

LGBTQ+ Representation and the Hollywood Hyperreality in *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar*

There is a great number of presumptions and stereotypes surrounding Los Angeles. From the exaggeration of LA's weather and landscapes to the charm and desire for a Hollywood lifestyle, Los Angeles holds a dream-like view in many people's perspectives around the world. In his book, *My Los Angeles*, Edward Soja describes Los Angeles, specifically Hollywood, as conveying the idea of hyperreality, or a made up narrative that overpowers the actual reality of a situation. In this case, the idea of Hollywood presented to the world overpowers the actual reality of people's lives in Los Angeles. The film, *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar*, portrays the view of Hollywood as an aspirational American ideal. This film not only serves as a testament to the hyperreality around Hollywood, but it also reveals to what extent the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed in film.

To Wong Foo shares the story of three New York drag queens travelling cross country to compete at a drag competition in Los Angeles. In the opening scene, the protagonists are competing in a ball with the prize being a trip to Hollywood. Everyone in the room gasps with desire and optimism at a chance to obtain this prize. Each of the three protagonists hope to fulfill their respective dreams with their goal being personified through the ideal of Hollywood. Without much detail of why, Hollywood serves as a beacon of hope for the protagonists. The film conveys that Hollywood, Los Angeles represents an objective for growth and fulfillment.

I will be reviewing two articles that look into how *To Wong Foo* has portrayed Hollywood and how Hollywood has portrayed the LGBTQ+ community in *To Wong Foo*. In the article, "Pistols and Petticoats, Piety and Purity: To Wong Foo, the Queering of the American Monomyth, And the Marginalizing Discourse of Deification," Robert Brookey and Robert

Westerfelhaus analyze how the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed in the film *To Wong Foo*, They reflect on the common method of the dehumanization of LGBTQ+ peoples in Hollywood productions, and notice a difference in the film *To Wong Foo*. *To Wong Foo*'s representation of the LGBTQ+ community takes on the opposite approach of dehumanization, instead using the method of deification, or idolization. Deification in this film is expressed two ways. The first being the mentorship of Noxeema Jackson and Vida Boheme towards Chi-Chi Rodriguez. Throughout the film, Noxeema and Vida act as guides for Chi-Chi on her quest to become a full-fledged drag queen. Their roles can be described as spiritual guides reminiscent of Cinderella's fairy godmother. This symbolic role Noxeema and Vida portray shows a fairytale-like theme in the film that emphasizes the view of Los Angeles as a "dreamland."

Not only do they serve as Chi-Chi's role models, but all three drag queens become saviors for the townspeople of Snydersville. They perform righteous acts such as makeovers for the townspeople, and Vida's protection of Carol Ann from her abusive husband Virgil. Through these acts the protagonists portray a savior-like complex. They are seen as otherworldly forces that take over the town of Snydersville and leave it for the better. In the end, the previously humdrum town obtains a new vigor, and Chi-Chi Rodriguez develops along her journey to eventually win the competition in Los Angeles. This supports my argument of Hollywood's hyperreality and how it is enforced through movie productions. Through the deification of the characters in *To Wong Foo*, Hollywood is cemented as a fantasyland where anyone's dreams can come true. It is a source that drives people to pursue their innermost dreams with optimism. Not only is this hyperreality of Hollywood enforced but it provides inspiration to the general public. This superficial perspective of Hollywood serves as hope for all who view it.

Looking into Hollywood's hyperreality, it is important to note the methods used in *To Wong Foo* that help perpetuate this perspective. In the article, "How Homo Can Hollywood Be? Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo* to *Brokeback Mountain*," Alex Evans raises an interesting point that *To Wong Foo* calls back to the "golden age of Hollywood glamour;" mimicking and obtaining themes from films from Hollywood's Golden Age. Most notably, the film exudes a feel good nature that appeals to Middle American viewers. Evans argues that by sticking to this method and playing it safe, this poses a threat to the "authenticity" of LGBTQ+ representation. By producing a feel good movie, the characters in *To Wong Foo* aren't able to develop past simple storylines. Just as Hollywood is portrayed as an aspirational ideal, so are *To Wong Foo's* protagonists. As Brookey and Westerfelhaus analyzed, the deification of Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi, create idolized images rather than well-rounded characters. This supports the themes I approach about the hyperreality around Hollywood and how it is perpetuated by Hollywood itself.

In review, *To Wong Foo* works as an example of the creation and encouragement of the Hollywood myth. Although it gives a mostly positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters, the film lacks real substance in characterization and instead opts for its protagonists to be deified characters. It is not a film centered on LGBTQ+ issues or experiences, but rather a testament to the hyperreality surrounding Hollywood. *To Wong Foo* capitalizes on the optimistic perseverance of success in dreamland.

Works Cited

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