known figures from the Stonewall Riots. She was born in New Jersey and moved to New York in 1966 (Born, Tyler). She grew into a popular eccentric drag queen and sex worker. In addition to her eccentric nature, Marsha was known for her generosity. An interesting facet of Marsha was that she had almost dual identities. Her female persona was Marsha and her male persona was Malcolm. Malcolm was quite aggressive and a very unpleasant person. This may be due to schizophrenia, as Marsha struggled with her mental health throughout her life. As for her gender identity, there is no exact answer because she was identified as a transvestite<sup>6</sup> instead of a transgender woman. However, she had also expressed interest in getting sexual reassignment surgery. She also stated that she never goes out not in drag (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, And Queer Antagonist Struggle). However, her identity as Malcolm cannot be ignored as it was an important part of her legacy. Johnson was found dead in the Hudson River in New York on July 6, 1992. Her death was ruled a suicide but witnesses claim it was murder as she had been harassed the day before (Born, Tyler).

Johnson was noted to have been one of the key figures in the riots themselves. One eyewitness claimed that they saw Johnson climb to the top of a lamppost and drop a heavy object in a bag on top of a police car. Other witnesses saw her in the crowd throwing rocks

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> Note: Transvestite is no longer a widely accepted term in the LGBTQ+ community, but it is being used here as it was part of the community's language during this time

and yelling. A number of sources state that Marsha might have been the first person to really start the riots. Marsha supposedly threw a shot glass at a mirror when the police entered and yelled “I got my civil rights!” (Duberman, Martin).

Despite having such a prominent role, Marsha P. Johnson did not have that much of a role in the film of *Stonewall*. Instead of being this fierce drag queen, she was more of a comic relief. While she was good natured, the character in the film was very one-dimensional and did not serve any real purpose to the story. As for the riots, Johnson did not really participate at all. Instead, she gets arrested but sneaks away with the manager of the bar, Ed Murphy. She’s not depicted as an active person in the rioting but rather a passive source of comedy. This is an example of the film not giving proper representation to the people who were actually present at the riots. An argument could even be made about how Marsha could have been the main character of the film instead of making up a whole new character, which might have even reduced the amount of controversy the film received.

### **Sylvia Rivera**

Sylvia Rivera is a noted person who was involved with the Stonewall Riots and LGBTQ+ rights. She was born in 1951 with a Venezuelan mother and a Puerto Rican father, so she grew up with a strong Latina background. She became a street queen/transvestite<sup>7</sup> who started hustling on Times Square when she was 11 and became a frequent patron at the Stonewall Inn. At the Stonewall Riots, she said that the riots were “the turning point” in regard to the LGBTQ+ community’s rights (Wilchins, Riki). One of her friends urged her to leave, she said “I’m not missing a minute of this- it’s the revolution!” (Duberman, Martin).

She is also noted to have possibly thrown one of the first bottles at the riots. A year afterwards, Sylvia became involved with LGBTQ+ rights by joining the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) in New York City. Unfortunately, GAA stopped supporting drag and transvestite rights, alienating Sylvia. So, she and Martha P. Johnson went on to found the Street Transvestites Actual Revolutionaries (STAR), which performed a variety of tasks such as protesting and creating safe spaces for the teens on the street. In addition, she opened a homeless shelter for youth. As Sylvia experienced numerous bouts of homelessness, she wanted to help out youth who were in similar situations to hers. At the Stonewall riots, she was only 18 years old so she wanted to provide a better life for youth in similar situations to hers. Sylvia Rivera passed away in 2002 due to complications from liver cancer at the age of 50.

For Sylvia Rivera, her gender identity was unique to her. She initially started taking hormones to feminize her body, but she eventually stopped because the label of “woman” did not fit her. In her own words, “I came to the conclusion that I don’t want to be a woman. I just want to be me” (Duberman, Martin). Instead she preferred doing drag, saying “ I like to pull some shit out of the closet, throw on some female attire, a blue or whatever - not complete drag- paint on a little makeup - and hit the streets” (Duberman, Martin). Based on Sylvia’s own words, classifying her as a transgender woman would be incorrect as that label did not fit her. Instead, she saw herself as a unique being with her own identity.

For someone as involved with the Stonewall Riots and the LGBTQ+ community as Sylvia Rivera, it would be logical to include her in a film about the riots. However, *Stonewall* did not do this. She was completely left out of the entire film. This is possibly one of the

reasons why the movie was so criticized for erasing transgender woman. However, this could be seen as an inaccurate complaint because Sylvia did not identify as a transgender woman.

In addition to the claim of erasing transgender women, *Stonewall* was also criticized for whitewashing LGBTQ+ history. This could have been avoided by having Sylvia in the film, as Sylvia had a strong Latina heritage. This heritage made her an “other” to the mainstream white LGBTQ+ rights movements at the time and by not including her in the film and instead creating a white main character, *Stonewall* continued this tradition of “othering” her. Overall, it could be seen as a poor decision to not include a key figure of the riots in the film, but it cannot be claimed that it was erasure of transgender woman based on Sylvia’s own statements about her identity. However, an argument can be made about the film whitewashing the riot’s history by not including this key Latina figure in LGBTQ+ history.

