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SANCTIFYING QUEERDOM:
RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN NEW QUEER CINEMA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film, and Theatre

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Marco Torres

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ABSTRACT

SANCTIFYING QUEERDOM: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN NEW QUEER CINEMA

by Marco Torres

This thesis offers a critical reading of the intersection of religious and queer identities in films from the second wave of the New Queer Cinema movement (2000-2007). The films studied are Sordid Lives (2000), Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001), Latter Days (2003), and Bad Education (2004). Using a theological criticism model as presented by Religious Film scholar Joel W. Martin, the thesis analyzes and discusses the use of plot, character, and mise-en-scène in these films to construct identities that are simultaneously queer and religious, and examines how the directors of the films address the conflict between the two identities and what, if any, resolution to the conflict is provided by the films.

For my father, who taught me the value of intellectual discourse,
and for my mother, who taught me the value of faith.

And to all the family, friends, and colleagues
who supported and inspired this work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I. The Origins of New Queer Cinema and Queer Film Studies¹

“New Queer Cinema” is a term first coined by film scholar B. Ruby Rich in 1992 to describe a growing number of films from the independent film circuit that contained a politicized stance toward queer subjects. Films such as Paris Is Burning (Jennie Livingston, 1991), Poison (Todd Haynes, 1991), My Own Private Idaho (Gus VanSant, 1991), and Edward II (Derek Jarman, 1992), films by openly queer directors about queer characters, made up the initial wave of New Queer Cinema. In the introduction to New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader, Michele Aaron explains that “The films . . . had few aesthetic or narrative strategies in common, but what they seemed to share was an attitude” (Aaron, 3). This “attitude” Aaron speaks of is an unapologetic presentation of queer characters and issues, an assumption that the audience of these films would not be taken aback by the mere appearance of a queer character.

Since Rich’s first use of the term, it has since been adopted by both film scholars and popular media to refer to any film with a focus on issues or characters within the queer community. In April 2005, gay newsmagazine The Advocate featured a cover story on the return of New Queer Cinema. Citing the success of films such as Hedwig and the Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001) and Latter Days (C. Jay Cox, 2003), and looking to the releases of the much-hyped films Eating Out (Q. Allan Brocka, 2004)

¹ A brief note on terminology: While much discussion and debate has been had over the use of the terms “queer” and “gay,” both have become generally acceptable terms used to refer to sexual identities that do not fit the model of a traditional, heterosexual identity. For the purposes of this work, the term “queer” will be used to refer to non-heteronormative sexualities in general, including gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and transsexuals. Gay will be used most often to refer to homosexual males, unless otherwise noted.

and Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005), film critic Alonso Duralde suggested that the production and success of these films recalled the New Queer Cinema movement of films Rich wrote about in the early 90s.

Both waves of New Queer Cinema sparked interest amongst film scholars, causing a growth in scholarly work in the field of Queer Film Studies. While New Queer Cinema was first introduced as a concept by Rich in 1992, the foundations of much of the scholarly research in the field can be traced to scholarship in Queer Theory as well as Feminist Film Studies (Hayward). Queer theory has its origins in the research of sociologists and biologists, as well as the political rhetoric of the queer community following the historic Stonewall riot of 1969. Proposing that sexuality is not a binary, static trait, but rather fluid, and socially, ideologically, and biologically constructed, queer theorists use this understanding of sexual identity as a means through which to examine all aspects of society, including artistic media and performance.

Feminist Film Theory is concerned with the presentation and performance of gender, particularly the feminine, and the presentation of women as both characters and visual objects rather than subjects. Feminist film theorists, such as Tania Modelski and Laura Mulvey, are also concerned with issues of spectatorship, the roles of gender and sexual identity in reception of film, and Mulvey introduced the concept of the “male gaze” to film discourse. The combination of these two disciplines, Queer Theory and Feminist Film Theory, has led to the study of Queer Cinema, which uses the ideas of fluid, constructed sexuality as a starting point to examine the presentation of non-heterosexual identities and bodies in film, as well as the presentation of films created for

a non-heterosexual spectator.

There are a number of recurring issues in the study of Queer Cinema. Drawing on its origins in Feminist Film Theory, much scholarship has been done on issues of spectatorship. Examinations of the role of identity, particularly sexual identity, of the spectator and its influence on the production and reading of New Queer Cinema, have provided the groundwork for the influence of national, racial, and ethnic identities as well. Queer film scholars such as Ros Jennings and Loykie Lomine have examined the role of national identity in queer film, while Louise Walsenburg and Daniel T. Contreras have focused their work on matters of race and ethnicity in queer film. The recognition of multiple influential identities has allowed for the discussion and examination of spectators, characters, and directors who are “queer and...” in cinema.

Queer Cinema scholars have also drawn on auteur theory to examine New Queer Cinema. Auteur theory is concerned with the role of a director’s technical competence and personality, and its influence on the production, reception, and reading of a film as text (Sarris). Queer film scholars have identified a few directors of the New Queer Cinema as auteurs, including Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki. Scholars Michael Deangelis and Glyn Davis have done case studies on these directors, examining their films from an auteur theory perspective.

Politics and culture have also been concerns of queer film scholarship. Again, drawing on the work of feminist and queer theory, scholarship has looked to the body and its presentation on film as a political tool. The depiction of queer bodies allow for discussion of cultural and political views on sex and health. Examination of eroticism

and sexual titillation on film has led some Queer Film scholars to view pornography as political and social commentary, and the discussion of sex and the political in the queer community often leads to a focus on AIDS, prostitution, drug use, and their perceived connections to queer culture. Thomas Waugh, Alexander Doty, and others have written on these political issues in Queer Cinema.

All of these issues are concerns of Queer Film scholarship, but an examination of the writings of Queer Cinema scholars reveals a unifying focus on the presentation of queer identity. Vito Russo's landmark work, The Celluloid Closet (first published in 1981), both a book and the film inspired by it, provides an extensive survey of the history of representation of queer characters in American cinema, though not necessarily from a scholarly perspective, per se. While Russo's research dealt primarily with clear, intentional depictions of queer characters, much scholarly research has been done since then on the films of the mid-twentieth century (1930-1960), re-examining these films in an attempt to uncover sexual identities that had to be hidden due to the mandates of the Hays Office. This examination of hidden identities has crossed over various genres, though the most in-depth work has focused on horror films and film noir. Harry Benshoff's work, Monsters In The Closet, provides a queer reading of monster films from 1920s to 1940s. Richard Dyer and Lee Edelman have both written extensively on the hidden queer identities of Noir films, with Edelman's Homographesis providing an extensive methodology by which to read queer identities in these films. The work of Alfred Hitchcock has also been the focus of queer film scholars, with John Hepworth, Robin Wood, and Sabrina Barton each having written extensively on the portrayals of

homosexuality throughout Hitchcock's work. Each of these works addresses the construction of queer identity in film, building from other critical theories including auteurism, semiotics, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis. However, the idea of constructed identity perhaps finds its biggest influence in Queer Theory, and it is this idea -- i.e., that identity is constructed and can be uncovered in film -- that provides the genesis of the point of departure and methodology for this work.

II. Religion in Queer Film Studies

While, according to The Advocate, Queer Cinema may be undergoing a renaissance, the queer community itself currently finds itself embroiled in a cultural war over topics such as gay marriage, anti-discrimination laws, clergy sex-scandals, and accurate representation in popular media. As a result of a growing movement in the United States by queer activists pressing for the legalization of same-sex marriage, and success in a handful of much-publicized legal cases, as well as the revelation of sexual abuse by clergy in the Catholic Church, and the outing of prominent Evangelical leaders such as Ted Haggard, the struggle between institutionalized religious organizations and sexual minorities has become a debate that is being waged in the headlines of newspapers and magazines. Popular media and journalists are depicting this debate as a battle between the liberal, queer community and the religious, conservative right. It is often depicted as a binary, "us" versus "them" war with no middle ground, and there is the pervasive stereotype that if one is queer, then one must have renounced religion. Yet, as discussion and debate continue to play out in popular media, a more diverse, personal struggle is being revealed: the struggle of those who identify as both queer and religious

to reconcile their dual, often antagonistic, identities. However, this is not an area within mainstream film studies that has received critical attention or been the focus of much scholarship, perhaps because issues of religious identity are usually reframed as the product of ideology and culture rather than in terms of personally held and strongly valued belief systems.

This struggle between religious and queer identities is, nevertheless, being explored in entertainment media, perhaps as a response to the growing news coverage of recent years. As the visibility of queer characters has increased in television, the conflict between religion and queer identity has begun to be addressed as well. Television series by queer creators, with leading queer characters, such as Queer as Folk (Showtime, 2000-2005), and Six Feet Under (HBO, 2001-2005) have explored this topic on pay cable, but even broadcast network shows have broached the topic in series like Dawson's Creek (WB, 1998-2003), and Will and Grace (NBC, 1998-2006). However, in-depth exploration has been found primarily in non-fiction entertainment. Reality series such as The Real World (MTV, 1990 – 2007), and Transgeneration (Sundance, 2004) have lent themselves to depicting discussions of religion and its relation to queer identity.

It is no wonder then that in cinema, the same pattern holds true. Documentary films specifically documenting the debates and struggles surrounding the queer community and religious institutions include Trembling Before G-d (Sandi Simcha Dubowski, 2001), which examines the struggle of Orthodox Hassidic Jews who are gay and lesbian, Sinners and Saints (Abigail Honor, 2004), documenting a gay couple's attempt to have a traditional Catholic wedding, and this year's For the Bible Tells Me So

(Daniel G. Karslake, 2007), an examination of the Evangelical Christian movement's bible-based arguments condemning homosexuality.

It is important to acknowledge the work of Derek Jarman, a self-identified queer director whose films (1970-1994) are considered to be groundbreaking work in presenting an unapologetic portrayal of homosexuality on film. However, most relevant to this thesis, Jarman's films also have lent themselves to a discussion of religion in queer cinema, because of their persistent use of religious iconography. Scholarly discussion of Jarman's cinematic work tends to focus on either the unusual structure of his films' narratives, the depiction of homosexuality, or the use of visual juxtaposition. It is within the context of these elements in Jarman's films that the discussion of religion in Jarman's work takes place. Scholars do not identify an attempt by Jarman to reconcile religious and queer identities in his work, which is the focus of this study of the New Queer Cinema that emerged after Jarman's death. Nevertheless, the body of scholarly work devoted to Jarman's treatment of queer identity and use of religious iconography should be acknowledged.

Steven Dillon explores the unique structure of Jarman's films quite extensively in Derek Jarman and Lyric Film. In the introduction to the book, Dillon explains that what makes Jarman's anti-narrative technique so interesting is "the degree to which he thinks of this contrast to narrative as poetry," (Dillon, 3). Dillon explores a number of Jarman's films and their poetic structure, focusing primarily on the recurring image of mirrors and bodies of water as emblematic of Jarman's poetic structure, and also examining the influence of homosexual identity in these images. Stephen Carr, in discussion of

Jarman's The Garden (1990), suggests that the purpose of the disruptive, non-narrative structure of these films "is to make the film hinge rather more on the specific images . . . and rather less on the dominance of the meaning of the specific images by the narrative as a whole" (Carr, 13). The images of The Garden present biblical stories and religious allusions, including the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the Passion narrative of Christ. These images are juxtaposed with images of a homosexual couple and their ostracization by the society they live in. Dillon views these images and juxtapositions in light of Jarman's poetic structure and use of mirror images as poetry. Carr, on the other hand, examines the image-centric structure of The Garden as a criticism of religious hierarchy and oppression of the queer community, and the intersection of religion and homosexuality in the film is used to support this criticism of Christianity.

Jarman is often hailed by film critics and queer film scholars for his groundbreaking work that unapologetically depicted male homoeroticism on film. Caravaggio (1986) is often included in discussions of Jarman's portrayal of sex and the male body. Niall Richardson writes extensively on the presence of queer identities and relationships based on sexual dominance in the film. Richardson looks specifically at the queering of masculinity in Caravaggio, suggesting that Jarman's work is "a vehicle for examining contemporary sexual politics, especially the circumscription of sexual desire to specific bodies" (Richardson, 42). However, it is Jarman's first feature film, Sebastiane (1976), that is perhaps the most referenced of Jarman's films in discussing the visual display of the nude male and homosexuality. Film scholar Steven Dillon describes it as "visually drenched in homoerotic display" (Dillon, 62) and queer film critic Thomas

Waugh, in his original review of the film in 1978, writes about the overwhelming display of male nudity and homosexual activity that dominates the visuals of the film (Waugh, 69-71). Sebastiane is also noteworthy because it is an adaptation of the Christian myth of Saint Sebastian, and the story of his martyrdom serves as the basis for the homoerotic imagery that dominates the film. Dillon, again, is more concerned in the poetic structure of the film, but like The Garden, he explores the use of religious images by Jarman to construct the poetry of the film. Waugh writes on the overt eroticizing of the Christian myth, discussing how Jarman's film extrapolates the homoerotic subtext of religious martyrdom and its connection to sadomasochism and other sexual fetishes.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to point out that Jarman's work and the scholarly study of it are not concerned so much with theology and religious doctrine, as they are with artistic structure and ideology. Religious iconography, in the films of Jarman, is used to reveal the status of queer identity in a specific society at a specific point in time. It is concerned more with the parallels between religious and queer identity in relation to ostracization and persecution from a secular majority, and less concerned with the direct conflict between religion and queer identity. However, it is this precise conflict between religious and queer identities that has been a neglected area of study within mainstream film studies and queer studies generally, not simply in the work of Jarman, and which this thesis seeks to redress in the context of New Queer Cinema.

In fact, it is this presence of discussion, debate, and struggle of multiple identities in New Queer Cinema that brings up the question for study in this thesis: To what extent are religious motifs and iconography used by self-identified queer directors to construct

character identities that are simultaneously queer and religious? While the examination of the ideological implications of these two identities throughout this thesis will be indirectly informed by earlier discussions of the films of Jarman, the primary emphasis of my work is on filling in the gaps among queer studies, film studies, and studies of religion in film through a critical reading of the theological aspects of the films being studied -- specifically, the construction of theological and religious identities, and their interaction and conflict with queer identities.

