

Ghosts of Queerness Yet-to-Come

The Horrors of Heterosexuality

In a Decade of Made-for-TV Christmas Movies



Elizabeth Simins

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APPROVED BY

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shawna Lipton", written over a horizontal line.

Reader 1

Shawna Lipton, *Critical Studies Program Chair*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Taylor Eggan", written over a horizontal line.

Reader 2

Taylor Eggan, *Thesis Faculty*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sara Bernstein", written over a horizontal line.

Reader 3

Sara Bernstein, *Thesis Mentor*

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Abstract



This paper broadly examines 140 made-for-TV Christmas movies released between 2005 and 2020 alongside a variety of scholarly texts on subject matter including popular romance readership, queer interpretations of horror, cultural studies, and critical heterosexuality studies to argue that the pleasure experienced by queer viewers in the made-for-TV Christmas romcom audience may be more akin to that traditionally generated by horror than romance. Christmas movies paint a bleak view of the world for presumed-heterosexual women—all women according to the genre’s internal logic—one in which only a once-a-year force known as Christmas Magic can save them from the misery of the magic-free heterosexual dating pool. The largely generically consistent narrative structure of Christmas movies, intended to be watched in bulk during annual marathons, uniquely qualifies them to expose the horrific and uncanny aspects of a world in which anything other than heterosexual marriage is perceived as a tragic failure. For queer viewers, a truly happy ending might entail the heroine’s realization that heterosexual marriage isn’t the only valid relationship model, and that her near-universal dissatisfaction with men may suggest something that can’t simply be solved by the timely arrival of “the one.” That she never does, thanks always to the timely intervention of Christmas Magic, is a chilling and constant reminder to queer viewers of the impossibility of their own existence in the Christmas movie’s supposedly charmed world. However, like horror viewers whose terror is confined to a movie’s running time, queer viewers may breathe a sigh of relief as each Christmas movie comes to a close, secure in their knowledge that Christmas Magic has no purchase in the world off screen.

Keywords: *Christmas, popular romance, horror, television, queer theory, made-for-TV movies, Hallmark movies, heterosexuality, critical heterosexuality studies, cultural studies, genre, heteronormativity, heteropessimism, monsters, true love ideology*

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Ghosts of Queerness Yet-to-Come:

The Horrors of Heterosexuality in a Decade of Made-for-TV Christmas Movies



I: Every Day Is Christmas

Holiday In Handcuffs (2007)

Trudie Chandler (Melissa Joan Hart) is having a bad day. Not only did she leave her hair curlers in for too long, but she showed up late for a promising job interview, and on top of that, her family is imminently expecting her at their cabin for Christmas where her mother will surely give her yet another pink sweater she hates. When her boyfriend unceremoniously breaks up with her, it's the last straw: What choice does Trudie have but to grab a gun and kidnap the first hot guy she sees so she has someone to bring home for the holidays? With David Martin (Mario Lopez) safely tied up and unconscious in her car, Trudie drives to the family cabin. Christmas-themed and crime-tinged hijinks ensue until somehow inevitably, even while defying all logic, David and Trudie fall in love.

In the early winter of 2018, I was in one of those moods that calls for indulging in a guilty pleasure, which for me more often than not means watching something that can only be described as “so bad it’s good.” *Holiday In Handcuffs*, a 2007 entry in ABC Family’s 25 Days of Christmas programming, fit the bill perfectly. So perfectly, in fact, that following that first viewing session, I found myself coming back to the Christmas category on various streaming services night after night, until I had watched so many made-for-TV Christmas movies that I could confidently recommend specific ones to friends and family based on their individual tastes.

I wasn't watching just any Christmas-themed cinematic fare, though; I deftly avoided anything critically acclaimed, skipping over classics like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*. I eschewed movies with storylines that focused on anything other than a highly clichéd, always-heterosexual romance (not that I had much choice in that last qualification). Even schlocky Christmas romcoms like *Love, Actually*, didn't qualify for my extended viewing marathon if they had ever shown in theaters—I was only interested in the worst of the worst. Before I knew it, Christmas season was over, but my new hobby continued.

It was time to admit it: Watching terrible, made-for-TV Christmas romcoms was no longer simply a guilty pleasure; it was, rather, a pleasure—though certainly not simply. For reasons I couldn't yet understand, something about this particular category of Christmas movies, or about the experience of watching them, must have appealed to me beyond how bad they were. Was there something comforting or stimulating about their standardized 90-minute length, low production values, improbable and predictable plots, shallow characterization, and absurd Christmas trappings? No matter how many I watched, I only became more convinced of how ridiculous they were. Even more importantly, the genre's unwavering moral—that women's problems can all be solved by the right man—was regressive, anti-feminist, heterocentric, and a whole list of other epithets too long to count. So why did I, a critically minded Jewish lesbian with more than enough quality entertainment available to me, crave made-for-TV Christmas movies whenever I had an hour and a half to spare?

Over the past few years, there has been a groundswell among queer media critics and consumers pushing for more “LGBTQ representation” from the studios and channels responsible

for each winter's Christmas movie avalanche; in response, the first smattering¹ of Christmas movies about gay couples was finally released in 2020. The rationale for the outcry seems to be that queer people who enjoy cheesy Christmas movies that center heterosexual couples will get an enhanced, but analogous, experience if the movies center same-gender couples in the same overall narrative patterns. The more Christmas movies I watch, however, the more I'm inclined to disagree. For some queer viewers, watching rote heterosexual romances each Christmas (or whenever they watch them) may satisfy an entirely different urge from the one potentially fulfilled by the same movies given an overtly queer paint job.