### **The Butch Lesbian**

In the film *Stonewall*, the unknown butch lesbian is an interesting key character that may or may not have existed. Varying commentators have disagreed about whether or not she was actually present at the riots. According to the sources that state she was there, they say she appeared to fit the stereotypical image of a “butch dyke.” A *Stonewall* employee states that she originally started to fight back against the police within the bar. Another account stated that there was a butch lesbian who was struggling with the police and shouted “Why don’t you guys do something!” to the gay men in the crowd (Carter, David). Some sources, including *The Village Voice* reporters who were present at the riots, stated that this struggle between the lesbian and the police started the riots. While different sources state that

they saw a butch lesbian resist the police, it is possible that there were other lesbians at the bar that night. These women were also mistreated by the police and were being roughed up. Regardless of whether it was a single lesbian or multiple ones, the police brutality helped lead to the eventual uprising.

A name that is sometimes thrown around as the possible lesbian is Stormé DeLarverie, but there are a number of reasons why it is unlikely that it was her. First, she stated that she was at the riots that night but she had been standing outside of the bar quietly to see what was going on when a police officer hit her in the eye without being provoked (Carter, Davis). Another discrepancy is that DeLarverie was black and the lesbian that had been struggling with the police was supposedly white. Finally, DeLarverie was a well known figure in the lesbian community, so it is unlikely that she would not have been eventually recognized. While it may never be known who this lesbian was or even if she was actually there, her legacy has become an important part of the Stonewall riots. In the film *Stonewall*, they even depict the incident of a lesbian evading the police and yelling at the crowd to help her. However, the film does not really depict her as helping to incite the riot. Instead, she's seen more as a nuisance to the police.

## **STONEWALL AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE**

One major source of criticism was how *Stonewall* erased transgender people by creating a cisgender lead character when a number of people who were involved with the riots did not identify as cisgender. No one in the film identified as transgender, so the actors portraying the trans characters were just acting the part. The director stated that they had read a number of transgender actors and stated the reason why they did not cast any of these

actors was they went with who they thought was best (Schou, Solvej). This was met with much resistance from people protesting the film. To these critics, this film could have given transgender performers a chance to become well-known, increasing public awareness of trans performers.

### **Terms From the 1960's**

The transgender identity has evolved since the 1960's. During this era, the term "transgender woman/man" was not used. Instead, the terms "drag queen", "transvestite", and "crossdress" were more commonly used and there were nuances to those terms which has led to misunderstanding about the Stonewall Inn's history. "Queen" was often used to refer to any man who was not masculine. So, any man who did not follow strict male gender roles at that time would be dubbed a queen, regardless of what gender they identified. This misinterpreting of the term queen has led to an exaggeration of the number of "drag queens" present at the Stonewall Inn. Another reason why the number of drag queens present at the bar may be exaggerated is because there were a number of "scare/flame queens," a term that is no longer used. This type of drag is akin to the term "gender fuck" where men wear female attire without attempting to be seen as a woman. These people also did not specifically identify as either women or drag queens, but they might have been thought to be, thus adding to the idea that there were a number of drag queens and transgender patrons at the bar. According to Carter, the best way to describe what gender identities were present at the bar was that there was a lot of gender transgression, but that it was a product of the gay male culture at the time. Most of the men at the bar were masculine, but there were a number of effeminate men, scare queens, and "a few transvestites and some transsexuals" (Carter,

David).

One term that might need further explanation is the term “gay”. During the 1960’s, gay was a catch-all term. Instead of the variety of terms currently used such as bisexual, transgender, pansexual<sup>8</sup>, etc., gay was used as an umbrella term. When people used the term “gay power” at both the riots and in *Stonewall*, they do not mean to only empower gay men. They instead meant to empower the whole community but the language of the time just used “gay”. If this was done in the current day, it would not necessarily be seen as appropriate because it would be excluding certain identities. Gay would now mean “gender-appropriate men or women who have sex with, or desires, other gender-appropriate men or women” (Valentine, David). While these terms might seem exclusionary or offensive to a modern audience, it must be kept in mind that these were different times and had different understandings about the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Gender as a Political Statement**

Gender is sometimes not thought of as being a political statement, but in queer theory it is. According to Riki Wilchins, gender is a construct and is a political statement as “they [genders] serve certain agents, they empower or erase certain bodies”(Wilchins, Riki Anne). What Wilchins is saying is that expression of gender is a form of political expression. If a person only believes in two genders, they express that by following a strict gender binary and attempt to erase those who fall outside of the gender binary. They also tend to be seen as more conservative in Western politics Those who believe in more than two genders or no genders at all are deemed progressive or going against what society deems “correct”.

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<sup>8</sup> Pansexual: sexual orientation where the person can experience attraction to anyone regardless of gender

This political construct of gender extends to the Stonewall Inn, an extremely political location even before the riots started. To begin with, it was a bar that served gay men which was not allowed during the 1960's, so this was a major political transgression. A number of the patrons were going against the strict gender roles of the time by dressing in clothing deemed appropriate for the "opposite gender", so they were making additional political statements. They were not restricting themselves to a certain gender expression even at the risk of being arrested. If the police raided the bar and were not wearing three pieces of gender appropriate clothing, they could have been arrested. By creating the political statements and serving the LGBTQ+ community and allowing patrons to blur the gender boundaries, the Stonewall Inn had made itself a location for new political ideas to blossom and primed itself to become the site of political discourse through the riots.