III. Methodology

The study of religion and film has traditionally come from scholars with a background in Religious or Theological Studies, rather than from within film studies itself. It is generally framed within a social or political paradigm rather than a religious or theological one, as the body of work on Jarman's film's shows. Hence, to examine the ways in which both queer and religious identities are linked and worked through in New Queer Cinema, the work of theological scholars with an interest in film actually proves most useful to the project of this thesis.

In discussing the basis for theological criticism of film, John C. Lyden points to the influence of the work of theologian Paul Tillich, particularly his 1919 essay "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture." Tillich's essay examined the similarities between art and religion, and suggested that art, like religion, pointed to some greater "reality of meaning," and could thus, even when lacking explicitly religious elements, still be viewed from a theological perspective. While Tillich's work does not directly address film, the understanding of film as art by contemporary scholars and theologians has

allowed for the use of Tillich's theological interpretation of art to serve as the basis for the methodology of religious film scholars. Joel W. Martin, in his introduction to Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film, provides a three-part methodological approach to studying religion in film. These three approaches, Theological, Mythological, and Ideological, are addressed by Lyden as well, and are the generally accepted methodology of Religious Film scholars for reading cinematic texts. Martin describes theological criticism as the use of ethical reflection and exegetical commentary to understand how a film relates to the beliefs and practices of a particular religion, most often a Christian-based one. Mythological criticism defines "religion" in a broader sense, looking at cross-cultural archetypes and drawing on the work of comparative religion and mythology scholar Joséph Campbell. Ideological criticism focuses on the political influences of religion and myth on a particular society at a particular time.

While the basis of this study is grounded in an ideological curiosity about the current social struggle between queer and religious identities, it will focus on a primarily theological critical approach, as defined by Martin, to the films being studied. The interest of this study is to extrapolate the simultaneously queer and religious identities present in films from the New Queer Cinema, and a theological approach provides the best means for extrapolating a specifically religious identity. However, ideological criticism will inform much of the reading of these identities as well, allowing for the inclusion of a reading of the queer identities. Theological criticism and an auteurist approach will also be used to understand the creator's role in introducing the possibility

of reading identities in texts. As Martin explains in his description of theological criticism, “Theological criticism hinges upon the notion that the critic, director, screenplay writer, or some other creative force behind the film develops a certain theological agenda or concept, and the distinctive goal of the theological critic is to uncover that concept” (Martin, 14).

Theological criticism provides a solid framework by which to extrapolate religious meaning and identity in films. In Narrative Elements and Religious Meaning, literary critic Wesley Kort provides four elements of narrative that can provide a religious understanding of texts. Those four elements are atmosphere, character, plot, and tone. Martin uses these four elements as guidelines for viewing films theologically, noting that “Films incorporate the same four elements of storytelling [as literature] and, thus, have the ability to confront the audience with otherness, thereby expanding and altering worldviews,” (Martin, 16). For the purposes of this thesis, the reading of religious and queer identity in the films being studied will focus on Kort and Martin’s elements of plot and character, as well as an examination of the elements of *mise-en-scène*, including décor, costume, figure action and expression, color, lighting, camera angle, distance, and movement. The examination of these elements will provide the methodology by which religious and queer identity will be discussed and examined.

In order to more accurately assess and discuss the presentation of religious and queer identities offered by the films selected for study, readings of the cinematic texts will be based on the completed production of the films as they are presented in their DVD releases (for purposes of accessibility for study), and all quotations and descriptions will

come from the presentation offered by the DVD product, rather than from the film's script. When relevant and available, the discussion will also incorporate critical reviews of the films and audio commentary tracks of the directors' commentaries.

Both Queer Cinema studies and Religious Film studies are relatively new fields of film scholarship, the latter even more so than the former, and the intersection of specifically queer and religious identities has yet to be explored in depth. As such, the availability of scholarly research on the subject is greatly limited, with the works of Derek Jarman – as objects of inquiry -- being the notable exception. Even there, however, the discussion of religion has less to do with identity and more to do with a social or political paradigm, as discussed above. This thesis, a discussion and examination of the intersection of religious and queer identities in films from the New Queer Cinema, seeks to begin to bridge the scholarly gap between Queer Film Studies and religious scholars. It will expand earlier discussions of queer identity to include the theological-based methodology employed by Religious Film scholars, in order to provide a critical reading of religious and queer identity in Queer Cinema.

IV. Films for Study

The following films have been selected for this study because they share a number of characteristics. First and foremost, all of these films can be identified as part of the second wave of New Queer Cinema movement of the new millennium identified by The Advocate. The films selected are both written and directed by creators who have identified themselves as queer in publicity for the films or in interviews and commentaries, and more importantly, the creators have clearly stated that their own

religious backgrounds were influential in the creation of the films. The plots of the films also focus on explicitly queer characters and their narratives share a common theme of questions of identity. With that in mind, the films selected are: Sordid Lives (Del Shores, 2000), Hedwig and The Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), Latter Days (C. Jay Cox, 2003), and Bad Education (Pedro Almodovar, 2005). While there are other films from the second wave of New Queer Cinema that deal with religious identity, these four share a specifically Christian influence which is a focus of this study, and all have been clearly identified by their directors as being intentionally influenced by their own struggle with religious identity.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations imposed by the film selection. The religious identities of the directors and films have been restricted to an examination of a Christian background, though the allowance has been made for each film to draw from a different Christian denomination. This has been done in order to maintain a consistent set of images, iconography, and mythology by which to read and provide an analysis of the four films. While there are a number of New Queer Cinema films dealing with non-Christian religions (Judaism and Islam being the most prominent) they have been kept out of this analysis in order to maintain a feasible focus. Another limitation is that all of the directors selected are male, and self-identify as gay. The characters in the films are also male. While Hedwig and Bad Education both also feature transsexual characters that defy a strictly male label, the characters in these films begin their stories identifying as gay men, and are portrayed by male actors. The limitation to male, queer characters is only placed in order to make the study more feasible and focused, and is not meant to

diminish or disregard the need for study of female-identified characters and/or directors.²

The analysis of these films is arranged chronologically, by year of release, but also ideologically. Sordid Lives and Hedwig, make up the first half of this study, and both present a reconciliation of queer and religious identity in their characters and narratives. Latter Days and Bad Education, on the other hand, make up the second half and depict a rejection of institutionalized religion, leaving the queer and religious identities of these characters in opposition to one another.

² Another quick note on terminology: When referring to these transsexual characters throughout this work, the gendered pronouns “he” and “she” will be used according to the identifier used by the character according to the stage of transition that they are in, and the gender they are performing, and thus may change throughout the discussion of their narrative arcs.

CHAPTER 2: “JUST AS I AM”: RECONCILIATION AND ACCEPTANCE IN SORDID LIVES

". . . we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Dallas . . . deplore the proliferation of all homosexual practices, and reaffirm the biblical position of Southern baptists that all such practices are sin and are condemned by the Bible. . ."
- Southern Baptist Convention on Homosexuality (1985)

I. Del Shores and Southern Baptist Influence

In discussing his work, writer/director Del Shores has often acknowledged that he writes from his personal experiences growing up in a Southern Baptist household. As a playwright, Shores has written directly on the topic of the conflict between homosexuality and Southern Baptist beliefs. This conflict was the driving force behind his 2001 GLAAD award-winning play, Southern Baptist Sissies (which is currently in production as a film), and Shores has also tackled the issue during his stint as a writer and producer for the television series, Queer as Folk.

Sordid Lives, the 2000 film written and directed by Shores, is an adaptation of his stage play of the same name and marks Shores first -- and so far only -- stint as film director. Shores and his work has yet to be explored in a scholarly context, and popular media has limited discussion of Sordid Lives to interviews and reviews, with examinations of the film's comedic elements and the performances of its cast (in particular Olivia Newton-John and Delta Burke). The major focus of these discussions, however, is on the film's multi-layered plot that interweaves the individual character arcs of a rather large cast into a single narrative. Film critic Gary Kramer actually divides his review of the film character-by-character, examining each narrative individually. However, the struggle between religion and homosexuality in the film is only briefly

addressed in these discussions. The film follows the revelation of various secrets in a Texan family after the matriarch, Grandma Peggy, dies while having an affair with her neighbor's husband. Her sister, Sissy, tries to maintain order while daughters Lavonda and Latrelle prepare the funeral and try to comfort Noleta, the neighbor whose husband Peggy was sleeping with. Their cross-dressing brother, Earl Ingram (aka Brother Boy) is in a mental institution, where he has been for the past twenty years, in hopes of curing his homosexuality. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, grandson Ty speaks to a therapist about his fear of returning home for the funeral, mostly because he hasn't told his family he's gay. Shores has noted that his Southern Baptist background, and experiences coming out to a Southern Baptist family, informed much of the characters and plot of the film (Duralde, "The Sordid Truth").

While religion plays a role in most of Shores' works, it permeates the visuals and cast of characters in Sordid Lives. The Southern Baptist background and culture of Grandma Peggy's southern family and neighbors can be seen throughout the mise-en-scène of the film. The film restricts itself to five central settings, with only brief excursions outside of them. These locations are Ty's therapist's office in Los Angeles, Wardell's bar, Dr. Eve's office, Sissy's home, and the local chapel. While the chapel, obviously, is a symbol of religious culture and identity, Sissy's home perhaps shows the biggest influence of religion on the lives of these characters. Various decorations in Sissy's living room are iconic items of a Christian, specifically Southern Baptist, identity. On the wall behind the couch is a portrait of Jesus, before which Sissy often stands in shots showing her speaking to Lavonda and Latrelle. Hanging in the kitchen window

above the sink is a wind chime in the shape of a crucifix. On the mantle behind the piano in her living room is a set of bookends in the shape of praying hands. And on the piano itself is a church hymnal from a Southern Baptist congregation, which Shores admits is his from his own personal belongings (Shores, DVD Commentary). All of these items are constantly present in shots throughout the sequences filmed in these settings, and close-ups of the women often include one of these items in the frame as well, serving as a constant reminder that this is a family whose identity is steeped in their religious tradition.

While other settings in the film don't have religion quite so clearly built into their design, they are nonetheless connected with issues of religious identity by the characters who interact in those settings. The therapist's office in L.A. and Dr. Eve's office will each be further discussed in the explorations of Ty and Brother Boy's identities later in this chapter, but Wardell's bar also provides examples of the insertion of religion into location by characters.

In particular, there is a sequence in the latter half of the film during which Lavonda and Noleta, inspired by watching Thelma and Louise, storm Wardell's bar seeking revenge for G.W.'s infidelity and Wardell's cruelty to Brother Boy. The women's scheme ends up converting the bar into both a queer space and a religious one. As part of their demands, the women force G.W., Wardell, and Odell to take on Brother Boy's identity. At gunpoint, they make the men undress, put on women's lingerie, dance with each other, and then kiss. The exposure of the men's bodies, the donning of feminine attire, and the physical, erotic contact gives the men, and the bar itself, the trappings of

gay male culture. This is accentuated when Bitsy Mae Harling walks into the bar and, seeing the men, identifies them as homosexuals. The bar, and its inhabitants, are now viewed as queer.

At the same time, Lavonda and Noleta's actions against the men also bring forth a spiritual change within the bar. Wardell, acknowledging that the women are not wrong for demanding retribution, begins to admit his crime against Brother Boy, and wanting forgiveness, willingly submits to the punishment imposed by the women. Viewed from within a Christian paradigm, Wardell acknowledges himself to be a sinner, declares his sin before the community, and then submits himself to a ritual meant to cleanse him of the guilt brought on by his actions. Once satisfied that the men have been sufficiently humiliated, and after Wardell testifies to his sin and the necessity of the ritual, Noleta declares "I feel like I've been to Church!" To which Juanita, the only female patron in the bar, replies "Amen! Praise Jesus!"

II. Character Identities: Ty Williamson

In looking specifically at the character of Ty and his story in the film, Shores acknowledges the strong influence of his own struggle in coming out. In fact, Shores acknowledges that the story "came out of my first visit home after coming out" (Shores, DVD Commentary). Ty is the first character the film introduces, and his introduction is a clear statement of religious identity. "I was raised rigid Southern Baptist," are the first words of dialogue uttered. Ty's introductory monologue is quickly revealed as part of a session with his therapist, and is a discussion of Ty's internal struggle of wanting to come out to his family but not feeling as if he can. Interspersed throughout Ty's monologue are

cuts to Bitsy Mae Harling performing a song, in what is assumed to be Wardell's bar, that is itself a conversation with "the Lord." The lyrics of the song refer to humanity as "sinners and saints" and note that the Lord does not care what goes on "in between the sheets." This juxtaposition of sound and image opens the film and illustrates the struggle between queer and religious identity: Ty clearly feels he cannot come out to his family because of their Southern Baptist identity, while Bitsy Mae's song counters that sexual expression isn't something for which God judges humanity.

Ty's fears are shown to be legitimate later in the film, when Latrelle, his mother, is confronted by Lavonda about her disdain for their brother, Brother Boy. Lavonda accuses Latrelle of hating Brother Boy because of his "influence" on Ty, to which Latrelle replies, "Ty is not homosexual!" When Lavonda asks Latrelle why she believes there is anything wrong with homosexuality, Latrelle's response is direct: "It's wrong . . . according to the bible. According to God." Ty's assumptions that the religious influence on his family's response to his homosexual identity will be negative is proven correct. His own mother cites the bible and God as basis for her condemnation of homosexuality. What is interesting in this scene, however, is Shore's directorial choice to play out Ty's internal struggle between two heterosexual women, with Latrelle using religion to condemn while Lavonda tries to put a positive spin on the relationship between God and homosexuality. As these two women give voice to Ty's inner conflict, Ty actually confronts the issue head on with his therapist.