In her 2019 book *Gothic Queer Culture*, Laura Westengard discusses Lee Edelman's conception of the "sinthomosexual," or non-reproductive queer people who are not interested in "reproductive futurity," describing their relationship to normative society as follows:

[S]inthomosexuals turn the sequined fabric of society's fantasy structure inside out to reveal the knotted underbelly—to make what was once familiar and homelike horrifically exposed as something constructed and denaturalized, uncanny because it replaces the comfort of the fantasy with a perverse version of itself.²

I happened to encounter that passage around the time I realized I had watched too many made-for-TV Christmas movies to continue to write off my fascination with them as irony, and Westengard's succinct description of normativity turned inside-out and uncanny relative to a queer positionality seemed to apply to my viewing experience of Christmas movies, but not because non-reproductive queerness featured in the genre, which it decidedly did not. It was my own position outside heteronormativity that was causing Christmas movie romance—seemingly

¹ Hulu's *Happiest Season*, Netflix's *A New York Christmas Wedding*, Paramount's *Dashing in December*, and Lifetime's *The Christmas Setup*.

² Laura Westengard. *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. Expanding Frontiers: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019, 48.

intended to be “familiar and homelike”—to feel “horrifically exposed as something constructed and denaturalized.”

The unending parade of too-white smiles on clumsy, overambitious women turned happy by surly, competent men with chiseled jawlines and close-cropped hair that made them hard to tell apart; the constant assurance that I, too, could be happy with a man, if I only opened my heart to a little Christmas magic and held out for that special time of year when all my wishes for conventional marital bliss would come true... I realized I was deep in the uncanny valley of heterosexuality, and as I looked on with fascination at the horrifically exposed, knotted underbelly of Christmas movies, there was nothing familiar or homelike to be found. But that I kept coming back despite experiencing all the uncanny discomfort that Westengard had described indicated to me that my own enjoyment of the genre may actually have relied on that very discomfort. My queer positionality wasn't keeping me from taking pleasure in repeated viewings of Christmas movies, but it was twisting that pleasure from the calm reassurance of watching a romance into something more akin to the terror followed by relief typically inspired by horror.



II: Countdown to Christmas

Girlfriends of Christmas Past (2016)

When she gets pulled outside for a chat over Thanksgiving, party planner Livvy Beal (Tammin Sursok) is sure her boyfriend of a year, Anderson (John Brotherton) is about to propose to her. He dumps her instead, which sends Livvy into a tailspin of depression. Luckily for Livvy, she spots Anderson with a new girlfriend only days later, which gives her a new reason to get out of bed every day: Revenge. Realizing that Anderson had been cheating on her, Livvy seeks out and

enlists two of his other ex-girlfriends, Murphy (Lindsey McKeon) and Zoe (Abigail Klein) to help her sabotage his new relationship from behind the scenes. The three women orchestrate various Christmas-themed schemes that each backfire catastrophically, only bringing Anderson and his girlfriend closer, but Livvy also meets self-proclaimed good guy Carter (Brent Bailey) along the way. Though Carter first judges Livvy for—among other things—having fallen for Anderson’s act, he agrees to date her despite what he says are her flaws and the two seal their future with a kiss on New Year’s Eve at midnight.

By the time I started watching Christmas movies, I was already an out queer person in a romantic relationship with another out queer person. My life had long since diverged from the path of normativity I now watched so many Christmas movie heroines incessantly marching down, and I had no interest in changing course. But years earlier, I had lived another life that was much more in line with that of a Christmas movie heroine: I got engaged to a man at 22, and married him at 25. The marriage only lasted a year before I realized it wasn’t what I wanted, but the time I spent on the presumptively normative path that led me to heterosexual marriage was much longer than just one year, and is never far from my mind, even as I get further away from it. I’m haunted by alternative possibilities for my own life, by my own phantom “what-if” choice to stay where I was; conversely, I can see a phantom choice for Christmas movie heroines, too—the choice I *did* make, but the one they never do. Maybe any queer viewer can see shadows of it as each new exceptional man, summoned by the unique whims of the holiday season, brings each new heroine back into the presumptively heterosexual fold.

Winter 2020 saw the release of nearly 100 made-for-TV Christmas movies, with Hallmark and Lifetime alone pumping out 40 and 30 of them, respectively.³ But we didn't always live in a world this saturated with cookie-cutter Christmas romcoms. In fact, though 2007 may not seem like too long ago by most metrics, *Holiday In Handcuffs*'s release date might as well be ancient history on the timeline of made-for-TV Christmas movies. Back then, ABC Family (now Freeform) was still the reigning champion of network television Christmas, with its 25 Days of Christmas programming block that started in 1996 and has featured 1-3 original Christmas movies per year ever since, accumulating around 35 Christmas movies in all as of 2019. It wasn't until 2009 that Hallmark moved in on ABC Family's territory and launched the Countdown to Christmas programming block that has given low-budget, predictable, vigorously heterosexual Christmas movies a sort of cultural ubiquity—or, depending on how you look at it, notoriety. Hallmark has ushered in something of a Christmas movie arms race, with over 200 original holiday-themed movies released since 2009, pulling it far ahead of its closest competitor, Lifetime, which only just cleared 100 Christmas movies total in 2020. Netflix, Hulu, and other streaming services and channels have also entered the fray, but in nowhere near Hallmark's numbers—though their scarce entries do tend to get more critical attention.