### **The Character of Danny and Politics**

After discussing the politics of the Stonewall Inn and riots, it is important to discuss the political implications of the main character Danny from the film *Stonewall*. As Wilchins indicated before, gender is a political statement. Those who go against the norm are making a statement about their own personal political beliefs. For Danny, he does not go against the gender norms of the time, showing that he normally does not support going against what society deems "normal". He appears conventionally masculine and is white and attractive, so he is not shunned from society because of his gender or his skin color. The only real "transgression" he commits is that he is gay. While being gay was a major cause to become a

social pariah, he still could easily navigate the heteronormative<sup>9</sup> world appearing as a straight white male.

Having a character who does not violate the political and social norms of gender be the one who starts the Stonewall riots is a juxtaposition. Another aspect about gender which relates to the character of Danny is that gender is performative (Wilchins, Riki Anne). This means that the way a person presents their gender is a performance because they act out their ideas of what gender is to those around them. As noted earlier, both a number of the Stonewall patrons and those involved with the riots were those who violated gender norms, showing different political values than mainstream society. These people dressed differently were rejecting what society thought was appropriate. In this kind of oppositional political environment, it would make sense to focus more on a character who is deemed an outsider to start and lead these riots as it was a rejection of society's rules. Instead, the director cast a character who, while is seen very often depicted in modern and media and might be seen as being relatable, does not make any real political statements until throwing the first brick of the riots. All the time before this, Danny never exhibited any rejection of societal norms except for being gay. Through his gender and appearance, he follows the binary quite rigidly. This shows that he was accepting society's rules instead of rebelling against them. Following these ideas, it does not make sense for someone like this to suddenly act up like this. It seems illogical and can demonstrate poor thought on behalf of the director.

By casting Danny as a lead, the director Roland Emmerich was in a way avoiding a major source of political discourse. If he had instead focused more on a character who violated both gender and societal norms such as Marsha P. Johnson, that might have caused

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<sup>9</sup> heteronormative: when heterosexuality is seen as the default and "normal" sexuality

the audience to not necessarily relate as well to the film as well not having the producers finance the film. However, that is defeating the purpose of the riots. The Stonewall riots were meant to challenge authority and make people change what they thought about the LGBTQ+ community who were seen as outsiders. For example, Marsha P. Johnson has been thought to have thrown a shot glass which started the riots and she could be seen as an extreme outlier of society as a black drag queen. These people wanted to reclaim their humanity and no longer be seen as second-class citizens. With the character of Danny, *Stonewall* instead plays it safe with a masculine male character and does not make a political statement about a political and civil rights movement.

### **Race and Gender**

Because a number of people involved with the riots were people of color, going outside the gender norms, or both, it is important to discuss the intersectionality of race and gender. In Wilchins' *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, the author notes that race and gender are identities that cannot really be separated. For example, Latina women are stereotypically depicted as fiery lovers and black men are often depicted as only heterosexual and hypermasculine. Wilchins states that “racial stereotypes, are in, some way implicit gender stereotypes,” meaning that society’s perception of a particular group goes on to shape how they identify personally (Wilchins, Riki Anne). These ideas confine people into certain boxes and people who do not follow those parameters are treated as being wrong. These stereotypes go on to erase a person’s individual identity and if they step out of these boundaries, they are shunned. Race and gender cannot be separated from each other as they impact each other. The people who did not fall into these stereotypes were trailblazers.

In the case of Danny's character, he is the opposite of this. He does not go against what is stereotypically thought of as what's appropriate for the gender of a white male. For white men, they are often seen as masculine but not hypermasculine, athletic, and the breadwinners of the family. Danny fits almost all the criteria of being a white man except that he is gay. However it must be noted that especially in modern times, it is more culturally acceptable for a white person to identify with the LGBTQ+ community than other races due to cultural differences. For example, in Latino culture there is a strong sense of *machismo* which highly prizes masculinity, family, and supporting said family. This makes it extremely difficult for Latino men to come out as queer because they'd be going against this code of masculinity. In regards to Danny, he still faced backlash for being gay and was kicked out of his home but he still faced less discrimination due to his gender and race aligning with what is expected of him. This social acceptance is put in contrast with a number of the Stonewall's patrons who faced far more discrimination because of their race and gender. Because of this, it can be seen as inappropriate for someone who did not face this kind of discrimination to lead the riots where a number of people of color and gender-variant people participated. This is not meant to attack people who identify within the scope of what their social group expects, it is meant to point out that there is intersectionality of race and gender, which can impact a person's own identity and how others perceive them.