Towards the end of the film, Ty returns to his therapist and begins to explain his growing need for God in his life. It is in this sequence that the film presents the

possibility of reconciliation between Ty's religious and queer identities. "I prayed," he begins, clarifying that he hasn't prayed since "I was a kid, back when I went to church -- when I believed." As Ty's discussion of the peace he found in prayer continues, the camera cuts to the empty chapel where Grandma Peggy's funeral will take place. The camera pans across the empty pews, light streaming in from windows, and creates a picture of a peaceful, quiet church. As this peaceful, religious image continues, Ty explains why he hasn't prayed since childhood: "I stopped going. Because how do you embrace something that doesn't embrace you?" His struggle to reconcile identities is again spoken, and like the debate between his mother and aunt earlier, the struggle is once again given visualization by a woman. As Ty speaks his words, the image on screen remains focused on the chapel, and we see Bitsy Mae walk in and then slowly make her way to the front of the church, a look of sorrow on her face. The camera then cuts back to Ty, who continues his monologue by describing how The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939) served as a sign from God that he should come out to his family. In fact, Ty describes his coming out process specifically as a "spiritual quest," again underscoring the significance of both religious and queer identities in this film.

As Ty sets out on his spiritual quest, Bitsy Mae picks up her guitar and begins to play another song. The lyrics begin, "I've wandered far away from God / Now I'm coming home." The homecoming theme connects God and religion directly back to Dorothy's journey in The Wizard of Oz ("There's no place like home!"), which is representative of Ty's identity-affirming coming out experience, and which Ty has already connected to his religious identity by identifying the film as a sign from God. A

montage sequence then ensues, cutting between Bitsy Mae singing in church and Ty wandering around West Hollywood, watching a group of gay men chat happily and a lesbian couple play with their infant son. Bitsy Mae's song, about returning to God and home, intercut with Ty's dawning realization that he can be openly gay and happy, highlight the connection between the religious and the queer in Ty, and reveal that he may have found some reconciliation of the two.

This reconciliation is confirmed and illustrated in Ty's actual coming out. In Texas, in the chapel, Latrelle is speaking to the corpse of her mother when Ty walks in, having returned home to be with his family. There, in the chapel (the same chapel that was used to highlight Ty's desire for spiritual peace), Ty tells his mother that he is gay, and completes his spiritual quest. Unfazed by the news, Latrelle, who up to this point has used religion to condemn homosexuality, tells Ty that she has always known, and that she believes their strong bond stems from the fact that he is gay. The two embrace, and Ty's story (though not the film) ends here, with his coming out in church. His conflicting identities, gay and Southern Baptist, are reconciled, as his mother's acceptance of him illustrates.

III. Character Identities: Brother Boy / Earl Ingram

Shores reveals the struggle between religious and queer identities through another queer character in the film, Earl Ingram, otherwise known as Brother Boy. Brother Boy, a drag performer fascinated with Tammy Wynette, is introduced, and always depicted, in full drag. At the start of the film, he has spent twenty years under the observation of Dr. Eve Bolinger in a mental institution, where he is meant to be cured of his terrible case of

homosexuality. As mentioned above, Earl has been placed in Dr. Bolinger's care by his family due to Latrelle and Peggy's religious beliefs. The film's introduction of Brother Boy is through a close-up of his mouth as he applies lipstick, lip-synching to the lyrics "Lord, you know I need a friend." The scene is humorous and campy, but also reveals Brother Boy's construction of and control over his identity. As he marches down the halls of the institute (the camera focusing on the heels he is wearing), one of the security guards calls him a "faggot" and asks him to "show your pussy." Brother Boy is completely unfazed by the comments, continuing to hold his head high and proud as he walks in Dr. Bolinger's office. This display of pride and comfort in his identity, despite the derogatory comments, is in sharp contrast to Ty's overwhelming fear of coming out, needing to hide, and shock at being recognized as gay. Unlike Ty, Brother Boy is in less turmoil with his identity, more at peace with his queerness, but there is still an interesting queer/religious dynamic at play in his identity. While Brother Boy may at first appear to lack any sort of inner conflict between his identities, the religious/queer struggle is played out externally. Dr. Eve, Latrelle, and Peggy are all in direct conflict with Brother Boy as a result of their religious beliefs regarding his queer identity, and his placement in a mental health facility underscores the larger social/cultural conflict that Ty fears.

After Dr. Bolinger comments on the lack of progress in his "de-homosexualization," Brother Boy notes the judgment in her tone and begins to reveal the influence of religion on his understanding of his own identity. "I feel a little bit like a whore in church," he tells Dr. Bolinger, revealing not only a vulnerability so well hidden earlier as he marched down the halls in drag, but also a struggle between his identity as a

drag performer and his upbringing as a Southern Baptist, much like the allegorical whore in church. Like the whore, Brother Boy finds himself in a social institution that is passing moral judgment on his “deviant” sexual identity.

The drag performance of Brother Boy also permits a religious reading of the character. When he finally becomes fed up with Dr. Bolinger, Brother Boy reveals the salvific role of his queer identity: “It gets me through this hell,” he explains, referring specifically to the twenty years he has spent at the mental health facility, but also to the community that has persecuted him throughout his life. Wardell’s assault on him twenty years ago, Peggy and Latrelle’s reactions to his homosexuality, and the slurs thrown at him by the staff of the facility all point to an ongoing suffering due to his queer identity. But it is also through his drag persona that Brother Boy is able to ignore his hell. The construction of his physical queer identity also brings about the construction of a religious one as well.

The spiritual salvation brought on by drag performance is a theme repeated throughout the film through Brother Boy. In Latrelle and Lavonda's argument over homosexuality, Lavonda notes that their brother began dressing as woman from an early age, when, at the age of five, he played the role of the Virgin Mary in a Christmas Pageant. Mary is a noteworthy image to mark the beginning of Brother Boy's queer identity, for in the Christian tradition, it is from Mary that Jesus is born and salvation brought to humanity. Brother Boy, like Mary, also brings salvation to others through his cross-dressing. When he performs for the patients of the institute, his performance is littered with screams from the audience about Jesus, Satan, devils, and salvation. A

spiritual struggle is voiced by the patients, and it is Brother Boy, as Tammy Wynette, that ultimately soothes and brings peace. His performance comes to its end when Wardell bursts into the hospital to free Brother Boy. At Wardell's appearance, one of the patients screams "It's Jesus!" It is an accurate identifier, in the sense that Wardell comes to bring not only Brother Boy freedom, but also redemption and forgiveness of sin, as Wardell's actions are ultimately also an act of penance for his past crimes against Brother Boy. This sequence is rendered comically, with the dialogue and music suggesting a light-hearted chase sequence. However, Wardell's earlier testimony at the bar, and his request for forgiveness from Brother Boy, lend the sequence a more serious subtext that underscores the religious themes of reconciliation.

Brother Boy's story, and the film, ends with one final act of salvation through drag, this time intricately connected to Southern Baptist theology and ritual. At Peggy's funeral, Bitsy Mae Harling delivers a personal eulogy for the woman and begins to play a hymn. That hymn is "Just As I Am," which Shores notes is a Baptist hymn tied into salvation ritual: "In the Baptist Church, you walk down the aisle to accept Jesus as your savior to that hymn" (Shores, DVD Commentary). It is to this hymn that Brother Boy, in full drag, marches down the aisle of the church to say his final words to his mother's corpse. The words he speaks are a full affirmation and acceptance of his own queer identity and a rejection of anything that would seek to condemn that identity.

Both Ty and Brother Boy's narratives conclude with an empowering moment for the characters that embraces both their queer and religious identities. Ty's outing and acceptance in church, and Brother Boy's declaration of gay pride being introduced by a

Baptist hymn mark both characters as positively -- and simultaneously -- queer and Southern Baptist. The two identities are reconciled, at least internally, by the characters.

The next chapter will offer another reconciliation of queer and religious identities in the film Hedwig and the Angry Inch. The connection between drag performance and spiritual salvation offered in the analysis of Brother Boy's identity will be explored in more depth in analysis of the character of Hedwig and the reconciliation of her identities.

CHAPTER 3: "MORE THAN ANY GOD COULD EVER PLAN": THE TRANSSEXUAL MESSIAH OF HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

I. John Cameron Mitchell and Gnostic Influence

John Cameron Mitchell's recent film work includes Tarnation, the 2003 documentary by gay filmmaker Jonathan Caouette that explores his own painful upbringing, on which Mitchell served as executive producer, and 2006's Shortbus, written and directed by Mitchell. Shortbus garnered much attention for its controversial depiction of non-simulated sex acts, leading to debate regarding whether the film should be classified as pornography. Mitchell's body of film work shows that he is no stranger to exploring questions of identity on the big screen. His first foray into film in 2001, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, is no exception. The film addresses numerous issues of various identities and the reconciliation of them, including the blending of religious and queer identities. While not as overtly stated as in Sordid Lives, the attempt to reconcile those identities is a central theme of the film.

Based on Stephen Trask and Mitchell's own hit off-Broadway play, which itself began as a series of performances at the New York City drag club Squeezebox, Hedwig is the story of a transsexual musician seeking fulfillment by reconnecting with her "other half." The story is based in part on Plato's Symposium and scholarly writing on the adaptation of Symposium, such as James Leshner's "Some Notable Afterimages of Plato's Symposium" and Michael Greenberg's "Myth and Science Around Gender and Sexuality" make brief references to Hedwig in their discussions. Reviews of the film highlight the Symposium influence in the film, and make connections between Plato's myths and Hedwig's queer identity. The emerging scholarly literature centered on

Hedwig, including Judith Peraino's Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig and Sharon Dean's "There Ain't Much of a Difference," focuses on the expression and performance of gender and queer identity in the film. What these writings reveal is that at its core, Hedwig is a film about identity. With its origins in glam rock, musical theatre, drag performance, and ancient mythology, the film is hard to pin down in terms of genre, though it is most often labeled as a "Rock Musical." The main character, Hedwig herself, is also a conglomeration of numerous identities: German and American, male and female, gay and transsexual, rock-star and prostitute. Director John Cameron Mitchell has acknowledged numerous sources for Hedwig's origins, with the creation myths of Plato's Symposium being perhaps the most referenced in reviews. The most relevant for this study, however, is Mitchell's interest in early Christianity, in particular the Gnostic movement of the first century (VonBusack). The combination of drag performance and Christianity may at first glance seem strange, but Laurence Senelick describes the connection between Gnosticism and drag/transsexual identity in his book The Changing Room: "The Gnostic fondness for speculating about divine androgyny, and the subsequent soteriological rituals and baptismal rites in which even women were supposed to recover the original perfection of the male, met with hostility from the orthodox" (Senelick, 59). It is with this understanding of the Gnostic belief in androgynous divinity, and its influence on Mitchell's creation of Hedwig, that a reading of the film's religious identity becomes possible.

II. Character Identities: Hedwig Robinson

Hedwig's narrative can be read as allegorical and religious throughout the period of her life covered in the film, but her religious and divine identities find their origins in her pre-woman life as well, when "she" was a "he": her youth in East Berlin as Hansel Schmitt. In his youth, Hansel was put to sleep by his mother with a bedtime story about the origins of love, an adaptation of Aristophane's speech in Plato's Symposium. As rock-singer Hedwig, that story becomes the song "Origin of Love." During the performance of the song, Hedwig recounts her life-long search for her other half, the one person who will bring completion to her identity and fulfillment to her life. An animated sequence accompanies the story and song, and at the beginning of the sequence, the image of a young Hansel lying in bed with his mother is transformed into a series of stick-figure caricatures of Hansel with potential "other-halves." One of those figures is a man with a beard and crown of thorns, a use of traditional iconography used to depict Jesus of Nazareth, the Christian messiah. The implication here is clear: Hansel's "other-half," the source of his/her complete fulfillment of identity, may very well be the Son of God.

This connection between Hansel and Christ is further emphasized as Hedwig's performance continues, when she recounts a conversation between Hansel and his mother. Watching television, young Hansel proudly declares "Jesus was good!" His mother slaps the boy and warns him that "absolute power corrupts." This warning, and it being directed toward the boy, at the very least, suggests that his mother sees a connection between him and Jesus. But more deeply, it suggests that young Hansel

himself may have some power of which to beware being corrupted by. A possible reading of what this power might be can be found in Hedwig/Hansel's queer status. Queer film scholar Niall Richardson, in his work on the films of Derek Jarman, writes "The power of 'queer' is what Jonathan Dollimore has termed the 'perverse dynamic'. Something which culture deems deviant and outside the 'regimes of the normal' often actually stems from the dominant order" (Richardson, 5). This "perverse dynamic" is Hedwig's power. In her blending of identities she unties the religious and the queer, the deviant and the dominant.

The perverse dynamic of Hedwig/Hansel plays out visually in the discovery of Hansel by Sgt. Luther Robinson. Sgt. Robinson first stumbles upon Hansel as he is sunbathing in the nude -- on the crumbled ruins of a church. The image of Hansel's naked body lying on a stained-glass window in and of itself creates an iconic image that alludes to Catholic icons and artistic depictions of Christ and the Saints. But the image is also important because of its homoeroticism and queer overtones. Placed at the beginning of Luther and Hansel's relationship, the image marks the beginning of the Hedwig identity, as well, since it is the eventual romance between the two that causes Hansel to receive the botched sex-change operation that gives life to Hedwig Robinson. The creation of the queer Hedwig identity is tied to a homoerotic figure (i.e., Hansel's nude body, as perceived by Luther's gaze), and a religious site (the church ruins). Here, Hedwig's perverse dynamic unites the queer and religious dimensions.

This understanding of the queer struggle with religious identity establishes the basis for Hedwig's multiple identities and allows for a reading of numerous religious

identities in Hedwig. After a botched sex-change operation, a move from East Berlin to Junction City, and a divorce from the man for whom she became a woman, Hedwig finds herself at a loss when it comes to her identity. Music becomes the outlet for her search, and numerous possible identities are expressed through her songs and musical numbers. "Origin of Love" lays out Hedwig's primary conflict: she can only be complete when she has found her other half. Hedwig has this conflict marked onto her body with a tattoo on her hip of a face broken into two halves. This conflict is similarly stated by queer theologian Richard Cleaver in describing the struggle of gay Christians. Describing salvation, Cleaver explains that "Salvation is collective. By covenanting, we choose to be part of a gathered people. . . ." and continues ". . . But it is not really part of my experience as a gay Christian. I experience my relation with the rest of the people of God not as belonging but as isolation," (Cleaver, 39). As previously mentioned, the song itself is a retelling of Symposium, but at the same time it combines a number of religious mythologies into its performance. Greek, Norse, Egyptian, Hindu, and Roman mythologies are all blended (through the involvement of Zeus, Thor, Osiris, "Some Indian God", and Jove, respectively) into the creation story being told. Hedwig views her quest, and her identity, as being directly tied into divine action, and dictated by God (or gods).