My research draws from a set of 140 Christmas movies, almost all of which were released in the years since 2010. Of those, 91 came out between 2017 and 2020, so my focus is heavily weighted toward a relatively recent sample.⁴ I chose which movies to watch based primarily on their accessibility, so my sample includes pretty much every Christmas romcom included with subscriptions to Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime since 2018, as well as

³ Dan Snierson. "Here's When All 99 New Christmas Movies Will Air." *Entertainment Weekly*, November 6, 2020.

⁴ Otherwise, the yearly breakdown is as follows: 2 movies from 2005; 1 from 2007; 2 from 2010; 7 from 2011; 5 from 2012; 6 from 2013; 6 from 2014; 10 from 2015; 10 from 2016; 19 from 2017; 26 from 2018; 36 from 2019; and 10 from 2020.

Amazon's Hallmark Movies Now channel, which rotates its selection monthly. I also rented and purchased a few here and there from Amazon Prime when the cost was under \$5, which usually applies to movies older than one year. The vast majority of my sample originally aired on Hallmark, Lifetime, or Freeform as part of each channel's respective annual Christmas programming, plus a fair number of Netflix originals.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly every protagonist in my sample of easily accessible Christmas movies is white, though this begins to shift ever so slightly in 2018, with women of color making up only 15% of heroines overall, but 25% of heroines in the set since 2018. Class is even more homogenous, with protagonists almost universally college-educated, financially comfortable, and employed in white-collar careers.⁵ My dataset skews more secular and less raunchy, following the trends of mainstream Christmas movie release marathons. A handful also feature gay secondary characters, occasionally as the straight protagonist's happily married sibling, but usually as her best friend, cheerleader, and comic relief. *Life-Size 2* (2018) stands out for having a bisexual protagonist, though her only onscreen romantic interest is a man. I've also watched four Christmas movies that center queer romance—two with gay male leads, one with lesbian leads, and one with a bisexual lead in a lesbian relationship—all released in 2020.⁶ On the whole, though, Christmas movies barely differentiate themselves from one another, and taken as a group, they less tell a series of individual stories than they do assemble a mosaic portrait of one normative path that a whole slew of fictional women innately understand to strive for.

⁵ The protagonists' routine financial comfort is never questioned even while their families' property—farms, stores, theaters, inns, you name it—is constantly being threatened by big-city executives of various kinds due to what the viewer is made to understand are dire financial straits. (Until a man swoops in to help save whatever it is, of course.) For more on capitalism's outsized role in Hallmark Christmas movies, see Sean Brayton, "Courtship and Class Conflict in Hallmark's 'Countdown to Christmas,'" *Feminist Media Studies*, February 10, 2020, 1-15.

⁶ *Dashing in December*, *The Christmas Setup*, *Happiest Season*, and *A New York Christmas Wedding*, respectively. *Ghosting: The Spirit of Christmas* (2019) is also worth mentioning in this context, though a discussion that would do justice to its subtly queer storytelling, which doesn't stop at the lesbian romance it features between supporting characters, is beyond the scope of this paper.

And for the last decade made-for-TV (or streaming, as the case may be) Christmas movies have been designed to be watched in such a way as to facilitate the assembly of such a mosaic: in bulk, at a rate of at least one per day if you have any hope at all of keeping up with the onslaught. It's a frenetic pace that Hallmark, for one, encourages with its downloadable programming guide, which is formatted like a checklist and even syncs up with the Hallmark Movie Checklist app so avid viewers can make sure not to miss a single one.⁷ Amid my own watching history, only a handful are memorable as being particularly interesting or unusual, plots and characters otherwise blurring together into an indistinguishable smear of red and green sweaters, extravagantly decorated office parties, and visibly empty prop coffee cups. The experience of watching Christmas movies, then, both for me and for a normatively positioned viewer, Countdown to Christmas checklist in hand, is exactly that: the experience of watching Christmas *movies*. Regardless of the potentially endearing idiosyncrasies of any given heroine's trials and tribulations on her way to find love, when the movie ends, she inevitably recedes in the rearview mirror as quickly as she appeared, tomorrow's newest heroine already about to meet her Prince Charming before she, too, is left behind. Today, in the age of streaming media, we might say Christmas movies were made to be binge-watched. In 1984, sociologist Janice Radway called this pattern of consumption "repetitive reading."⁸



⁷ The Hallmark Movie Checklist app has been available since 2018.

⁸ Janice A. Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, 10.