## **RACE AND STONEWALL**

### **Racial Makeup of the Stonewall Inn and Riots**

The backgrounds of the street youth and the patrons of the Stonewall Inn are important to discuss when discussing if the *Stonewall* film whitewashed the history of the

riots. According to Carter, most of the street youth were “predominantly white, with a few black and Latino youths” (Carter, David). This is accurately depicted in *Stonewall*, as most of the street youths in the film appear to be white but there are also a few black and Latino youths, so the film cannot be accused of whitewashing this demographic. For the Stonewall Inn itself, it had a variety of clientele. Different parts of the bar had different groups in it. At the front of the bar, it was populated mainly by white men in their upper-twenties and lower-thirties. The back of the bar was favored by “homeless youth, as well as of young blacks and Puerto Ricans” (Carter, David). This resulted in the front room being referred to as the “white room” and the back room the “black” or “Puerto Rican” room. This division of the bar was not depicted in the film as the bar was depicted as a single room with different people milling about. Still, the majority of the patrons were white with other ethnicities mixed in, but it is still primarily white as the film depicted. Most of the extras in the bar scenes appear to be white. Based on this information, the film was accurate in its depictions of the bar patrons and cannot be accused of whitewashing this aspect of the riot’s history.

As for the riots themselves, most of the people on the frontline were the homeless youth and were white and a few were Latino (Carter, Davis). Because most of the homeless youth and the patrons of the Stonewall Inn were white, this is logical. However, this is not to say that there was no people of color involvement in the riots. Another notable people of color who participated in the riots was Ray Castro, who was Puerto Rican and gay. The police tried to arrest Castro but he resisted intensely. This riled the crowd up and is attributed to “assuring that violence did erupt” (Carter, David). However, the majority of the people involved with the riots themselves were white, so it would be inaccurate to claim that People of color fought the most during the riots. *Stonewall* in this sense did not whitewash the rioters

as it depicted most of them as white (Stonewall). Yet, this does not mean, though, that the film cannot be called whitewashed as it focused on a fictional white person being the riot's sole initiator. This is inaccurate because while it cannot be concluded exactly who started the riots, there are a number of people of color who had a major role in starting the riots, such as Marsha P. Johnson who was black. Another person who could have initiated the violence was a gay Puerto Rican named Gino who threw a heavy cobblestone at a police car, causing the police to barricade themselves in the bar. One last account of someone throwing the first object was an unknown Puerto Rican man who threw a milk carton. Overall, the film can be criticized for whitewashing the riots by having a white character throw the first object of the riots when there are numerous accounts by people present at the riots that people of color were the first ones to do that.

### **Whiteness in the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement**

One issue that has been noted is that there is an overrepresentation of white people in the leadership history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. According to David Valentine, the “‘mainstreaming’ approach to gay and lesbian rights... has been at the expense of representing non-‘respectable’ gay men and lesbians” (Valentine, David). This has led to the identity of gay being associated with people who are middle-class, white, and gender-normative (Valentine, David). The early activists for LGBTQ+ rights were using a method to make the LGBTQ+ appear to be just like the heteronormative society. What they wanted to do was make it seem like a queer person was only different in who they desired. However, this contributed to the division of white and people of color members of the LGBTQ+ community. In the ethnic model of queer theory, the lumping of multiple types of people into

one group isolated many people of color people because they did not feel like they had more in common with white members of the LGBTQ+ community than people of their own ethnicity (Jagose, Annamarie). In addition, the highlighting of only being “gay” has caused other identities such as “class, race, and cultural differences” to be ignored (Valentine, David). Being seen as prosperous and in the majority had created the idea that the average gay person was white, middle-class, and gender -normative. Some of these trends continue to this day, as indicated by the GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index. GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) is an organizations that analyzes popular media to ensure there is proper representation of the LGBTQ+ community. The majority of LGBTQ+ characters depicted in films during the year 2015 were white and the most commonly portrayed identity was gay man. What this all means is that in order to appear more like “normal people”, the LGBTQ+ community had pushed people who do not conform to that standard, such as people of color, to the side.

### **Gay Liberation Theory**

In contrast to the LGBTQ+ community’s efforts to appear similar to heteronormative society, there was a different school of thought called Gay Liberationists who rejected this notion. Instead, they “challenged conventional knowledge about such matters as gendered behavior, monogamy, and the sanctity of law” (Jagose, Annamarie). Instead of blending into society, gay liberationists sought to distinguish themselves and express themselves freely. According to Jagose, the Stonewall riots were a key example of this mentality where the rioters did not try to surrender their identities and instead stood up for them. Characteristics of the riots themselves that demonstrate this is that it took place at a cultural site that was

socially disreputable and a hub of gay culture, they had the ideas of self determination, and the rioters were militant in their political expression (Jagose, Annamarie).

A major example of this theory being contrasted with the “just like us mentality” during this film is the Mattachine Society, which was pushing for acceptance of gays and lesbians and the riots. Instead of using revolutionary tactics, the Mattachine Society wanted the LGBTQ+ community to appear normal and just like straight society. In the *Stonewall* film, Danny attends one of their meetings where a man named Frank Kameny is giving a speech. He is constantly hammering in how gay and lesbians need to appear normal in order for society to accept them. Some of the phrases used were “We must resist the radicalism” and “Wearing a suit and tie will make them understand that you’re just like them. That’s how we win” (*Stonewall*). In contrast, the riots are a major example of gay liberation theory because the community refuses to conform and accept what society thinks of them. Instead, they rise up and state that gays have rights as seen by the chant “gay power”.