However, while "Origin of Love" sets up Hedwig's identity struggle from a broad, mythological basis, there are other moments in her music that point specifically to the mythology of the Christian Bible. As she once again sings about her predicament of not knowing who she is in "Wicked Little Town," which Hedwig notes is the first song she

ever wrote, she cites the book of Genesis: "And then you're someone you are not / And Junction City ain't the spot / Remember Mrs. Lot / And when she turned around." The image of Lot's wife is a strong one that speaks to Hedwig's fears about her own identity. In the book of Genesis³, Lot and his family are spared by God during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But during their escape from the cities, Lot's wife "looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt," (Gen. 19:26).⁴ In looking back, Mrs. Lot was destroyed, and Hedwig fears the same thing will happen to her if she dwells too much on who she used to be. The biblical story then serves as a warning to Hedwig: she must press forward and discover who she is now, and not remain trapped in who she used to be.

At the conclusion of the performance, Hedwig wipes her face with a towel, and pulling it away, reveals to the camera that her make-up has left an impression of her image on the towel. While not a direct biblical reference, this "Shroud of Hedwig," as Mitchell identifies it (Mitchell, DVD Commentary), does refer to two separate pieces of Christian mythology: The Shroud of Turin and Veronica's Veil. The Shroud of Turin is a relic believed to be the linen in which Joséph of Arimethea wrapped the body of Jesus for burial. The shroud contains the image of a body that appears to have suffered the wounds of crucifixion. The origins of Veronica's Veil are derived from an apocryphal text, but have been immortalized in the Catholic ritual of the Stations of the Cross. The

³ All biblical citations throughout this work are from the New King James translation.

⁴ It is interesting to note that the tale of Lot's wife is a part of the narrative surrounding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, perhaps the most cited biblical passage to support a condemnation of homosexuality. Of course, the validity of such an argument has been challenged by numerous biblical scholars, such as Richard Hays, Victor Paul Furnish, and John McNeill, and it is now generally accepted, among scholars at least, that the sin in the story is inhospitality, and not sodomy.

veil, according to myth, was used by a woman named Veronica to wipe the face of Jesus as he carried his cross for execution. When she had finished her act of kindness, she discovered that the face of Christ had been imprinted onto her veil. Literary scholar James Rhodes writes on the mythology behind Veronica's veil and suggests in his work that "the Veronica legend stresses the central message of Christ's ministry by stating that it is not Christ's physical presence in the world that constitutes personal salvation, but his spiritual presence in one's soul" (Rhodes, 36). Hedwig's quest can be similarly stated: she seeks to join her identity with others. In essence, her central goal is to place her presence in the identity of someone else. The imprinting of Hedwig's own image upon the towel recalls these two Christian pieces of mythology and places Hedwig in the role of Christ, suggesting that one of her many identities may be spiritual messiah.

The other direct biblical reference in Hedwig's lyrics is found in "Tear Me Down," the film's opening number and the film's introduction of Hedwig. In describing her transsexual status, she explains the transformation from male to female with a reference to one of the miracles of Jesus: "I rose from off of the doctor's slab / Like Lazarus from the pit." The images of a slab, Lazarus, and escape from a pit suggest death, but also, paradoxically, freedom. It is appropriate imagery, as her transformation marks the death of her identity as Hansel, while simultaneously bringing about her escape from East Berlin and the possibility and hope of a new life in America, which is only possible as a result of her new queer identity as a transsexual woman. At the same time, the Lazarus comparison highlights the religious elements of her new identity. The story of Lazarus, found in Chapter 11 of the gospel of John, is one of resurrection and is a

foreshadowing of Jesus' own resurrection after his death. Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, dies after falling ill. When Jesus arrives to see the body, he is criticized by Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, for not saving their brother from death. Jesus explains that the death was necessary, as now he can bring about resurrection: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, shall live,'" (John 11:25). The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection is understood among biblical scholars as a crucial piece of understanding Jesus' role as messiah. For Hedwig to describe her own "resurrection" as a woman in terms of the miracle of Lazarus opens up the possibility of understanding her new identity as a messianic one.

"Tear Me Down" also contains another allusion to Hedwig's possible messianic identity. Midway through the performance, Yitzahk, Hedwig's band mate and husband, proclaims that Hedwig is like the Berlin wall, "Standing before you in a divide / between East and West / Man and woman / Slavery and freedom / top and bottom!" Looking to the epistles of Paul in the New Testament, specifically Galatians, we find the following description of Jesus' role as messiah: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Hedwig, like Christ, blurs and complicates binary opposites by her very nature as a blending of male and female in one body. However, Hedwig also adds the binaries "top and bottom," a reference to sexual position and power. It is an important addition, for, unlike St. Paul's messiah, Hedwig's identity is directly tied to sexual identity and activity, re-enforcing that she is a queer persona. However, "Tear Me Down" is only the beginning of Hedwig's story, and while it does allude to her messianic identity, the

parallels between her and Christ continue throughout her narrative. Hedwig undergoes two distinct deaths and resurrections over the course of her story. The first, as already discussed above, is her Lazarus-like transformation from the boy Hansel into the woman Hedwig. The second plays out more closely to the Passion narratives of the gospels. After being abandoned by her band mates, Hedwig is discovered on the streets by Tommy, the boy she has been seeking throughout the film. This encounter leads to Hedwig accusing Tommy of betraying and ruining her, and the argument concludes with the two characters crashing their limousine into a news truck. This is followed with a montage sequence that shows Hedwig and Tommy after the crash. Their faces are covered in bandages, bruises, and dirt, suggestive of a corpse. During the montage, Tommy cries out, "I don't know that woman! I didn't even know she wasn't a woman!" Here, then, we see Hedwig abandoned and denied by her disciples (Tommy and the band), and then put to death (the car crash), as Christ was by his own disciples. But then, miraculously, following the crash, all of Hedwig's dreams are fulfilled. She rises from the "death" of the collision to a new life as a celebrity, hailed as the talented rock-star she has longed to be. Betrayal, death, and ultimate resurrection: the essential elements of the Passion narrative.

The film does not end with Hedwig's new life of success and celebrity, however. Following a montage sequence of magazine covers promoting Hedwig's newfound fame, the film moves into a more abstract, musical performance of Hedwig's death and resurrection narrative. The lyrics and elements of *mise-en-scène* in the musical numbers that comprise this final act of the film work together to underscore the Passion narrative

of Hedwig's story. First, Hedwig walks into Bilgewater for her latest performance. She is greeted by a throng of fans, cheering, clapping, and screaming her praises. In the Catholic tradition, the beginning of Holy Week, which marks the final week of Jesus' life, is Palm Sunday, during which Jesus was cheered and glorified by throngs of followers as he entered the city of Jerusalem. Both sequences begin with an entrance marked by cheering crowds.

Following this, Hedwig takes the stage and begins to sing "Hedwig's Lament," a brief musical number that recounts the many loves and betrayals she has experienced in her life. It concludes with her greatest betrayal, that of her own pupil, Tommy: "I gave a piece to the rock star / He took the good stuff and ran." The passion narratives also include this betrayal of the messiah by a disciple: Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, a sign of intimacy and love, just as Tommy betrays Hedwig by stealing her heart.

This number immediately segues into the next, the appropriately titled song, "Exquisite Corpse." During this number, Hedwig rages and wails chaotically, as if in massive pain, as the lights go out and flashes of dark blue and red alternate and light up her body. The similarities to the Passion narratives and Catholic mythology are numerous here. The wailing and agony, the use of dark red and blue lighting, and the identification with an exquisite corpse work together to paint an image of Hedwig's performance as a torturous, agonizing death scene, just as the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus is portrayed in the narratives of the gospels. As Hedwig sings and wails about how she is to become a corpse, a victim of death, she rips the clothes off her body, throws off her wig, and leaves only her naked form. This too alludes to the crucifixion of Christ.

In the Gospel of John, the soldiers take Jesus' garments and tear them into pieces, crucifying him naked (John 23-24). In the case of Hedwig, however, this stripping sequence, while alluding to Christ's passion, is also a full revelation of her queer identity. On stage, she is still performing the female identity of Hedwig, but without her clothes her body is revealed to be male. She is both male and female in the act of being stripped, an act that reveals both her queer and religious identities simultaneously.

The death imagery is both visual and lyrical throughout Hedwig's performance, and she notes that her fate is beyond her control: "And all the rest's illusion / That there's a will and soul / That we can wrest control / From chaos and confusion." Her acknowledgment of her fate again alludes to the words of Christ on the cross: "And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, 'Father, into your hands I commit My spirit,'" (Luke 23:46). Both Hedwig and Jesus acknowledge that something greater is responsible for their suffering and ultimate fate. But in the midst of their agony, both messiahs also offer a revelation of hope. Jesus turns to one of the criminals crucified with him and assures him the promise of eternal paradise. Hedwig, too, promises a greater good from her suffering to those watching. She sings out "You see decay and ruin / I tell you no, no, no, no." At the conclusion of the song, Hedwig, her androgynous body now completely exposed, runs off stage, leaving the world of her concert, and into darkness, just as Jesus, following his death on the cross, is placed into the darkness of the tomb.

In Catholic mythology and theology, the three days following the crucifixion are believed to be passed by Christ in the depths of hell, where he carries out his salvific

mission by releasing all the souls worthy of heaven. The darkened concert hall serves as a similar descent into hell and revelation of purpose and identity for Hedwig. Here she encounters Tommy, her missing "other half," who interestingly enough, looks like a mirror image of Hedwig in this scene. Finally reunited, Tommy sings a reprise of "Wicked Little Town" to Hedwig, only this time the lyrics offer an explanation of who she is, rather than describing her identity crisis. In his song, Tommy identifies Hedwig as "You were so much more / Than any god could ever plan / More than a woman or a man." This ties back to Hedwig's introduction in "Tear Me Down," where Yitzahk described her as standing in the divide between man and woman, alluding to the Gnostic understanding of an androgynous messiah that is simultaneously male and female. Tommy continues, explaining that Hedwig's purpose is one of restoration and creation: "That when everything starts breaking down / You take the pieces off the ground / Show this Wicked Town / Something beautiful and new." Her purpose is to take the broken and create something new; to take that which is dead and grant new life. And then, Tommy sings the salvific words which Hedwig sung to him when they first met: "And if you've got no other choice / You know you can follow my voice / Through the dark turn and noise of this / Wicked Little Town." By singing her own statement of purpose from earlier in the film, and as a physical representation of her completed identity, Tommy underscores Hedwig's messianic identity by identifying her as a savior; as someone who, through voice and words, guides others through their "wicked little towns."

Now a complete person, having reunited with Tommy, and aware of her salvific role, Hedwig returns to life in a new concert setting. The *mise-en-scène*, and in particular

the set and costume design, is especially noteworthy here. Hedwig and her/his band are in a room that is completely white, as are their costumes and the clothing of everyone in the audience, and Hedwig's forehead has been marked with a silver cross. Together, these elements convey a heavenly atmosphere, which, if read as part of a biblical death/resurrection narrative, corresponds to Jesus's ascent to heaven following his descent into hell. Hedwig, too, moves from the darkened hall of "Wicked Little Town" into the bright, pure, celebratory light of "Midnight Radio."

It is also after the harrowing "Wicked Little Town" that Hedwig is finally able to impart salvific transformation to her/his queer followers, specifically Yitzahk. Throughout the film, Yitzahk is revealed to secretly desire the wigs and female attire (in essence the identity) of Hedwig.⁵ During "Midnight Radio," Hedwig picks up one of her wigs and offers it to Yitzahk. Placing the wig upon his head, Yitzahk walks to the edge of the stage and leaps into the audience. The camera cuts from an audience point-of-view shot of a male Yitzahk's dive, to an overhead shot of a glamorous, beautiful, female Yitzahk being caught by the crowd. In giving Yitzahk her wig, Hedwig gives up her own body for her follower and becomes the power responsible for Yitzahk's transformation to a more whole, complete, and satisfying identity. Hedwig's salvific identity is confirmed by this miraculous act.

⁵ In the stage play, and in deleted scenes on the DVD, it is explained that Yitzahk was once a drag queen who used to perform under the name "Krystal Nacht." The allusion to the historical Kristallnacht of 1938, a Nazi pogrom directed at the Jewish community, isn't repeated at any other point in the film. The performance identity of "Krystal Nacht" is the primary conflict between Hedwig and Yitzahk. After meeting and marrying Hedwig, Yitzahk is forbidden from ever dressing like a woman again for fear of overshadowing Hedwig. This stipulation shatters Yitzahk's dream, and it is possible the relationship is a commentary on Christian-Jewish relations. However, the film provides no other signifiers of Yitzahk's Jewish identity, making such a reading difficult to argue.

Now whole and fully aware of her/his salvific identity, the musical number ends with an animated image of two halves of a single face coming together. This then visually transitions into the tattoo on Hedwig's hip, which is no longer of a split face, but has now come together into a complete whole. Hedwig, completely nude and whole, then proceeds to walk down a dark alley (the same alley that serves as the opening image of the film) towards a lighted street. Due to the angle of the camera, Hedwig appears to walk from the bottom of the screen up to the top, a visual ascent toward some great unknown.

Ultimately, Hedwig's story is one of death and resurrection, a Passion Play about a charismatic individual gaining followers and fame, only to be betrayed by a disciple, put to death, and then come back to life, whole and perfect, with a divine, salvific purpose. It is from this mimicking of a messianic Passion narrative that the power of Hedwig's perverse dynamic comes through. As a transsexual messiah with a fluid sexual identity, Hedwig is at once a simultaneously queer and religious figure. It is for those who, like her, are both queer and religious that Hedwig's perverse dynamic becomes salvific. The film provides examples of this in two of Hedwig's "disciples": Yitzahk and Tommy Gnosis.