III: Christmas Comes But Once A Year

The Spirit of Christmas (2015)

Kate (Jen Lilley) just got dumped—but she isn't sad about it; she never felt anything for the guy, nor for any of the many guys she's serially dated. And as an all-work-and-no-play real estate lawyer in Boston, Kate's chronically single status makes her the ideal candidate to spend the leadup to Christmas trying to get a small-town historical inn appraised so her firm can close the sale. But what starts as just another assignment turns complicated when Kate, who inexplicably insists on sleeping in the inn despite it being closed for Christmas, discovers it to be haunted by the ghost of a man who died 95 years ago. Daniel Forsythe (Thomas Beaudoin), it turns out, was a Prohibition-era rum runner who got embroiled in something of a love quadrangle that ended in his untimely death, and has since been cursed to haunt Hollygrove Inn for the 12 days leading up to Christmas each year. Despite his cold and standoffish demeanor, Kate finds herself falling for Daniel, and commits to helping him solve the mystery of his death to help him move on from his semi-mortal existence. In the end, he somehow chooses to stay with Kate, though the logistics of how he manages this are never made clear.

There is always a point up until which I can relate to Christmas movie heroines. After all, Christmas movies frequently begin with a woman who expresses dissatisfaction with her romantic involvement with men and realizes that heterosexual dating is making her unhappy. I've been there; I would venture to say most if not all queer people have had a moment when they're forced to admit that some aspect of heteronormativity isn't working out for them—a moment more than a little reminiscent of Kate's announcement at the beginning of *The Spirit of*

Christmas, for example, that when it comes to past relationships, her heart has never really been in it.⁹ But unlike prototypically idyllic queer comings-of-age, prototypically idyllic Christmas movies always end with the heroine happily replacing her feelings of broad, systemic discomfort with complacency in the safely heterosexual arms of “the one.” And so rather than being comforted by the traditional closure offered by the genre’s prescribed “happy ending,” I find that the pat conclusions of Christmas movies afford me an unsettling glimpse into a world that I, myself, escaped—but that no Christmas movie heroine can.

Strictly speaking, Christmas movies are not romance novels, though some are based on Christmas-themed romance novels and all of them follow the same basic structure as non-Christmas-themed made-for-TV romantic comedies, which—even when not literally based on a book—are essentially romance novels adapted for the small screen. Christmas movies have their own qualities, as do romance novels, but each have a great deal in common with one another, both in terms of internal attributes like narrative structure and character tropes, and, most importantly for my purposes, external patterns of consumption: The avid consumers of both Christmas movies and romance novels watch or read in rapid succession, one movie or book following quickly on the heels of the last. The only difference is that while romance readers do their reading year round, Christmas movie watchers (usually) limit their marathoning to the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas each year. Because pieces of media consumed in this pattern tend to merge into an overall impression rather than standing out as individual works, readers and viewers create meaning out of them differently than how they do with works not intended to be consumed en masse.

⁹ Word for word, what she says is, “I’m not going to pretend to feel something that I don’t. And you’re so right, I just... I don’t.” See David Jackson, *The Spirit of Christmas*. MarVista Entertainment, 2015.

In her 1984 sociological study of romance novel readership, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Janice Radway says that these “repetitive” or “chronic” reading habits grant romance novels a “hybrid status as realistic novels and mythic ritual”:

Romances purport to be open-ended stories about different heroines who undergo different experiences. They manage such a suggestion by using the conventions of the realistic novel, which always pretends to be telling the as-yet-uncompleted story of a singular individual. Despite this realistic illusion, however, each romance is, in fact, a mythic account of how women *must* achieve fulfillment in patriarchal society.¹⁰

In Radway’s view, the unerringly formulaic nature of romance novels renders the small differences between each narrative irrelevant to their cultural impact and relationship to readers. Because each romance heroine encounters the same story beats on her way to an identically inevitable “happy” ending coupled with a male love interest, romance novels have more in common with moralizing fairy tales or allegory than with realistic fiction; the difference is that romance novels employ the conventions of realistic fiction to hide their mythic status. In this way, women who consume romance novels can benefit from the repeated reassurance of the genre’s message—true love is possible and marriage will lead to happiness, even with a man who has assorted negative qualities—without feeling like they are reading fairy tales designed to teach them a lesson. This somewhat contradictory process, though, still renders each romance novel “never simply a love story, [but] also an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women,”¹¹ and in particular an exploration that comforts women who hope to reconcile their desire for marriage with their negative feelings toward or experiences with men. To accomplish

¹⁰ Ibid., 17. Emphasis Radway’s.

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

this, the romance novels that Radway studied follow a pattern in which the heroine's narrative arc is defined by her gradual conversion of a cruel, heartless man into her ideal romantic partner by using "all the nurturing skills associated by patriarchal culture with the feminine character."¹² Any and all discomfort the heroine initially felt is dispelled as she slots into her idealized conventional role—indeed, the fact that she has taken on the traditional feminine role seems to be the very thing that transforms her love interest into marriage material.

In made-for-TV Christmas movies, the arc more commonly begins with the heroine being fed up with dating men altogether before she finds that one exceptional man able single handedly to displace all of her systemic frustrations, no matter how eloquently or determinedly she had expressed them in the front half of the movie. Kate's understanding of herself as someone "unable to love" in *The Spirit of Christmas*'s opening scene and Holly's dissatisfaction with flesh-and-blood men compared to mannequins in *Holly's Holiday* (summarized below) are just the tip of the iceberg: In *A Very Country Christmas* (2017), protagonist Jeanette "doesn't date." In *Back to Christmas* (2014), Ali looks forward to spending Christmas alone so that nobody will "be judging her or incessantly asking if she's seeing anyone." Carrie, who in *Married by Christmas* (2016) must get married by Christmas, has no interest in dating until she needs a husband to claim her inheritance. And, perhaps most strikingly, *Girlfriends of Christmas Past* spends nearly the entirety of its running time allowing its three heroines to express their frustrations with and dislike of men out loud and in so many words.