While *Stonewall* does depict the riots in a manner accurate to what made the riots follow gay liberationist thought, in the end it rejects it by featuring Danny as the main character. He is not shown using gay liberation theory for the majority of the movie as he is constantly trying to blend in with heteronormative society. His character is meant to be easily relatable to a straight audience, he came from a middle class family, and attempted to hide his gay identity. Instead of standing out, he tried to keep his head down and tried not to be noticed. It is noted that in the film that he does eventually throw a brick to incite the riots and chants “gay power,” but that is the extent of his behavior that can really be deemed as a gay liberationist. It could actually be argued that his decision to act this way is to spite his ex-lover Trevor, who was working for the Mattachine Society. At first Danny attempts to stop

his friend Queen Congo from throwing the brick, but he eventually decides to throw it when Trevor comes on to the scene to see what was going on and to prevent the bar patrons from acting up. Instead of Danny throwing the brick to promote gay liberation theory, the film makes it seem like he throws it just to show up Trevor, reducing the power of the moment. It would seem more appropriate to have someone who was already demonstrating these ideas previously at the riots actually lead them instead of a character who constantly tried to conform.

### **GLAAD 2016 Studio Responsibility Index**

When analyzing representation in film, it is important to analyze overall themes of representation in other films that were released in the same time period. Every year, GLAAD releases a Studio Responsibility Index to determine trends in LGBTQ+ representation in film in the year before. It analyzes different identities, such as number of LGBTQ+ characters, which of those characters are people of color, and how well those depictions represent the LGBTQ+ community. The 2016 Studio Responsibility Index was included *Stonewall* in its analysis as it can be compared to other films released that same year.

In the year of 2015, only 17.5% of the major studio releases had LGBTQ+ characters (Studio Responsibility Index 2016). This means that 82.5% of the major studio film releases had no LGBTQ+ characters. As for the LGBTQ+ characters themselves, 77% were gay men, 23% were lesbians, 9% were bisexuals, and 5% were transgender people (Studio Responsibility Index 2016). For the racial diversity of these films, 72.3% were white, 10.6% were Latino/a, , 8.5% were black, and 6.4% were Asian/Pacific Islander (Studio Responsibility Index 2016).

*Stonewall* could be considered revolutionary as a story about LGBTQ+ history when most films do not even include an LGBTQ+ character. As for the diversity of its LGBTQ+ characters, the film matched the statistics up against other films. Its lead character was a white gay man, which was actually a major source of criticism for the film. According to GLAAD, *Stonewall* had been criticized for whitewashing the riots and for “erasing many of the real stories of LGBT women of color who were instrumental in the rebellion” (Studio Responsibility Index 2016). As for other characters in the film, there is a more diverse cast. One of the secondary characters is Ray/Ramona, who is a gender non-conforming homeless teen. This character is meant to be loosely based on Sylvia Rivera, a Latina transgender activist. A number of the background characters such as other street kids appear to be non-white. In addition, there is a small role for the character of Marsha P. Johnson, who was a real black transgender activist who was present at the riots. While there were a number of people of color in the cast, the main criticism comes from the creation of a fictional white character for the movie to focus on instead of someone actually present at the riots.

It is important to do research about what demographics were present at the Stonewall Inn in order to determine if it was completely unreasonable to cast a white gay male as the lead. According to David Carter, his evidence suggests that the group most responsible for the success of the riots were young, homeless gay men. As for the riots themselves, it appears that the most marginalized members of the community committed the majority of the violent acts. Most of them were white with a few Latinos and quite a few came from middle-class families. In addition, most of the patrons of the Stonewall Inn were young men. There were few lesbians present at the bar. Still, there are different racial identities present in the bar. Over time, the black and Latino patron numbers increased. The back room was favored by

the young blacks and Puerto Ricans. Overall, the Stonewall Inn was catered to gay men and they were the ones who did the majority of the riot's fighting.

So, it might seem insensitive to create a white male character to lead the riots. However, the evidence shows that there was a large number of white men present both at the bar and at the riots. This demonstrates that it was not completely out of the question for the director to have done this. Still, it must be said that there is already an oversaturation of representation for gay white men in film as indicated by GLAAD's Studio Responsibility Index. What the director could have done is instead focus on one of the people who were actually there, thus shedding light on the events and people who were actually there, give representation towards the underrepresented in the LGBTQ+ community, and teach the audience a more accurate history of the Stonewall riots.