III. Character Identities: Tommy Gnosis

Hedwig's narrative in and of itself provides the necessary elements with which to read her messianic identity. But as the miraculous transformation of Yitzahk shows, and as "Origin of Love" states, Hedwig also constructs her identity, and especially her religious messianic identity, in and through others. Hedwig has a number of followers

throughout the film: her band, The Angry Inch; her agent, Phyllis Stein; and a constantly growing number of "Hedheads", devoted fans who follow and support Hedwig's performances. Yet two followers in particular help directly construct Hedwig's messianic identity and salvific power: Yitzhak and Tommy, Hedwig's significant others. Yitzhak's role has already been described above in analyzing Hedwig's Passion narrative, and while Tommy has also been touched upon in the discussion of that narrative, Tommy plays a much bigger role in Hedwig's construction of a salvific power.

Tommy is introduced in the film through Hedwig's voice-over as a "Jesus Freak with a fish on his truck." His religious identity is the first element that is revealed about him, and as more of his character is developed, the religious imagery associated with him becomes more complexly layered. He always wears a necklace with a charm in the shape of a fish, a Greek symbol known as an Ichthus that is also a reverse acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God" and that was used by early Christians to identify themselves (Healy, 289). Once he becomes a musical celebrity as Tommy Gnosis, his band's logo is that same fish with the word "Gnosis" in it, the Greek word for "knowledge" and the origin of the term denoting the Gnostic movement. During "Wicked Little Town," Tommy wears a t-shirt that reads, "God doesn't believe in atheists." It is also during this performance that Tommy finds himself the recipient of Hedwig's "Shroud," marking the beginning of Tommy's discipleship under her tutelage. Beyond the physical, decorative suggestions of a religious identity, Tommy also directly states his religious beliefs. During their first conversation, after Hedwig reveals her transsexual nature to him, Tommy asks, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?" It is a question that

confirms Hedwig's initial assessment of him as a "Jesus Freak." All of these religious elements signify Tommy's own identity as a Christian, but at the same time their connection to his relationship with Hedwig underscore his identity as a queer man. As both a Christian and a queer, Tommy becomes the primary recipient of Hedwig's salvific power.

Tommy's elaboration of his religious beliefs offer the first glimpse of Hedwig's perverse dynamic power, and its connection to the Gnostic beliefs of an androgynous, knowledge-giving messiah. In his monologue, he speaks of God's creation of mankind, referring specifically to the Adam and Eve story found in the book of Genesis (although this also alludes to the creation mythology found in "Origin of Love"). Tommy states that he believes Eve is responsible not for sin, but for salvation: "Eve just wanted to know shit. She took a bite of the apple and she found out what was good and what was evil. . . And that was good, they now knew." This understanding of Eve places Tommy's religious beliefs right in line with that of the Gnostics, who also believed that Eve was not guilty of sin, but of giving knowledge. And Tommy then goes on to proclaim his faith in Hedwig: "Hedwig, would you give me the apple?" Tommy recognizes Hedwig's power, her ability to save through knowledge stemming from her perverse dynamic of knowing and being both the deviant and the dominant.

She prepares Tommy for the life of a musician, and grooms him to become her band mate. In doing so, she also constructs a new identity for him, and with it comes a new name that reveals director Mitchell's Gnostic influence in creating Hedwig's story. "I gave him his name. Tommy Gnosis, the Greek word for 'knowledge.'" It points

specifically to Hedwig's role as knowledge-giver. Tommy believes Eve's purpose in the creation story of Genesis to be that of a giver of knowledge, a belief shared by Gnosticism, which further equates Eve's role with that of Christ. Mitchell himself acknowledges his own fascination with this idea in an interview with Richard Von Busack: "It didn't make sense that just because Adam and Eve wanted to know something they were penalized. In the Gnostic view, Eve was really connected to an overarching God; like Jesus, she was a knowledge giver" (VonBusack). And so, by giving "Gnosis" to Tommy, Hedwig takes on that role of knowledge-giver as well.⁶ Like Yitzahk, Tommy is offered completion through a new identity by Hedwig. As the eventual blending of Tommy and Hedwig illustrates, this new identity underscores the perverse dynamic's power to break down binaries, even between two distinct physical bodies. As Hedwig's follower and recipient of her salvific power, Tommy's identity is now blended with hers.

Following his naming, Hedwig marks both her own and Tommy's religious identities with an act of religious ritual: an anointing. Hedwig takes a dab of silver make-up and rubs it onto Tommy's forehead in the shape of a cross. This symbol marks Tommy through the rest of the film, right up to his final moments during his performance of "Wicked Little Town (Reprise)," and it is part of the logo for his band, "Gnosis." The *mise-en-scene* suggests that this creates a deep connection between the two, a merging of identities, with a shot of Tommy's face in a hand-mirror that Hedwig holds up to her face.

⁶ While "Gnosis" was the name Hedwig chose for her disciple, the camera gives a brief glimpse at her written list of possible names to give Tommy. Included on that list are "Stigmata" and "Dogma," both of which are also given by God for purpose of establishing religious identity.

The mirror causes the visible portion of Tommy's anointed face to complete Hedwig's image. Tommy has been given an indelible mark by Hedwig, a mark that signifies that his salvation is now directly connected to her. Tommy himself acknowledges this following his anointing, as he tells Hedwig, "When Eve was still inside Adam, they were in paradise. When she was separated from him, that's when paradise was lost. So when she enters him again, paradise will be regained." And their salvific connection is fulfilled at the end of the film, following "Wicked Little Town (Reprise)," when Hedwig takes on her now complete identity with a new guise that blends her own physical form with the attire of Tommy Gnosis: an androgynously male body, and the silver cross on the forehead. Tommy has been reconnected to Hedwig physically, a transformation much like Yitzhak's that marks a fulfillment of his Gnostic beliefs; his salvation comes when Adam and Eve, male and female, rejoin in a single body.

The perverse dynamic given physical embodiment in the character of Hedwig allows for the construction and reconciliation of a simultaneously queer and religious identity. While Sordid Lives offered a similar reconciliation of the two identities, Hedwig offers a much deeper meaning of such a union. It draws upon the blending of the two identities to create a character that is Christ-like, taking some of the theological ideas of Gnostic Christianity and reconstructing them into a modern day queer messiah that offers hope and salvation to queer Christians who share Hedwig's perverse dynamic.

The next two films to be analyzed offer a distinctly different understanding of and resolution to the religious/queer identity struggle. Unlike Hedwig and Sordid Lives, Latter Days and Bad Education do not offer a reconciliation of the two identities, but

rather emphasize a rejection of religious identity as the solution to the identity struggle.

CHAPTER 4: "WHAT IF YOU'RE THE BLINDING LIGHT?": THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE OF LATTER DAYS

I. C. Jay Cox and Mormon Influence

Like the other films in this study, Latter Days deals with the struggle between queer and religious identities. However, unlike Sordid Lives and Hedwig, whose narratives provide a reconciliation of queer identity with the respective religious mythologies and cultures that influenced the films, Latter Days's narrative revolves more around a rejection of institutionalized religion in favor of a more secular spirituality. In fact, of the films discussed in this thesis, Latter Days is perhaps the one to present the conflict between religion and homosexuality most directly. Unlike Sordid Lives, which includes the religious/queer conflict as one of numerous plots in the film, and Hedwig, which keeps its religious motifs and allusions to a primarily allegorical and sub textual level, the central plot of Latter Days directly presents the conflict between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the closeted homosexual identity of one of the Church's members.

Like Sordid Lives, Latter Days has yet to be discussed in an academic context by scholars. The film, however, has sparked discussions in popular media. Reviews of the film examine such topics as the seduction fantasy at the center of the romance in the film, the acting talent of the cast (which includes Joséph Gordon-Levitt and Jacqueline Bisset), and the conventional plot elements as an identifier of a broader mainstream acceptance of queer themes (Kauffman). However, most of the discussion centers on the film's use of Mormon identity to drive the conflict of the plot. Gary Kramer's review of the film expands on this discussion by suggesting that the films spiritual themes are not limited to

the overt displays of Mormon identity in the film.

In a 2005 report on gay and lesbian Mormons, reporter Lisa Neff wrote that "While the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention have grabbed the most headlines with calls to 'save traditional marriage,' the Mormon Church has quietly become one of the most powerful forces opposing any changes that offer gays and lesbians equality under the law" (The Advocate). It is this conflict between the Mormon Church and queer identity that is the premise of C. Jay Cox's film. Latter Days is the story of Christian Markelli, a hedonistic, shallow, West Hollywood party boy, and his pursuit of Elder Aaron Davis, a young Mormon missionary who moves in next door. While the central story is the opposites-attract romance between the two characters, the film is divided into two distinct narratives: Christian's search for depth and meaning after falling for Aaron, and Aaron's coming-out story in the midst of a hostile Mormon community. Cox, who was raised and grew up in the Mormon Church, acknowledges that his film is heavily inspired by his own experiences coming out as a member of the Church. He explains that a majority of Aaron's story in particular "is based on my own experience -- I was a Mormon missionary when I was 19" (Cox, DVD Commentary). Indeed, he goes on to explain that both Christian and Aaron are representative of his own experiences, and that the genesis of the film stems from Cox's desire to have the out gay man he is now converse with the closeted missionary he was in his youth: "I thought it would be really interesting, just as an intellectual exercise, if I could be those two characters in the same room and have them talk and see what they might have to say to each other" (Cox, DVD Commentary). Apparently, Cox wasn't the only one interested in

that confrontation, as the film's success has shown. A year after its release, the film was the recipient of nine awards from various film festivals ("Behind the Scenes", Latter Days DVD). In her report, Neff notes that the success of the film was due to the personal, spiritual conflict faced by many queer Mormons: "The lives of many gay and lesbian Mormons indeed reflect the emotional messiness portrayed in the 2003 indie movie Latter Days" (Neff).

II. Character Identities: Aaron Davis

As a film whose plot hinges on the presence of a specific religious institution -- the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints -- Mormon identity is directly stated and infused throughout the entire film. The character of Aaron, in particular, is steeped in Mormon identity. He is a Mormon missionary, he lives in a community of Mormon missionaries, his family is Mormon, and his father is a Church Elder. But Cox makes sure that Aaron's religious identity is more than a communal one. Religious identity is visually emphasized throughout the film, as well, particularly in the depiction of Aaron. In most scenes, Aaron is shown carrying his bible, constantly reading and studying. The only time that this book is actually read aloud is also telling, as the passage cited by Aaron is both a statement of commitment and a revelation of his own internal struggle: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).⁷ The bible's presence is a constant reminder of the conflict Aaron faces should he come out. The only

⁷ The film incorrectly cites the passage as 1 Cor. 7:1.

other item Aaron consistently carries throughout the film is his pocket watch, a gift from his father and a family heirloom that is engraved with the biblical passage “The greatest of these is charity. 1 Cor 13:13.” This passage is representative of the Mormon Church’s understanding of unconditional love as the greatest of virtues, an understanding derived directly from the teachings of Christ and the prophets (Schow, 262). Its presence in the form of the pocket watch provides a visual representation of Aaron’s possession of this virtue, and his association with and commitment to the ideals and beliefs of the Mormon Church.

Similar visual cues of religious identity are presented through costume. Aaron's primary costume is a white dress shirt, black pants, blue tie, and a name tag that reads "Elder Davis." It is the traditional uniform of Mormon missionaries, and throughout the film, Aaron is seen wearing something other than this in only a handful of scenes. In one of the few scenes in which Davis does not wear the suit-and-tie uniform, he is clothed in another specifically Mormon mode of dress: Temple garments, or as director Cox irreverently refers to them, "sacred underwear" (Cox, DVD Commentary). These garments are especially important in understanding the character of Aaron, as the wearing of them has a deeply spiritual association of faith identity and commitment to Mormon dogma. In writing on the importance of the garments, Latter Day Saints member Elder Carlos E. Asay explains, "Latter-day Saints filled with faith wear the garment and wear it properly, not because someone is policing their actions but because they understand the virtues of the sacred clothing and want to 'do good and be restored unto that which is good'" (*Ensign* 19). Being shown wearing the garments also indicates Aaron's

commitment to and identification with the dogma and teaching of his Church. It is perhaps the clearest statement of religious identity within the film.

Aaron's story-arc in the film is a coming out narrative, focused on his awareness and eventual acceptance of his queer identity. Yet, because the conflict of the narrative lies in the conflict between his Mormon identity and queer identity, religious imagery and motifs are present throughout his coming out. And, with or without the religious influence, coming out narratives lend themselves to a reading as conversion narratives. Theologian Robert E. Long, in his essay "The Sacrality of Male Beauty and Homosex," explores the similarities between coming out and religious conversion, going so far as to declare that living as an out homosexual is itself a religious vocation. He notes that what makes the coming out process a conversion is that the act of coming out is a "breakthrough to a valuation in spite of social prejudice and pressure to the contrary," and that both religious conversion and coming out are an "experience for oneself the appropriateness and the deep satisfactions of the new life" (Long, 274). A review of the film points to a conversion reading of the narrative in describing Aaron and Christian's relationship: "It will come as no surprise that Christian does get to 'convert' Elder Davis. . ." (Kramer, 209). With this in mind, reading Aaron's coming out story as a conversion narrative is not only possible, but illuminating.

The film opens immediately with numerous images that either speak directly or allude to spiritual and religious themes. The first visual is an aerial night shot of Los Angeles, the city of angels. This is immediately followed by the first appearance of Aaron, in full missionary uniform, the badge on his chest identifying him as Elder Davis

of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Walking out of Los Angeles International airport, he is greeted by a group of Church Elders and taken to a car. On their ride, as he looks out the window at the cityscape, Aaron's eye -- and the camera's -- falls on a homeless man holding a sign that reads "Welcome to Hell." The imagery of the sequence establishes Aaron's religious identity, and the sign in particular notes that the journey he is about to embark on, the experiences he will have in this city, will be spiritual. The beginning of this journey, and its trajectory as a conversion away from Mormon identity, are shown later in the film during a flashback sequence of Aaron's departure from Idaho to Los Angeles, during which he says goodbye to his family. If his family, his past, are read in terms of his Mormon identity, then this moment also depicts the beginning of Aaron's farewell to his religious identity, and movement toward his openly out, queer identity.