It is worth pausing here to discuss in greater detail how *Girlfriends* approaches its female characters' discontent with men, because taken in context it can be understood as a concrete expression of what is present across the genre as a whole on a more thematic, implicit level. The most glaring example comes around the movie's halfway point, when Livvy, Murphy, Zoe, and

¹² Ibid., 127.

Carter eat dinner together, the women taking turns complaining about similar problems they have experienced in past relationships with men: men who can't commit to marriage, men who objectify them, men who don't let them speak their mind, men who lie and cheat, and so on. Carter is taken aback by their negativity, but rather than probe for more details about a side of the dating experience with which he is clearly unfamiliar, he scolds the women for blaming men for their shortcomings:

[M]aybe it's just that you girls are chasing this image of an unattainable guy that you think you want, and then when you finally catch him, you realize he's not half the guy you spent all this time cracking him up to be. Maybe it's not the problem that all guys are alike. Maybe it's just that you girls aren't very good at picking them.¹³

It may seem like Carter is saying that women having expectations that men *don't* treat them poorly is what actually *causes* them to treat women poorly, and this backwards logic is confirmed later on when Livvy, in response to Anderson's ultimate apology to her for lying and cheating, takes some of the blame in return—for expecting him *not* to cheat: “Well, I don't think it's entirely your fault. I think we all put you on some pedestal that... you didn't really belong on.” On top of that, to win Carter back after alienating him with her embarrassing revenge-karaoke performance at Anderson's holiday party, Livvy sends him a card with the following written in it:

With zero expectations,
I simply wanted to say...
I'm sorry.
And thank you.
You were right.¹⁴

¹³ Jake Helgren. *Girlfriends of Christmas Past*. MarVista Entertainment, 2016.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Carter's misogynist understanding of heterosexual gender relations is repeatedly affirmed throughout the movie, primarily by Livvy agreeing unreservedly with all of his criticism masquerading as advice—including, at one point, “You listen to your mom too much”—and then still having to tell him he's right yet another time to get him back, all of which is heightened by Carter's repeated proclamation that he's “not that guy.” As a result, *Girlfriends* ends without ever offering even a fantastical solution to any of the very real problems raised by its three heroines, only that they should stop expecting better. That men lie to, cheat on, objectify, and stifle their female partners is taken for granted as a truth that is neither worth challenging nor taken particularly seriously as a legitimate stumbling block along a woman's expected path to heterosexual marriage.

Livvy, Kate, Holly, Jeanette, Ali, Carrie, and a slew of other Christmas movie heroines all have in common that they express a deep dislike of men and the process of heterosexual dating, while also expecting either to continue dating men until they eventually marry one, or to remain romantically alone (a tragic ending for any romance heroine, often expressed shorthand as “dying alone”). The viewer, meanwhile, is tacitly expected to understand that it is normal for straight women to feel a wide range of negative emotions towards men in general, and dating or marrying men in particular, without ever questioning their attraction to the category of people triggering those negative emotions (men). This war-of-the-sexes mindset and model of attraction that seems to prioritize inevitability over desire and enthusiasm is common across heterosexual cultural artifacts too numerous to list, from wedding cake toppers depicting a bride dragging a groom to the altar, to reality dating shows that repeatedly emphasize the difficulty of marriage while also encouraging contestants to strive for it, to bachelor and bachelorette parties that celebrate a soon-to-be-married person's last night of “freedom.” That there exists a simultaneous

mutual dislike and attraction between men and women writ large; that marriage is at once urgently desirable and inevitably miserable: These contradictions have gained the status of common knowledge. Their presence in any given romcom needs no more explanation than their presence in the world.



IV: He's A Mean One

Holly's Holiday (2012)

As Christmas season approaches, workaholic advertising executive Holly Maddux (Claire Coffee) insists that she has everything she needs—well, almost everything. Walking past a department store Christmas display, Holly quips to her friend that she wishes she had a man as perfect as the mannequin in the window. Much to her surprise, after falling and hitting her head, she wakes up and the mannequin has not only come to life, but is ready for romance. Bo (Ryan McPartlin) is perfect... too perfect. And over time his perfection starts to grate on Holly, especially compared to her aggressively imperfect coworker Milo (Jeff Ward), who is frustrated not just with Holly, but with what he says is the tendency of all women to chase after a fairy tale that doesn't exist. Just when Holly realizes Milo is actually her Mr. Perfect (because he isn't perfect), she hits her head again and wakes up in the hospital. She may have spent several days comatose, but she has both figured out the diamond sales campaign she was assigned just before her injury, and learned to stop searching for a man as perfect as a mannequin, so she chalks it up as a win.