### **Impact of Media Representation**

Media representation can have a great impact on how people perceive other groups in society. This includes if they accept and affirm members of the LGBTQ+ community or if they vilify and judge sexual orientation or gender identity. In one study, participants were shown a variety of videos, each with a different attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community. The researchers reported that "[t]he majority of the responses supported the assigned video's opinion and approach to the subject" (Levina, Marina et al.). This demonstrates how far reaching media can be. It can be noted that there has been increase in positive LGBTQ+ representation in the media beginning in the 1990's with the coming out of Ellen Degeneres. When she came out, she faced considerable backlash and she lost her show, *Ellen*. Now, Ellen Degeneres is the popular talk-show host of *The Ellen* show and it is no longer a social

taboo to have an LGBTQ+ person in the media. This can possibly be credited to a broader social acceptance for LGBTQ+ people. Another positive source for LGBTQ+ acceptance during the 1990's was the sitcom *Will and Grace*, which made a gay man a relatable lead character. This process could almost be imagined as a cycle, where the media representation led to more acceptance which in turn led to more positive media representation.

However, LGBTQ+ representation can have mixed results. The majority of these representations tend to fall into what society deems acceptable. They tend to be rather limited on who they present, including race, gender, class, and sexuality (Moscowitz, Leigh M.). This can be done in order to make the LGBTQ+ community more acceptable to the heteronormative society (Moscowitz, Leigh M.). As noted in the GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index, the majority of LGBTQ+ representation is of white gay men. These trends can limit who the heteronormative and cis-normative audience can accept as LGBTQ+ community. The impact of the media shows what power film can have and how *Stonewall* could have helped the general audience members learn to accept other members of the LGBTQ+ community, not just attractive gay white men.

### **Straight Acting**

The director of *Stonewall*, Roland Emmerich, stated that there was a reason why the character of Danny was created for the film. He stated that Danny is there as a white middle-class man to help the audience relate to story. To him, a “straight-acting” character was needed. “Straight-acting” is an in-group term defined as a person or a character who does not act in a stereotypically “gay” manner (i.e. effeminate or flamboyant) which would lead a person to believe that they are actually straight, not gay. For example, Neil Patrick Harris can

be seen as “straight-acting” because a number of people are surprised when they find out that he is gay. Danny is portrayed in a similar manner to Harris. He acts and dresses very masculine, is middle class, is white, and the “fatal flaw” of his character is that he is gay. If Danny was straight, he would be seen as the ideal man.

During the film, there is a moment which basically sums up this whole notion of “straight-acting”. Early on in the movie, it is shown that Danny is engaging in sexual acts with his friend Joe in secret. When Danny is contemplating if they are really gay, Joe says to Danny “we’re not faggots” (Stonewall). To them, there is a big difference between them and being gay. Both of these characters are masculine characters who are athletic and are conventionally attractive and desirable. Given to the social thinking of the time, they could not be gay because of this. They were not flamboyant, feminine, or “limp-wristed.” They did not fit the stereotype of being gay such as being “feminine” or pedophile predators as seen in the film “Boys Beware”. In their own minds, they’re just two men having sex with each other and nothing more. They do not perceive their own gay identities because they do not fit gay stereotypes.

Emmerich went on to defend his choice by stating in an interview that because the film was meant for both straight and LGBTQ+ audiences, he had to make it appealing to both parties. According to him, “in the testing process, that actually, for straight people, [Danny] is a very easy in. Danny’s very straight-acting. He gets mistreated because of that. [Straight audiences] can feel for him” (Lee, Benjamin). These statements went on to further stoke complaints against the film. It is insulting to suggest that LGBTQ+ people have to be a certain way in order for straight people to accept them. This relates back to Gay Liberation theory. The LGBTQ+ community should not have to market itself to be the most palatable

and appealing to the straight community and the film. By doing this, Emmerich went against this theory and followed the “we’re just like you” method of LGBTQ+ acceptance. In addition, it can be argued that this character was not needed because there were a number of actual middle-class, white gay men who went to the Stonewall Inn Bar on which the film could have focused on. Another option is that the film could have brought more cultural attention to lesser-known people involved with the riots who do not fit the mold of what’s seen as culturally acceptable.

However, Emmerich does have a point: the film needs to be appealing to a straight audience. The LGBTQ+ community is a minority. A straight audience would have more influence and buying power and in order for a film to be successful, it needs to be able to draw in a large audience. With *Stonewall*, it could be considered a niche film because it a historical picture about the LGBTQ+ community. This is definitely not a blockbuster film that would attract swarms of people and the LGBTQ+ movie-going audience is a small population and could not bolster the film enough otherwise, Emmerich had to make it appealing enough to the straight audience members to make the film a success. This plan backfired on him though as it actually drove the LGBTQ+ population away due to claims of whitewashing. In addition, poor reviews of the film dissuaded other viewers. Instead of just creating a straight-acting character to have the audience relate to, Emmerich should have focused on making the film more enjoyable to watch and be more conscientious of the casting diverse of characters.

## COMPOSITION OF THE FILM

In film, everything presented in a scene is a conscious decision made by the director. Every part that you can see was deemed important enough for the film to depict. This includes which characters are in a scene, what props are used, the lighting, and how the whole scene is set up. This helps the audience gain a deeper understanding of the film and gives the story more depth. It also shows what the director wants to especially highlight and have the audience notice. That is why it is important to analyze the *mise-en-scène*<sup>10</sup> of a film, especially when analyzing a film like *Stonewall* where the director made controversial choices. Analyzing the film can help explain why Emmerich made these decisions and if they deserved the response the film received.