Once in L.A., Aaron's conversion away from his Mormon background and toward embracing his homosexual identity is initiated by his encounters with Christian. The name of Aaron's love interest is somewhat ironic, given Christian's hedonistic, anti-religion attitude throughout the film. However, as the dominant force in Aaron's conversion narrative, and instigator of his coming out, Christian's name underscores the similarities between religious conversion and Aaron's coming out narrative. Aaron's journey may end in a rejection of Christianity, but it moves him toward something that is equally fulfilling, spiritually: Christian.

After Aaron and Christian initially meet, Aaron and fellow missionary Ryder visit with Christian in an effort to fulfill the missionary duty of spreading the message of the

Church. During this conversation, Christian is verbally assaulted by Ryder, who tells him that "God hates homos." Experiencing a moment of solidarity with Christian, Aaron breaks the tension by joking that God also hates the French. The reactions of Christian and Ryder to this are telling. While Christian laughs at the joke and smiles triumphantly, Ryder glares angrily at Aaron, and questions him. The joke, meant to alleviate the growing tension, is taken by Ryder as an affront to their religious beliefs. In this first "battle" between queer and religious, Aaron has sided with the "homo." Aaron finds himself questioning his identity and religious beliefs because of his attraction to Christian.

Their next encounter is in the laundry room, the first real, extensive, interaction between Aaron and Christian, and the scene which inspired the entire film. As Cox has stated, he envisioned the scene as a dialogue between his own two identities, religious and queer (Cox, DVD Commentary). Cox has stated in interviews that he feels a queer identity cannot coexist with a Mormon one, that the two are just far too diametrically opposed to ever be compatible. He states, "When I came out, it was made very clear that a person could either be gay or they could be Mormon, but not both," (Phillips). In the laundry room sequence, Aaron's exchange with Christian reflects this irreconcilability. At one point, Christian looks over at Aaron's basket of clothing and comments, "You know that colors and whites can't mix, right?" This statement sums up director Cox's own views regarding the conflict between queer and religious identity.

However, Cox does not outright dismiss religious identity in favor of queer identity, and the film does depict Aaron's struggle to attempt a reconciliation between the

two identities. Aaron longs to return to his Mormon family, to maintain an unquestioning Mormon identity, to be who he was before Christian came into his life. But at the same time, he admits that he is not happy as a missionary. The Church does not allow him to have contact with his family, and he has no real connection with any of the men he lives with. In the laundry room sequence, he explains that, as a missionary, he is not allowed to reveal his name. To be unable to reveal his name because of his Church's dogma, then, also speaks to the fact that he is unable to reveal his identity, his queer identity, and be who he truly is. Then, in defiance of this rule, he tells Christian his name. Finding someone who is like himself, Aaron begins his coming-out process through one small, yet hugely significant, revelation of identity. McNeill notes that solidarity and identification with others (i.e. community) is an important part of conversion, religious or queer: "Community is the place where we lay ourselves open to genuine conversion. In fact, it is the only environment in which the ongoing process of conversion is possible" (McNeill, 188).

Despite the revelation of his name to Christian, Aaron's reluctance to give up his religious identity prevents him from expressing his sexual identity, and the reverse is also true. For him, sex is tied up in spirituality, and his reasons for rejecting sex with Christian in a later sequence is a sign of his struggle to find peace with his religious and sexual identities. When Christian is finally able to get Aaron into his bed and open up about his sexual identity, Aaron rejects his advances because the act is meaningless to Christian at this point in the narrative. Aaron demands that a sexual relationship have meaning, and that a sexual partner "believe in something." He cannot reject his Mormon

identity and give in to his sexual desire for Christian unless he knows that doing so will provide spiritual fulfillment. During a basketball game against Christian and his roommate, Julie, Aaron refuses to let himself and Ryder be "skins" (i.e., play without shirts on, thereby exposing their bodies) in order to tell the teams apart. His modesty is, in part, tied to the beliefs surrounding proper wear of the temple garments, and Aaron refuses to give them up, even temporarily. Later, during a bible study session among the missionaries, Aaron is the only missionary who takes the studying seriously, and he is able to recite, from memory, St. Paul's passage about the cleansing of the "filthiness of the flesh" in 2 Corinthians. In each of these aforementioned sequences, Aaron's religious and queer identities are clearly at war with one another and not easily reconciled.

Aaron's rejection of his religious identity comes about in two particular moments of crisis. Through a chance encounter, Aaron runs into Lila, the owner of the restaurant Christian works at, right after she learns that her lover has died. Trying to console the grieving woman, Aaron acknowledges the failure of his religious identity to handle the situation: "We pass out pamphlets. And they give us these discussions that we memorize. I don't know what to say here." It is when he decides to turn away from dogma, rejecting the "pamphlets and discussions," and instead rely on his own personal experience that Aaron is finally able to provide Lila, and himself perhaps, with an understanding of God that is comforting and empowering, and also echoes McNeill's writing on the importance of community in spiritual conversion. It is a similar moment of tragedy and vulnerability that causes Aaron to finally give in to his desires and express his queer identity. After Ryder is hit by a car, Aaron runs into Christian. Distraught and

worried about his fellow missionary's health, Aaron let's down his guard and seeks comfort from Christian. Christian provides it the only way he knows how -- he kisses him. As in the encounter with Lila, Aaron realizes that his religion does not provide the comfort and spiritually fulfilling answers he needs; it does not speak to his experience. And so, as with Lila, Aaron lets go of Church dogma and accepts Christian's comforting and sexually-charged kiss. It is the first overt expression of his homosexual identity, but this does not mark the end of Aaron's conversion; he still does not make a solid decision between his religious and sexual identities. What this moment reveals is that Aaron does find spiritual comfort in Christian and the expression of his sexual identity, as illustrated by their kiss. This moment allows Aaron to finally reject his Mormon faith and complete his conversion toward an embracing and expression of his homosexual identity when he and Christian are reunited once more. Christian once again challenges him to consider giving up his Mormon faith and embrace his sexual identity. "You want revelations engraved in gold, and angels trumpeting down from heaven," he tells him. "What if this is it instead? Me, telling you I love you, right here in the snow? I think that's pretty miraculous." Christian speaks directly to Aaron's Mormon beliefs, and then offers an alternative source of spiritual fulfillment, one that is not tied to religious dogma and institutions, but rather is founded on the expression of a sexual relationship. This is the crux of Long's argument of embracing homosexual identity as spiritual conversion. Long explains that in the conversion narrative of coming out, "the courage to be gay -- is rooted in the discovery of the holiness and sacrality of male beauty and gay sex" (Long, 274). Aaron is being asked to give up his religious identity, everything he has struggled

to maintain throughout the film, for a chance at a romantic relationship. He is understandably reluctant, but finally gives in and returns with Christian to a hotel room where the two have sex for the first time. The beginning of this sex scene is particularly important in understanding Aaron's conversion narrative. As the two passionately kiss and move towards the bed, Aaron begins to undress, until he stands before Christian in nothing more than the Mormon temple garments. Aaron pauses for a moment, staring at Christian, and then, moved by the sacrality of male beauty and gay sex, makes the decision to remove the temple garments as well, leaving him naked. Having already explained the significance of the wearing of the garments to Aaron's Mormon identity, his removal of them here symbolizes a shedding of his religious identity, giving it up in order to fully give in to and embrace his queer identity, as signified by the actual act of sex with Christian. At the end of the scene, Christian awakes to find Aaron gone, and discovers that he left behind the pocket watch his father gave him. The temple garments and the pocket watch, the two most significant possessions of his Mormon identity, are removed and abandoned by choice in this scene. The only way for Aaron to allow himself to be gay and embrace a more spiritually fulfilling identity is to abandon his religion.

The irreconcilability of his Mormon identity with his queer identity is further underscored in the film when Aaron returns home. Immediately following his return, Aaron has a vision of what awaits him in his old environment now that he has affirmed his queer identity. Lying in bed, droplets of blood begin to form on his wrists and forehead, areas where the crucifixion wounds of Jesus are most commonly depicted. As

the blood marks grow, the camera flashes to an image of Aaron, naked and nailed to a cross, a crown of thorns around his head. This is an unusual stylistic departure from the rest of the film, presenting Aaron's struggle with religious and homosexual identity in a more iconic visual image in this brief fantasy sequence. The jarring shift in style underscores the intensity of Aaron's conversion, and the serious repercussions it has for him and his religious identity. The vision informs Aaron, and the viewer, of what awaits him within the Mormon community: because he is gay, they are going to crucify him.

The religious and queer identities are ultimately unable to be reconciled by Aaron and his family -- or by the film. When his mother picks him up from the airport, she can barely look at Aaron, and there is no physical contact between the two. It is a sharp contrast to his initial departure for L.A., when Mrs. Davis could not stop telling him how much she loved him and embraced him lovingly. Later, in the kitchen of their home, the two argue about Aaron's outing and the sinfulness of homosexuality. As the hostility and frustration between the two builds, Aaron finally blurts out, "What if it's who I am?" Unable to accept this declaration of queer identity, Mrs. Davis violently slaps her son across the face. Aaron's father similarly displays only rejection and shame toward his son. In fact, it is Mr. Davis who leads the excommunication hearing against Aaron. During the hearing, Mr. Davis makes his stance on Aaron's homosexual identity quite clear: "In light of your abnormal and abominable state, and your refusal to see that you've been duped into a hogwash alternative lifestyle. . . I wish my shame was enough for the both of us, not to mention the shame you've brought to this Church, our family, our ancestors!" These are the last words Elder Davis speaks to his son before declaring

him excommunicated from the Mormon Church. Ironically, they are the absolute antithesis of the virtue of Charity that Mr. Davis imparted on Aaron in the inscription of his pocket watch. As representatives of the Mormon Church, and indeed as representatives of Aaron's own Mormon upbringing, the outright rejection of Mr. and Mrs. Davis of their son sends a clear message: by identifying as a homosexual, Aaron can no longer identify as a Mormon. The film does not allow Aaron the option of reconciling the two identities. And Aaron himself doesn't reconcile them. In fact, beyond the symbolic rejection of his religion during his sexual encounter with Christian, Aaron declares his disillusionment with the Mormon Church outright when he responds to his father's judgment: "You've gone way beyond hypocrisy, dad. You're just being mean."

Following his overt rejection of his religious identity, Aaron's narrative suddenly becomes very biblical, drawing on imagery from the Passion narrative of the gospels. Unable to exist as he is within the religious community, Aaron fulfills his own prophetic vision. Taking a razor blade, he slits his wrists, marking himself with the same wounds he had in his crucifixion dream. Like *Hedwig*, Aaron's story concludes with a death-and-resurrection Passion narrative. Following his suicide attempt, Aaron returns to L.A. His arrival is marked by the visual of a Los Angeles resident at a bus stop in full angel costume: wings, halo, and white robe. The film does not exaggerate any of this stylistically, the angel is merely presented as a woman in a costume, but it serves as a sharp contrast to Aaron's initial arrival to the city at the beginning of the film, which was marked with the "Welcome to Hell" sign. Having now accepted his homosexual identity

and rejected his Mormon one, L.A. now becomes a more heavenly locale, a place where Aaron can be in a community that, as McNeill describes, “enables us to resist the pressures of our culture and to genuinely proclaim something new in our midst. It is the place where the healing of our own lives as lesbian and gay . . . becomes the foundation for healing . . . of our community“ (McNeill, 188).

This sense of healing community is underscored when Aaron shows up at Lila's restaurant. She immediately recognizes him, and rushes to welcome him. Lila's actions in greeting him signify the change in Aaron's identity. She embraces him warmly, calls him "My dear boy," and orders her staff to give him whatever he wants. It is a homecoming which the film establishes as the exact opposite of Mrs. Davis' reception of Aaron when he returned to his family in Idaho. Lila and those in her restaurant (all of whom are queer or extremely queer-friendly) are now Aaron's family, his healing community, completely inviting, understanding, and embracing who he is.

The film concludes with a montage of Thanksgiving dinner at Lila's, with Aaron reunited with Christian and surrounded by his new, queer "family." In a voice-over, Aaron repeats his description of God that he told to Lila during their first encounter. It is a declaration of belief that God desires for all of humanity to be connected and in loving relationships, just like the one Aaron has now found. The conclusion to Aaron's story, then, closely parallels the death and resurrection narrative of the Passion of Christ. Having died to his religion and his Mormon community through the ire of Mormon religious leaders (represented in the form of his excommunication and suicide attempt), Aaron descends into hell (reparative therapy), only to be pulled out by angels (Julie and

the woman at the bus stop), and taken to paradise (Christian and Lila's welcoming "family").

Aaron's coming out experience, his conversion away from his Mormon identity toward an embracing of his homosexual identity, is a much different answer to the religious/queer conflict than the reconciliation and affirmation of both identities found in Sordid Lives and Hedwig. And yet, while the film does reject the institutional religious identity of Aaron's Mormon background, his homosexual identity and its uncovering are presented according to the semiotics of a religious conversion narrative, offering a sense of religious and spiritual fulfillment in Aaron's final identity. The next chapter, an examination of the film Bad Education, offers a more complex understanding of the religious/queer identity struggle, and its rejection of the religious offers a much different understanding of religious identity than those in the other three films discussed in this thesis.

CHAPTER 5: "IT IS NOT GOD WHO CONDEMNS YOU": DECORATIVE CATHOLICISM AND THE IDENTITY GAME OF BAD EDUCATION⁸

I. Catholic Influence and the Works of Pedro Almodovar

Pedro Almodovar, considered an auteur by many film critics, is the openly gay director responsible for numerous Spanish films from the 70s onward. His more well-known films include Matador (1986), Law of Desire (1987), Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (1988), the Oscar-winning All About My Mother (1999), Talk To Her (2002), and his most recent film, Volver (2006). His signature is placed on these films through a number of common characteristics: a dark sense of humor and camp, strong, larger-than-life female characters, an unapologetic portrayal of various sexual identities and practices, and a ever-present culture of Catholicism in the films' visual imagery and narrative.