I take a universalizing rather than minoritizing approach to queerness, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines as follows in her classic 1990 work of queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet*:

[The minoritizing view sees] homo/heterosexual definition ... as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority[, while the universalizing view sees] it ... as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities.¹⁵

A universalizing approach, then, is perhaps best explained in opposition to the popular, assimilationist, and thoroughly minoritizing “born-this-way” model of queerness in which certain people are born immutably different (queer) from an established, normative, biological default (cisgender and heterosexual), and which is our baggage-laden inheritance from the late-nineteenth century European sexologists who jumpstarted Western society’s obsession with rigid sexual categorization. Though a universalizing view does not preclude people from identifying as always—and, perhaps, seemingly biologically—having been queer, it also allows for a more flexible understanding of sexual object-choice generally as “less stable and identity-bound,” so more fluid among humanity as a whole rather than just among those who identify as sexually fluid.¹⁶

When discussing the “queerness” of a person or character in a universalizing framework, the definition of what it means to *be queer* can become slippery. In the context of Christmas movies, when I say “queer,” I am using it non-exclusively to mean relationship structures that do not adhere to heteronormative expectations in terms of the genders of the participants.

Obviously, this isn’t an all-encompassing definition of queerness, but unfortunately, even the

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Updated with a new preface. Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2008, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

most allegedly progressive Christmas movies have yet to acknowledge the existence of transgender people¹⁷ and my own research is focused on sexual orientation more than gender, so it would be disingenuous to say that transness figures significantly into my usage of “queer” in this context, though both cisgender and transgender people experience the categories of queer attraction I’m talking about. People who identify as some version of gay, lesbian, or bisexual fall into the category of “queer” as I’m using it—but so might people who identify as heterosexual, or who don’t identify as anything in particular but display queer attraction and relationship patterns. “Heterosexual people” as discussed in this paper, then, are not people born immutably and exclusively attracted to the so-called “opposite sex,” but rather people who believe themselves to be heterosexual.¹⁸

Christmas movies, like most mainstream media, take an approach to queerness that is so minoritizing it veers into outright erasure, with very few exceptions (see my demographic breakdown in Section II, above) that only serve to confirm the anomalous rarity of queerness in the warped reflection of society that persists across the genre. A Christmas movie heroine, who exists in a presumptively heterosexual world in a presumptively heterosexual genre, is always-already presumed heterosexual—but what that means is in the eye of the beholder.

The begrudging nature of straight-identifying women’s attraction to men has become something of a meme in recent years, with “men are trash” being thrown around as a catch-all

¹⁷ With the notable exception-that-proves-the-rule of *A New York Christmas Wedding*, a much-deserved longer discussion of which is outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁸ I also acknowledge that there are more and less “privileged heterosexualities” which people have frequently argued can be included under the queer umbrella—for example, the less privileged heterosexualities of straight people who practice non-monogamy or don’t have children—but for the sake of this project, I won’t be including those categories in my usage of “queer.” For more on hierarchies of heterosexuality, see Jennifer Coates, “The Discursive Production of Everyday Heterosexualities.” *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 5 (September 2013): 536–52.

explanation and descriptor for male bad behavior ranging from verbal street harassment to murder and rape. In her 2019 *New Inquiry* essay, “On Heteropessimism,” lesbian critic Indiana Seresin takes aim at the phenomenon of heterosexually-identifying people, mainly women, “perform[ing] disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience,” but never actually resulting in an abandonment of heterosexuality.¹⁹ In Seresin’s apparently universalizing view, performance of heteropessimism is a way for women to disavow their own responsibility in both continuing to “stay attached to heterosexuality,” and to individualize a larger systemic problem. That it has become in vogue for women to lament men being “trash” while continuing to date them, marry them, and claim they are still attracted to them is part and parcel of what Seresin calls “the individualizing turn” of heterosexual culture. According to heteropessimism, heterosexual attraction and behavior are something to be embarrassed by and ashamed of on an individual level, rather than something to address as a broader societal pattern: “To be permanently, preemptively disappointed in heterosexuality is to refuse the possibility of changing straight culture for the better.”²⁰ The popular romance genre in general, which accepts as a given that heterosexual interactions with men are a largely negative experience for women whose romantic lives can only be salvaged by a single standout man—“the one”—is firmly positioned within a heteropessimistic worldview. Christmas movies, which limit women’s chances for heterosexual romantic success even more dramatically for reasons I discuss in the next section, make up an especially heteropessimistic segment of their parent genre. That *Girlfriends of Christmas Past*, for example, is heteropessimistic at its core seems obvious, thanks to its continual condemnations of men both explicitly (by its female characters) and implicitly (by the male characters who insist that women’s high expectations are the cause of men’s bad behavior).

¹⁹ Indiana Seresin. “On Heteropessimism.” *The New Inquiry*, October 9, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

Radway attributes the negative characterization of men in romance novels, even and in particular those men whom the heroines eventually marry, to the cognitively dissonant needs of its readers, saying that women who were given no options in life besides an often-unhappy marriage with a man craved the repeated reassurance of narratives in which happiness and “true love” were possible despite men’s negative qualities that they also experienced off the page. The romance’s happy ending, according to Radway, “restores the status quo in gender relations,” which has been disturbed by the heroine’s reluctance to go easily into the prescribed female role of wife to a man, “when the hero enfolds the heroine protectively in his arms.” For women who identify as heterosexual and are married to or intend to marry a man, beginning with a negative outlook on men can lead to, as Radway says, a way to reinterpret men’s negative behavior in real life as fitting comfortably into the “true love” paradigm, while also averting any danger that serious questioning of that paradigm would pose to its stability.