### Scene Composition

Danny is featured in every scene of the film *Stonewall* and it is rare to have one where he is absent. It is important to hone in on a protagonist, but having him in every scene does not allow secondary characters or storylines to develop. It can also cause the audience to resent the character if they are forced to constantly watch them. It can annoy the audience if the character is unlikeable. People would leave with a negative impression of the film. Danny as a character is not a very intriguing character and comes off flat, so the film itself becomes uninteresting to watch.

As for the scenes itself, the film does move on from just focusing on Danny but there still is a preference to have him on the screen. Danny is usually shot in the middle of the screen or slightly off center. If another character is in the shot, they're occasionally in the

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<sup>10</sup> *Mise-en-scène*: The overall set up of a set for a theater or play

center or off center as well. However, sometimes secondary characters in a shot will be fuzzy until they get closer to Danny, who always seems to be in clear focus. Another way that the scene shows favoritism to Danny is that if the camera cuts away to another character, it almost immediately goes back to Danny. It is rare if Danny is not involved with a scene except towards the end of the film when the riots start. There is so much going on and because the riots are not about Danny, the film is able to focus on other entities.

The best example of Danny as the central focus of the scene — even if another character is present — is when Danny finds Ray crying alone in an apartment. Ray had just been assaulted by one of his clients. This is an extremely traumatic experience for Ray, and Danny attempts to comfort him. However, Danny remains the focal point for the majority of the scene even though it was Ray who was attacked. Ray's back is constantly shot with his back towards the camera while Danny is shot facing forward towards the audience. Ray is kept in the shadows and is not visible while Danny better lit. In this traumatic moment for Ray, the director decided to focus on Danny and detract from Ray as a character.

### **Character Development in *Stonewall***

The only character who has a major development is Danny because he is the only one the film focuses on. He journeys from being closeted to being proudly and openly gay, all while still being a productive member of society. Danny gains an understanding and appreciation for the LGBTQ+ community as he comes back to visit his friends in Greenwich Village and partakes in the first gay pride parade. However, his friends do not experience this same level of growth. Likely, this is due to Danny's character being fictitious. At the conclusion of the film, Ray and the other street kids are still on the streets and they appear to

be almost exactly the same as when they were first introduced. Another character that does not develop substantially is Joe, the other boy Danny was caught having sex with before moving to Greenwich Village. At the end of the film, Joe is still in the closet and has married his high school sweet heart. He is still in the mindset that he is not gay and that he cannot come out. One last character with no development is Danny's father. He kicked Danny out of the house and at the end of the film, he has not changed. He had a chance to say hi to Danny, but decided not to. The only character in the family who had any development is Danny's mom. Initially, she also wanted Danny to leave home after she found out that he was gay. However, she eventually comes around and accepts him. She even attends the gay rights march to support her son. In the end, the filmmaker's decision to focus on Danny prevented other characters from growing and thereby creating an uninteresting film that failed to connect with its audience.

### **Message of the Film**

The main message of the film appears to be one of acceptance. Danny goes from hating himself for being gay to being proud and accepting himself. His friends also experience this, but to a much lesser extent.

### **WHAT THE FILM GOT WRONG**

While no film is flawless, there are a number of factual errors with *Stonewall* according to both historians and people who were actually present at the riots. According to David Carter, the film should not have changed the series of events at the riots. "If they had just stuck to the actual facts, it would have been more powerful," (Smith, Nigel). For

example, Carter asserts that the character, Ray is supposed to actually represent Raymond Castro and was quite different from the character depicted. Raymond was a masculine and conservative man who did not engage in prostitution. He was arrested at the riots when he initially left after the raid but came back to help a friend of his. When the police attempted to put him in the police wagon, Raymond got in a big fight with them but was eventually apprehended. This element would have added far more drama and depth to the film. Another source of error in *Stonewall* to Carter is that the Mattachine Society was unfairly represented. The character Trevor is supposed to represent Craig Rowdell, who actually supported the uprising and was the chief propagandist for the riots. According to Carter, one last major error the film had was how it used offensive tropes from the 1960's to depict some of its characters, specifically the cross-dressing ones. One character, Sister Tooney, is very effeminate and creepy. She initially comes onto Danny in the beginning of the film but everyone looks down on her. Throughout the film, she behaves like an extreme 1960's stereotype of a gay man by acting very bitter, sarcastic, and almost predatory. Another disturbing character is an overweight man who dresses up as a woman in a bright and garish red dress. Danny meets this character because the owner of the Stonewall, Ed Murphy, kidnaps Danny to fulfill the man's request for a young man to have sex with. The entire situation and person are shown to make Danny uncomfortable, including that the man engages in oral sex with Danny without Danny's consent. These characters in Carter's mind do not help the film as they only seem to come from a place of prejudice.

In addition to Carter, another expert source that disagreed with the film's presentation of the riots is Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt, who is the only surviving member of the street youth of Stonewall. One thing he pointed out was that the film over-glamorized the

Stonewall Inn. The film version has a relatively decent interior for a small bar with bright lights. It almost had a cozy vibe. According to Tommy, the real Stonewall was almost the complete opposite of that. The bar was pretty dark, the interior was mostly plywood, the walls were wet, and the bar had a stale beer smell. Another source of error in this film was the whole notion of Danny throwing the first brick. In Tommy's mind, there really was not a first brick because there was so much going on at the same time. Instead of the riots being initiated by a single event, it was more of a multiple occurrence event.