Some scholarly writing on the films of Almodovar has focused on issues of gender and sexuality in his cinematic work. Mark Allinson's book, A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodovar devotes individual chapters on the topics of both gender and sexuality in Almodovar's films. Linda Williams writes on the homosexual subtext in Almodovar's female-oriented melodramas in her article, "Melancholy Melodrama: Almodovarian Grief and Lost Homosexual Attachments." The melodramatic structure of Almodovar's films is also the topic of Rikki Morgan-Tomosumas article, "Narrative, Desire, and Critical Discourse in Pedro Almodovar's Carne Tremula."

⁸ Bad Education is a Spanish film, by a Spanish director, and therefore many of the citations throughout this chapter are from Spanish sources. Quotations will be presented in their original language, immediately followed by my own translation, unless otherwise noted.

Other scholarly examinations of Bad Education focus on the religious elements, specifically Catholic culture, in Almodovar's film, though not on the relationship between religious and queer identity specifically. Scholar Maria Donaperty addresses the religious culture of his films in her article "Once a Catholic...: Almodovar's Religious Reflections." This Catholic element can be traced in large part to Almodovar's own background. As a Spanish Catholic raised during the Franco era, Almodovar's national and religious identity informs much of his art. Maria Donaperty, in speaking of the Catholic presence in Almodovar's films, observes that, "Although his stories are supranational in many senses, the rhetoric of his films and their diegetic modus operandi are connected inseparably with Spain which in turn cannot dismiss or forget its Catholicism" (Donaperty, 74). And while Almodovar's films deal with a diverse number of themes, settings, and inspirations, his own background is still prevalent in all of them, and indeed, informs much of the production of these films: "... the cinematic language in which these abstractions are articulated has its most visible roots in the Catholic religion" (Donaperty, 75). However, in general, existing scholarly literature on Almodovar does not generally consider the relationship constructed between religious and queer identities specifically; they are generally regarded and discussed as two separate, unrelated issues.

Bad Education (La Mala Educación), is Almodovar's 2004 thriller, a very queer (and male) mystery of identity steeped in Catholicism. It follows Enrique, a gay director in 1980s Spain, who is approached by actor Angel with a script. Angel claims to be Enrique's childhood friend, Ignacio, and his script tells the story of their childhood

romance, which was ended because of the involvement of Father Manolo, a priest who lusted after young Ignacio. The script fictionalizes their adult lives, with Ignacio now a drag queen named Zahara who reconnects with Enrique as she tries to blackmail Father Manolo. As Enrique begins production on the film, he begins to doubt that Angel is who he claims to be, and unravels the mystery of what really happened to Ignacio and Father Manolo. It is a complex, many-layered story, but its central narrative revolves around uncovering the identity of the mysterious Angel and discovering what really happened to Ignacio after he and Enrique parted ways in childhood. In an interview with Alonso Duralde of The Advocate, Almodovar confesses that the film has its origins in his own experiences growing up Catholic, and specifically in his education in Catholic schools as a child: "... I was badly educated, shall we say, in a Catholic school in the mid '60s; I was a soloist in the choir [like Ignacio]; and that's where my fascination with the liturgy and the ceremony of the Catholic Mass began" (Duralde).

II. The Presence of Catholic Identity in Bad Education

The various influences and identities that inform the film are established in the visual imagery of the opening credits, designed by Juan Gatti. The design and progression of the credits evokes a series of one-sheets being torn off a wall and revealing other posters and advertisements below. It is a nod to the world of cinema and entertainment, the world in which Enrique and Angel interact, and in which the character of Zahara performs. Imagery throughout the credits suggest the film's theme of performance, not only as entertainment, but also the performance of identity, including sexual identity, gender identity, and religious identity, all of which are performed to one

extent or another by the various characters in the film in order to conceal or deceive. These performed identities are all depicted in the opening credits. Rolls of film with images of Zahara, a trio of female singers, strippers in various titillating poses, and music sheets are some of the images that suggest sex and gender as a performance of identity. The opening image of the credits is of a blackboard, with various marks, drawings, and text done in chalk or perhaps scratched onto the board. The drawings here include a few doodles of a penis. This image underscores the relationship constructed between education and sexuality, a reference to the boarding school love triangle among the three central characters. Similar imagery is repeated throughout the credits sequence, including textbook diagrams of the male sexual organs, young Enrique and Ignacio, and a group of boys doing exercises on the school yard. The film's noir/mystery influences are brought out in the sequence as well, through visual cues (skulls and skeletons, figures hiding in shadow, silhouettes of beautiful women) and through the music that plays over the credits, which Almodovar explains "que recuerda a Bernard Hermann, el músico quien también trabajó con Hitchcock" ("it recalls the work of Bernard Hermann, the musician who also worked with Hitchcock") (Almodovar, DVD Commentary). The title of the film, La Mala Educación, is written over a collage of movie stills that takes the shape of a cross. As does the entire sequence, it visually represents the blending and uncovering of numerous identities, which is what drives the mystery of the narrative. Religious imagery persists throughout the credits and is perhaps the most recurrent type of imagery in the sequence: portraits of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an image of a guardian angel watching over school-children, a priest at a Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)

altar, the silhouette of a boy bringing water to a crucified Jesus -- these are just some of the more immediately visible elements of Catholic identity.

Throughout the film, elements of both Catholic and queer identity are on display, however, with most of the characters identifying with both. Visually, the religious identity is quite prevalent. The flashbacks to Enrique and Ignacio's childhood, as well as much of Enrique's film, take place in the Catholic boarding school they attended and the chapel attached to it. While the chapel is not surprisingly decorated in a such a way as to evoke a Catholic identity (with crucifixes, holy water fonts, lavishly decorated altar, stained glass windows, and statues of the saints), the school's décor is less lavish, its Catholic elements limited to the presence of priests and a few crucifixes on the walls. However, the design of the dormitory where Ignacio and Enrique sleep evokes a religious influence. The bunk beds are lined up, and shot by the camera, in such a way as to make their frames appear to be crosses, an intentional directorial decision about which Almodovar notes "visualmente, apareciera como cementerio" ("visually, it appears to be a cemetery") (Almodovar, DVD Commentary). Costume emphasizes religious identity in these scenes, as well. Father Manolo and the other priests are depicted in these sequences in the traditional religious garb of a Catholic priest: black robe, white priest's collar, and a rosary around their waists or in their hands. During sequences in the chapel, the full, ritual vestments are seen: white alb, dalmatic, chasuble, and stole.

Beyond the visual design and mise-en-scène of these scenes, however, religious identity is also expressed in the ritual actions of the characters. In the first scene at the chapel, Zahara and her friend, Paquito, both display a knowledge of and degree of respect

for the ritual of the Catholic Mass. They walk into the chapel in the middle of a liturgy, and so Zahara immediately quiets her voice, and orders Paquito to do the same. Walking in, they both make the sign of the cross, and respond at the various prompts throughout the liturgy. They are well acquainted with the rituals here, and their continual observation of and interaction with those rituals indicate an ingrained Catholic identity that is almost instinctual. Paquito even reveals his knowledge of the bible when he warns Zahara of the potential danger of confronting Father Manolo; he refers to Jesus' driving out of the moneychangers in the temple, a story from the synoptic Gospels (Mark 11:15-19, Matt. 21:12-17, Luke 19:45-48). However, this knowledge of Catholic ritual is mostly depicted as a performance, as the two characters use their interactions with the ritual to hide their planned theft of the various gold and silver items left on the altar. Once the liturgy is over, neither character has any qualms about stealing from the Church. Their performance of Catholic ritual was exactly that: a performance, a masking of their true intentions, rather than a sincere identification with the moral and theological meaning of the ritual.

Father José, another priest at the school and friend of Manolo, also uses his religious identity as a tool for more devious purposes, rather than any true devotion or respect for his role as Catholic priest. Like Paquito and Zahara, José's religious appearance is merely a performance, an identity that can be taken on and off like a costume. It is a decoration, and his performance of it holds no moral or theological meaning for him. During one of the flashback sequences, Father José is shown ordering young Ignacio to sing for Father Manolo's birthday. Ignacio does so, in front of all of the

priests at the school. The implication here is that Father José, and indeed, all of the priests, are fully aware of Manolo's feelings and relationship with the boy, and encourage it; the priests all remain completely unfazed by the boy's presence or Manolo's intense emotional reaction to the performance. They ignore the fact that they are all Catholic priests who have taken vows and are meant to uphold moral ideals. Father José even reveals that he has been helping the boy prepare for the performance, as he knows that Ignacio, and the song he sings, are favorites of Manolo. José's co-conspiratorial relationship continues into the adult world in Enrique's film, as does his disregard for his identity as priest of the Catholic Church. In the final scene of Enrique's film, Father José assaults Zahara with a punch to the stomach, then restrains and gags her. When she reveals that she wishes to confess before they kill her, Father José refuses to hear her confession, completely disregarding his identity and obligation as priest, and instead snaps Zahara's neck, killing her. He does this surrounded by the religious iconography that decorates Manolo's office, in front of Father Manolo's eyes, while wearing his black robes and white collar. The Catholic identifiers in this sequence, for José at least, are nothing more than decoration, holding no true religious or moral power. Religious identity is just a costume that can be donned and doffed at will.

This sequence is representative of the role of religion throughout the film in that it is presented more as decor, simply part of the color that makes up who these characters are, rather than as a critical part of individual identity. Maria Antonia Garcia Leon and Teresa Maldonado suggest that this presentation is common throughout Almodovar's work. In his films, and in Bad Education in particular, "La religión queda reducida a pura

parafernalia. No hay interiorización, no hay culpa, no hay psicologización de los problemas religiosos, todo queda en la calle como reducida (la religión) a pura romería o a pura fiesta" (Religion is kept reduced to pure decoration. There is no internalization, no guilt, no psychological assessment of religious problems, everything is reduced to parade and festival) (qtd. in Donaperty, 68). This emptying out of religious signifiers is attributable, in part, to the time period of the film. Set in a post-Franco Spain, Almodovar notes that "España en 1977 es una España sincera, democrática, libre. Donde la hipocresía de los sacerdotes va a tener mucho menos impacto" ("Spain in 1977 is a sincere, democratic, free Spain. Here, the hypocrisy of priests is a lot less shocking") (Almodovar, DVD Commentary). The Catholic Church had lost much of its power and authority to the common Spaniard in this post-Franco era, with a growing secular, non-religion driven, culture taking control.

Because the culture of the film is set in an era that is suspicious of and moving away from the authority of the Church, religion is purely decorative for most of these characters, and does not provide any substantial conflict or moral dilemma for them. In addition to Father José, the character of Angel, the many-faceted, amoral actor around whom the central mystery revolves, depicts this adoption of religious identity as decoration very well, emptying it of genuine spiritual significance. When he is first introduced, he reveals that his acting credits include El Retabillo de San Cristobal (The Niche of Saint Christopher) and El Diario de Adán y Eva (The Diary of Adam and Eve), and accompanying photos on his resume show him in costume as these religious figures. Yet, this donning of religious costume is the only indicator of a religious identity for the

character, and it is a costume only, a false identity, simply a role that he plays. Angel is revealed as having had an affair with a married man, murdered his transsexual sister, and eventually murdered his former lover, as well. None of this is ever shown to faze him, and religion is never brought in as a basis for moral argument. The religious identities he has donned in the past are cast aside in these moments, having no influence on his actions or his response to them.

III. Character Identities: Manolo and Ignacio

The film is not completely unconcerned with the identity conflict faced by religious queers, however. Of the many queer Catholics in the film, two in particular experience a clash between their queer and religious identities: Manolo Berenguer, and Ignacio (the real Ignacio), portrayed as the drag queen Zahara in the film-within-the-film. While even in these instances the identity conflict is overshadowed by the more pressing and interesting love triangle that the characters are involved in and that motivates a vast majority of the film's plot, the conflict is still worth examining for the purposes of this study. Examination of the relationship between these two characters, and their identities as both queer and Catholic, will be divided into three parts: the childhood flashbacks at the Catholic boarding school, the fictionalized reunion as adults in Enrique's film, and Manolo Berenguer's account of their final encounters together.

a. Childhood Narrative

It is in the flashbacks to Ignacio's childhood that the clash between queer and religious identities is most emphasized for Manolo and Ignacio. It is during these

sequences that they are first placed in relationship and conflict with one another, primarily through Ignacio's discovery of his sexual identity and Manolo's abuse of it. In fact, the initial scene that introduces this time period depicts Father Manolo's sexual abuse of the young Ignacio. At a river, pupils from the boarding school go swimming while Manolo has Ignacio sing "Moon River" to him. As the boy sings, Manolo, dressed in the black robe and white collar of his religious order, stares longingly at him. As the song continues, Manolo becomes visibly tense, his eyes constantly looking away from Ignacio only to quickly dart back and stare at the object of his desire. He is noticeably conflicted. The camera cuts from the priest and boy to the swimmers, equating the object of the gaze of the priest with the half-naked boys enjoying the homosocial company of one another in the water. When the camera returns to Manolo and Ignacio, the sexual assault has already been committed, and Ignacio is now running away from the priest. The conflict is no longer just internally Manolo's, but has now been externalized between him and Ignacio.

The next scene once again puts Ignacio in opposition to Manolo, as the pupils of the school engage in a game of soccer with their teachers. The scene depicts the boys playing against the priests. But the conflict goes beyond the visual of the game and into something much deeper when Ignacio's homosexual identity is revealed. During the game, he encounters Enrique for the first time, and it is love at first sight. So smitten with him is Ignacio that he willingly throws the game, in order to spare Enrique the humiliation of defeat. From this first sign of same-sex love, the film cuts to Enrique sitting in the middle of a Church, participating in mass. From his pew, Enrique turns

around and his gaze falls on Ignacio, who is singing in the choir. This tracing of Enrique's gaze by the camera establishes the reciprocation of Ignacio's feelings during the soccer game, and also firmly establishes Enrique's homosexual identity. However, Enrique is not the only one enraptured by Ignacio's voice. Father Manolo, it is revealed, is the priest celebrating the mass, and as Ignacio continues to sing, the camera focuses on Manolo's face. Once again, as in the earlier swimming sequence, his eyes betray his inner turmoil. There, in the middle of the celebration of mass, the ultimate sacrament and duty of a Catholic priest, Manolo is forced to confront his sexual desire. The singing has ignited his lust and emotions once more, and he takes on the same look he did by the river. It is a conflict repeated, yet again, in the following scene, wherein Father José takes young Ignacio to sing for Father Manolo on his birthday. Again, the performance tortures Manolo, and the visual of his gaze reveals his inner conflict with desire and sexual tension. It is interesting to note that he is the only priest who shows any sign of discomfort with this exploitation of Ignacio. Manolo, unlike the other priests, cannot just cast aside his religious identity. For him, it does cause moral anguish, even if it doesn't prevent his sinful actions.