In the 40 years since *Reading the Romance* was written, of course, marriage and heterosexuality have developed in tandem with popular romance itself; marriage and childrearing are, at least seemingly, no longer the only acceptable life path for many of the women who repetitively consume romance. And though the sorts of historical mass market romances that Radway studied are still being written and published, other subgenres have also since emerged that align more closely stylistically with made-for-TV Christmas movies, and may more accurately reflect the lived realities of contemporary viewers. That being said, while discussing the “post-feminist” “chick lit” genre in “Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?”, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff still note “the extraordinary tenacity of notions of heterosexual romance against the backdrop of significant cultural and demographic changes,” including skyrocketing divorce rates and increasing acceptance of non-traditional families.²¹ The

²¹ Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff. “Rewriting The Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?” *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 2006): 487–504. 490.

heroines of chick lit are more “independent” and “liberated” on the surface than their mass-market romance counterparts, but in the end, they still invariably “[welcome] their rescue from economic and social independence”²² by the hero. Heroines are conveyed as having more agency than their more traditional predecessors, but, “frequently use their empowered post-feminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many second wave feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity ... for example, white weddings, downsizing, giving up work or taking their husband’s name on marriage.”²³ This is a consistent pattern in Christmas movies as well: High-powered career women lament the dire conditions of the heterosexual dating pool, often “swearing off” dating or men (in favor of the always-threatening specter of “spinsterhood”), but somehow, by the end of the movie, their outlook on everything has changed because of one special man with whom they can live happily ever after in heterosexual marital (or at least long-term monogamous, with eventual marriage implied) bliss. The superficial trappings of fictional romantic dynamics may have changed, but the structure still serves to reassure presumptively heterosexual women that the heteronormative, patriarchal life path they walk—whether by empowered “choice” or not—is compatible with “true love.” The main point of differentiation is that in Christmas movies, the power of the Christmas season—“Christmas Magic,” sometimes metaphorical but often literal and explicitly stated—intervenes to bring the heroine and hero together. While the heroine is still without exception happy with the hero by the end of the movie, the seasonally supernatural means by which she arrives at her happy ending subtly undermines her “empowered post-feminist position,” and reinforces the genre’s already-heteropessimistic structure.



²² Ibid., 495.

²³ Ibid., 499.

V: December Will Be Magic Again

A Very Nutty Christmas (2018)

With only six days to go until Christmas, Kate Holiday (Melissa Joan Hart) is struggling to manage the frenzied rush at her bakery, which must produce 15,000 cookies for the troops in time for the holiday. To make matters worse, her narcissistic actor boyfriend has just dumped her for paying more attention to the bakery than to their relationship, and Kate also needs to prepare to host a stranger in her spare room to make some extra money over Christmas. When she encounters a mysterious man at a holiday fair and tells him she doesn't think Christmas magic is real, he gives her a nutcracker as a gift to help restore her belief in the season, saying it's the actual nutcracker featured in Tchaikovsky's The Nutcracker—coincidentally soon to be playing in the town's theater. The next morning, Kate trips over a man sleeping under her sparse Christmas tree, assuming he's her planned guest, rationalizing his nutcracker garb by figuring he's here to perform in the ballet. Over the next six days, Chip the Nutcracker (Barry Watson) charms Kate into believing in Christmas magic again, though nothing can save him from turning back into a wooden nutcracker on Christmas Eve. Luckily, Kate's friend's nephew—whom we are assured physically resembles Chip—gets a surprise furlough from the army in time to show up at her house for her holiday party, hinting at a future romance. Meanwhile, nutcracker-Chip sits on the mantelpiece, having promised to return next Christmas, and winks at the camera.

And what of those whose response to real-life unhappiness in heteronormative romantic relationships doesn't end with Radway's restoration of the status quo, or Gill and Herdieckerhoff's "rescue from economic and social independence" by a man? What of those

who instead choose to pursue, and maybe even find, happiness via other paths? For queer people, a presumed-heterosexual woman's discomfort with or even repulsion from men or heterosexual dating can resonate not as a problem that needs to be solved by the right man, or even as yet another glimpse into a heteropessimistic worldview that is nonetheless compatible with heterosexuality. Instead, queer-identifying viewers may recognize the early stirrings of the realization that one might be happier outside of those heteronormative constraints. While the inevitable "happy ending" may bring comfort to those readers and viewers who, in Radway's words, "accept [heteronormative] patriarchy as given, as the natural organization of sex and gender,"²⁴ it's a different story for those whose response to their own real-life desperation is to move in a less normative direction.

The beginning of a Christmas movie about me, for example, might not differ significantly from the standard formula: An unhappily married woman feels something is missing despite everything looking perfect on the surface, and must do some soul searching to figure out what that thing is. Only after my initial, still-formulaic characterization as a woman whose romantic encounters with men have failed her would my path diverge from that of a conventional Christmas movie heroine—who, in my case, would likely have remembered why she fell in love with her husband in the first place and ended the movie pregnant at a vow renewal ceremony—when I realized my dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships could be attributed to the fact that I was gay. Though working out how to reconfigure my life in alignment with that realization was by no means a straightforward process, in reality, I encountered only mundane societal pressures pushing me back towards heteronormativity along the way. Christmas movie heroines, vulnerable as they are to supernatural intervention, aren't so lucky.