One last major error that was noticed was how the riots were depicted. The actual riots themselves actually lasted for four days with varying amounts of activity, as discussed earlier (Carter, David). In the film, this is not shown. The riots only make up a small portion of the film itself and no timeline is given to the viewing audience. So, it appears that the riots only last through the night and not much detail is given. The film detracts from the importance of these riots by barely giving them any film time. Instead, the film decided to just focus on what happens a year later without discussing the direct aftermath of the riots. All of these issues with the films detract from the importance it could have had by helping the movie going audience gain a better understanding of what it was like at the Stonewall riots.

## **WHAT THE FILM GOT RIGHT**

Even though there are multiple inaccuracies in *Stonewall*, there are still facts that it got right. The film did depict a number of people of color throughout the film in the background, which reflects what people frequented the bar. For example, it did depict Marsha P. Johnson and there were different ethnicities in the Stonewall Inn. Another

accuracy of the film was that it gave facts about the real life people some of the characters were based off of. Finally, the film was correct in its depiction of how dangerous it was to be LGBTQ+ in America during the 1960's. Queer people were looked down on and they were not seen as respectable members of society. A number of the characters in the film were disowned by their families and had to resort to sex work, which was a common reality during this time. The police constantly harassed LGBTQ+ people and called them a variety of slurs, as depicted in the film. Overall, the film was able to properly depict what life was like for the LGBTQ+ community at the time of the riots.

### **WHAT THE FILM COULD HAVE DONE**

As for what the film should have done, the easiest answer would to have focus on an actual person involved with the Stonewall Riots, as the majority of online criticism was due to the casting of a white cisgender character. A number of people stated that they would have preferred it if they focused on people like Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera. It would have been easy to center the film around Marsha, as she was already a minor character in the film. Instead of creating the character of Danny, Marsha could have been upgraded to a more prominent role. Since she was a real person, her backstory could take the place of Danny's backstory of how he got to the Stonewall Inn. Another problem people had with the film was that it was inaccurate to have Danny start the riots. This is another reason why having Marsha as the main character would have been a better choice. Marsha was known to be very involved with the riots and some people believe that Marsha was one of the first instigators of the riots. Another person who the film could have focused on is Sylvia Rivera, who was

also a key figure in the riots. It could have instead focused on Ray's character. Ray was a far more intriguing character and would have been more reflective of the people involved with the riots.

## CONCLUSION

There was much that the film *Stonewall* did not accurately depict, yet it was not as inaccurate as the online criticisms deemed it to be. The main criticism of the film came from the director's decision to create a masculine white cisgender character to have the film focus on when, in their minds, the Stonewall riot was started by transgender women of color. By doing this, the film was criticized for whitewashing the riots. However, there are problems with accepting these criticisms at face value. One issue is that the language and identities of the LGBTQ+ community has evolved from the 1960's. It appears that these critics attempted to apply modern identities to the community of the 1960's, but this should not be done as it does not accurately define what the community was really like during this time. Research indicates that the number of drag queens has been exaggerated over the years because the term "queen" has differing definitions. During the time of the riots, anyone who was effeminate was deemed as a "queen". In addition, a number of these people did not want to label themselves solely as transgender, so it would be inaccurate to force this label upon them. However, people who went against the gender norms of this time were responsible for a majority of the fighting at the riots, possibly even inciting the crowd to riot. By having Danny as the focus of the film and start the riots, the film ignores these more marginalized people and distorted the riot's history.

In regard to race, though, the film could be seen as accurate with having a white character. The majority of the people involved with the riots were white, but there were still a few people of color people involved. Based on these facts, it would not have been unusual for a white person to be present at the riots. In summation, it can be said that it should not be seen as unusual to have a white character as they were the ones mainly responsible for the riots, but inaccurate to depict a white person as starting the riots.

As to what *Stonewall* could have done to avoid controversy, the most effective action would have been to focus on a different fictional character instead of Danny. A suitable character to focus on could have been the character Ray, an effeminate street kid. Street kids were heavily involved with the riots, so this would have been a more accurate depiction. The other option the film could have done was to tell the story of someone who was actually present at the riots. One person in particular that it could have had as the main character is Marsha P. Johnson. She is one of the most notable people involved with the riots and she went on to be a positive influence on the LGBTQ+ community by helping found STAR with Sylvia Rivera (Born, Tyler).

In summary, not all of the film's criticisms were warranted but it was still an inaccurate telling of the Stonewall riots. There are more accurate depictions of this critical moment in history to help educate people about how this little bar became a pivotal point for LGBTQ+ riots. An alternative to this film is the documentary *Before/After Stonewall* if one wishes to learn more about the riot's history and an excellent literary source about the Stonewall riots is David Carter's *Stonewall*. These resources should be used to learn about the LGBTQ+ community's history, not the film *Stonewall*.

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