Meanwhile, the burgeoning relationship between Ignacio and Enrique illustrates how the film constructs the relationship between religion and sexual identity. At the theatre, the two boys watch a film starring Sara Montiel (who serves as Ignacio and Angel's inspiration for the performance of Zahara in Enrique's film). As the two boys engage in a mutual masturbatory exchange, the screen before them shows Sara Montiel, in a convent, being told by a nun that "No es Dios quien la rechaza. Soy yo, en nombre

de mi orden" ("It is not God who rejects you. It is I, in the name of my order"). This condemnation of Montiel, combined with the sexual act of the boys, suggests that the nun's statement holds true for the world of the boarding school. If there is any shame or conflict of sexual and religious identity, it is not God's doing, but rather that of the Church's human leadership. The use of God by the Church to condemn homosexuality is itself a performance with no theological or moral backing. The fact that an actress on a film screen makes this statement further underscores this view of religious condemnation as performance.

The Montiel film foreshadows Ignacio's eventual understanding of religion and its authority as a meaningless performance that does not truly align with the theological morality it preaches. From the theatre, the film segues back to the school, to the dormitories, where Ignacio and Enrique clandestinely meet in the bathroom. When Father Manolo finds them, he condemns the pairing of the boys, threatening them with public humiliation. Enrique turns the tables, however, when he declares to the priest that he will not leave him alone with Ignacio. Manolo's eyes light up in fear at this. Enrique and Manolo both know that Manolo's threat is meaningless, his religious authority and condemnation nothing more than a performance, for he is guilty of a true crime in the eyes of both the community and God. The shame is no longer the boys' for their love affair, but Manolo's for using his office of priest to take advantage of his pupil. Ignacio, however, still fears the power of the priest, and convinces Enrique to leave. Manolo then takes Ignacio to the chapel, to serve as his altar boy for a morning mass. During the consecration of the Eucharist, the most important and sacred part of the ritual of the

Catholic Mass, Ignacio forgets to ring the bell which signifies the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Instead, the boy eyes Father Manolo with anger and contempt. This moment, according to Almodovar, "el niño, al ver esas manos, unas manos que sabe que ya son bendecidas, son las manos que acaban de dar un golpe a su amigo. El no cree que esas manos puedan operar ese milagro. Y el niño seguramente ha perdido su fè" ("the boy, upon seeing those hands, hands that he knows have been blessed, are the same hands that a moment ago struck his friend. He no longer believes those hands can perform this miracle. And so the boy loses his faith") (Almodovar, DVD Commentary). It is in this moment that Ignacio truly sees the hypocrisy and exploitation Manolo has been involved in. His identity as a priest makes Manolo a symbol of the Church to Ignacio, and now all sacredness has been removed from that symbol. By not ringing the bells, Ignacio reveals a newfound understanding that the ritual of the mass and consecration is merely a performance by Manolo. Hidden in the sacristy, Ignacio removes the holy vestments from Manolo, an act that symbolically represents the stripping of both these individuals' identity as Catholics. Their opposing sides of the conflict now firmly established by Manolo's assault on Enrique, Ignacio realizes that he can no longer identify with the Church and its rituals, for they no longer hold meaning for him, just as Manolo no longer does either. He loses his faith, his Catholic identity, choosing instead to love Enrique, and in doing so strips Manolo of the power offered by his performance of the role of a religious authority.

b. La Visita Narrative

While Ignacio's childhood flashback narrative concludes with a casting off of religious identity for him and Manolo, the fictionalized world of La Visita suggests that the religious identities of both characters may not have been completely discarded. In Enrique's film based on Ignacio's script, Manolo and Ignacio (now the drag queen Zahara) and their conflict takes center stage once again. Zahara's return to the school and church where she was educated as a young boy was briefly discussed above in examining the decorative presentation of religion in the film. Zahara and her friend Paquito enter the chapel and participate in the liturgy, albeit to comedic effect. However, it is Zahara who initially points out that they are about to enter a church, and orders Paquito to lower his voice before entering. Zahara is also the first to make the sign of the cross upon entering, and Paquito merely follows her lead. Zahara's observation of these rituals, and her respect for them (as opposed to Paquito's mockery), suggests that the faith young Ignacio lost in this same chapel so many years ago may not have completely erased his religious identity. It is still there, even if it is, perhaps, merely decorational now.

The mass that the two drag queens walk-in on is, as they suspected, being celebrated by Father Manolo. Their entrance and discovery of Manolo happens to coincide with the part of the mass known as the Act of Contrition, a ritual prayer of forgiveness and purification that begins the liturgy. Manolo and Zahara are reintroduced by this act of asking for forgiveness, an indicator of Manolo's past crimes against Ignacio, but Zahara turns the ritual around with her responses, transforming it into an accusation. As Manolo prays, "Por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa" ("Through my fault, through my

grievous fault"), Zahara venomously replies, "Por tu culpa, por tu gran culpa!" ("Its your fault, its your grievous fault!"). Their conflict with one another, and their internal conflicts, are given voice through the liturgy, and visualization in their own physical appearances. Manolo, performing the mass in full religious vestments, is the embodiment of religious identity. Zahara, as a pre-op transsexual / drag queen, is the embodiment of queer identity. It is in the performance of the film La Visita that Manolo and Zahara are able to fully express their struggling identities through costume.

At the end of the mass, Zahara follows Manolo into the sacristy, and walks in as he removes his clerical vestments. Once again, in the sacristy, Manolo is stripped of his religious identity because of Ignacio. She asks him to remember Ignacio and his relationship with him, and Manolo eyes her with shock and fear, in part because he does not know who Zahara is, and in part because he fears she knows about the sexual abuse. He has no power over her, for she knows his hypocrisy, she knows his religious identity is meaningless, and that his true identity is that of a sexual deviant.

With their performances and costumes now revealing their true identities, religion is revealed to persist as part of those identities. As their confrontation continues out of the sacristy and into Manolo's office, Zahara explains why she has returned: She wants Manolo to finance her sex-change operation, or else she will reveal Manolo's crime. The blackmail scenario offers a potential reconciliation of religious and queer identities. If Manolo, as a Catholic priest, does finance Zahara's operation, then essentially the Catholic Church becomes a supporter of her queer identity. However, the scenario does not play out that way, and instead Manolo, with the help of Father José (as described

above), kills Zahara. Yet, shortly before her death, Manolo realizes that Zahara is Ignacio, and he is once again filled with inner anguish between desire and responsibility. Both characters, in this final moment, reveal that their religion is still a part of them. Zahara begs the priest to let her confess before he kills her. It is her final act before she dies, and it is one that identifies her as Catholic. And after José snaps her neck, Manolo rushes over and confers the final rites, taking on his priestly role in an authentic way for the first, and only, time throughout his relationship with Ignacio / Zahara. La Visita ends with these two queer characters sincerely taking part in Catholic ritual. In La Visita, at least, the religious identities that had been cast aside by Manolo and Ignacio in the past are revealed to still be a part of their conflict as adults. Unable to relegate their religious identities to mere decoration, the queer/religious cannot be resolved peacefully. Zahara, the embodiment of queer identity, dies at the hands of Father José, the embodiment of religious identity. Manolo, embodying both the queer and religious, is unable to cast aside his priestly identity and his queer desire for Ignacio. He remains tortured, his identities still in conflict.

c. Berenguer's Narrative

While La Visita offers Ignacio's account of things, another alternative ending for the relationship / conflict between Manolo and Ignacio is provided through Manolo's tale. There are many similarities between the two versions of events. Ignacio is still a pre-op transsexual, trying to blackmail Manolo into paying for her operation. And Manolo still winds up being involved in Ignacio's murder. But there is one major difference between the two accounts: in Manolo's version, he is no longer a priest. Having left the

priesthood years ago, Manolo is now married, has children, and goes by Señor Berenguer, not Padre Manolo. In this version, Berenguer might seem to have settled his inner identity by having rejected his Catholic identity, and the visual costume that goes with it. However, while he is no longer bound by the visual costume and performance of his religious identity, he cannot cast aside his identity along with his costume. In this version of the narrative, religion for Berenguer and Ignacio is not just a performance in this narrative.

Despite their new identities, Manolo and Ignacio find themselves bound to their former roles by coming back into each others' lives. Manolo calls Ignacio by his childhood name, ignoring the fact that he is now an adult woman. Ignacio, meanwhile, still calls Manolo "Padre" (Father), despite the fact that he has not been a member of the priesthood for years. While at first Ignacio's use of this identifier appears to be more of a taunt, it is eventually revealed to actually be a sign of respect. In their final scene together, Manolo gives Ignacio the drugs that will ultimately kill her. As she prepares to shoot up, Ignacio asks Manolo to please leave, as she does not wish for him to see her in such a state. Ignacio, despite his childhood rejection of Catholicism and adult blackmail of Manolo, still sees the man as a priest, and still has some respect for that identity.

For Manolo and Ignacio, it is now, as adults no longer bound by the confines of the chapel and school, no longer visually vested in religious identities, living and acting as queer individuals, that Catholicism is revealed to be not a mere decoration, as it is for the rest of the characters, but rather ingrained in who they are. Just as in the ending of La Visita, Catholicism remains a part of their identity, despite their rejections of the

institutionalized Church. But, as their ultimate fates in both La Visita and Berenguer's account reveal, there is never any peace for them and their conflicting identities. Their struggle between Catholicism and queer desire ends only in death.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Queer Cinema studies is still a relatively new area of research, though interest in the field has rapidly grown in the past few years, and continues to attract the interest of film scholars. Religious Film studies, however, is only beginning to emerge as a serious area for study among film scholars, and is still almost exclusively the field of theologians and Comparative Religion studies. With the exception of scholarship devoted to the work of Derek Jarman, the intersection of these two fields of study remains merely nascent, and even in the scholarly work devoted to Jarman, little has been considered in terms of the specific issue of simultaneously queer and religious identities. Hence, the analysis offered in this thesis is an attempt to expand the scholarly discussion of identities outside of their respective fields – queer and religious – and to develop them at the point of intersection between two academically disparate fields.

Through the examination of plot, characters, and mise-en-scène, as drawn from Kort and Martin's theological-based methodology of Religious Film studies, a reading of identities that are simultaneously queer and religious is extrapolated from the films discussed throughout this thesis, and reveals a diverse presentation and understanding of the interaction between religious and queer identities by the filmmakers of the second wave of New Queer Cinema. While each of the films examined in this thesis portrays the struggle between religious and queer identity, the narratives and characters of each film offer a very different understanding of the dynamic. Yet, despite the differing resolutions, all four films acknowledge the struggle of queer Christians, and attempt to offer an answer to that struggle, as seen in the plot of the films and the final resolutions of

the conflicts for the characters in each narrative. Sordid Lives offers affirmation and reconciliation of homosexual identities through religious identities in both Ty's coming out to his Southern Baptist mother, and Brother Boy's reunion with Wardell and declaration of pride in a Southern Baptist chapel. Hedwig and the Angry Inch performs a far deeper theological examination of the struggle of identity, and it is not just queer and religious identities that are examined. Using Gnostic theology and a perverse dynamic paradigm, Hedwig constructs its central queer character into a messianic figure that combines sexual identity with religious salvation and transformation. Latter Days provides an examination of the coming out process from a theological perspective, offers as its solution an affirmation of sexual identity as spiritually fulfilling, while at the same time rejecting the institutional religious Mormon identity of its central character. Bad Education, meanwhile, does not reject religious identity so much as it reduces it to a decorative signifier, something that is performed but holds no real consequence so long as it is not taken seriously. To place theological and moral significance in religious identity within Almodovar's film ultimately leads to inner torment and death.

Of course, these four films are not the last word in the discussion of the religious/queer struggle in narrative film, nor are they the end of the discussion for these directors. As of this writing, Del Shores is currently in pre-production on a film adaptation of one of his other stage plays, Southern Baptist Sissies. This play/film follows the experiences of four homosexual Southern Baptist boys and the paths each of their lives takes as they struggle with their dueling identities. The film is set to begin production sometime later in 2007. Shores is also developing a television series based on

Sordid Lives, continuing the stories of each of the characters in the film, including Ty and Brother Boy. The series premieres on the LOGO network in summer of 2007. John Cameron Mitchell, meanwhile, released his second film, Shortbus, in fall 2006. An exploration of sexual identity and sexual relationships, the film also offers some possibility for a religious reading. Pedro Almodovar released Volver in fall 2006 as well. Though its narrative does not focus on queer characters, it still retains a heavy Catholic influence in its design. The ongoing exploration of religion and sexual identity continues to be explored by these directors. And the past year has seen the release of films by other queer directors that also seem ripe for an exploration of Christian identity. 20 Centimeters (Ramon Salazar, 2006), the musical story of a narcoleptic transsexual prostitute, is influenced by both Mitchell and Almodovar's films, and it would be interesting to see how much religious influence there is in the film. Also, Save Me (Robert Cary, 2007), a queer romance set in an "ex-gay" ministry, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival this year.

Further research might also be done on the religious/queer struggle of non-Christian religions, and their depictions in Queer Cinema. There are a number of Jewish and Islamic queer directors whose films explore religious identity in these religious cultures, but an exploration of Asian queer cinema and Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, in film would add to much to the discussion of queer and religious identity as well. An often overlooked area for study in this matter, as well, is female sexuality. What do lesbian filmmakers have to say about their struggle with religious identity, and how is theology and religious iconography infused into the

construction of female queer character identities?

These and other questions could and should be fruitfully explored in future endeavors. It is my intention and hope that this thesis' contribution to the field of queer, film, and religious studies is only the beginning of a much larger and newly emerging discussion among film scholars and theologians, as well as filmmakers and screenwriters, in the years to come.

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