²⁴ Radway, 10.

Christmas Magic can take many forms, ranging from a literal spell or curse that only takes effect on or around Christmas, as in *A Very Nutty Christmas* or *The Spirit of Christmas*,²⁵ to a seasonally timed loosening of social constraints as in *Girlfriends of Christmas Past*, in which Livvy forgives her cheating ex-boyfriend because: “It’s Christmas. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t?”²⁶ Sometimes, Christmas Magic is simply the understanding that December is a charmed time, during which love is possible in ways that it isn’t during the rest of the year, a reason to reassure unlucky-in-love heroines that there’s no better time to find “the one.” Even when Christmas Magic isn’t explicitly named, that there is something special about the Christmas season is always, always implied to be the force behind the heroine’s eventual successful love match. And whether it’s a literal spell, a mood, or just a generic implication by proximity, the magic of Christmas always seems to emerge exactly when the heroine is about to give up on (heterosexual) love entirely.

The idea of a special time of year during which love is possible may seem uplifting on its face, but Christmas Magic doesn’t make (heterosexual) love *more* possible for Christmas movie heroines; it makes (heterosexual) love possible *at all*. Assigning special romantic powers to Christmas is, then, a fundamentally heteropessimistic conceit, especially in light of the extent of our heroines’ discontent and alienation with the world of men, dating, and marriage as each movie opens. It casts a dire sheen over the other eleven months and change that make up the vast majority of the year: For these unlucky women, their romantic woes can only be solved once a year, at Christmas, when magic is in the air. Or, to put it another way, they need the intervention of magic to be able to find romantic happiness with a man—and Christmas Magic always

²⁵ See also *12 Dates of Christmas* (2011), *Back to Christmas* (2014), *Angel of Christmas* (2015), *Wish Upon a Christmas* (2015), *How Sarah Got Her Wings* (2015), *Christmas Perfection* (2018), *Ghosting: The Spirit of Christmas* (2019), *A Christmas Wish* (2019), *Magical Christmas Shoes* (2019), etc.

²⁶ See also *Holiday in Handcuffs*, *Hitched for the Holidays* (2012), *Love at the Christmas Table* (2012), *The Rooftop Christmas Tree* (2016), *Christmas Wedding Planner* (2017), etc.

appears just in time to stop our heroines from noticing that their characterization fits just as well in a story of queer self-discovery as in one of stifling conventionality.

Outside of Christmas movies, of course, there is at least one word that is commonly used for women who, without magical intervention, are incapable of being romantically happy with a man. And occasionally, Christmas movies even make explicit the link between a heroine's lack of success with men and the possibility of queerness—in both *Holiday in Handcuffs* and *Holiday Engagement* (2011), for example, the protagonists express concern that after being dateless for so many holidays, their mothers are starting to think they might be lesbians. In the overwhelming majority of cases, though, the Christmas movie heroine's queerness remains firmly in the eye of the beholder. And when the beholder does perceive queerness, or the possibility of it, Christmas Magic loses its benevolence and good cheer, becoming something far more sinister, something that resists uncomplicated categorization into the romance genre at all.



VI: You Better Watch Out

Second Chance Christmas (2017)

When Caroline (Katrina Begin) and Jack (Tilky Jones) met, romance was in the air: It was the first party Caroline had ever planned, and Jack wooed her with a trail of messages written on balloons. Years later, as Christmas approaches, Caroline has allowed frustration with Jack's shortcomings to make her forget why she fell in love with him in the first place. Knowing she has no chance of getting Jack to agree to sign divorce papers, she tricks him into it, then promptly gets hit by a truck on her way to file them. She wakes up with no memory of Jack, her job, family, or friends, and Jack takes the opportunity to conspire with Caroline's parents and friends to keep

both their marital woes and Caroline's entire career a secret from her. Caroline, in turns out, was too ambitious pre-amnesia—one memorable scene shows her mother hiding her childhood bedroom from her because it contains a number of trophies hanging alongside a sign reading "Success Is Avoiding Failures"—but now, the memory-free Caroline rediscovers her love of baking, cleaning the house, and playing video games with Jack. Though Jack and his co-conspirators eventually get busted, Caroline has already fallen back in love with him. She apologizes for prioritizing her career over her husband, and calls off her pre-amnesia divorce plans just as her memories are serendipitously restored, though they don't change her mind.

It was months into my ongoing obsession with made-for-TV Christmas movies that I found myself rooting against Christmas Magic. Refracted through my vantage point as a queer person, my sympathy for the archetypal Christmas movie heroine had taken on a shape that felt at odds with the genre's ostensibly comforting, inoffensive mood. Rather than a series of women happily falling into the arms of their Princes Charming, I saw them repeatedly encountering a force that steered them away from the natural process of self-discovery, a process that may well have tipped them past mere heteropessimism and into what Seresin calls the abandonment of heterosexuality. In the Christmas movie I couldn't help imagining for myself, I would have regarded Christmas Magic as a supernatural force trying to drag me back to heterosexuality—a hostile force. Coupled with the staying power of Westengard's exposed-underbelly imagery, this revelation led me to look across genre borders for the answer to why and how I took so much pleasure in Christmas movies.

Thomas Fahy opens the introduction to his *Philosophy of Horror* anthology with a concise description of the experience that the horror genre promises:

the anticipation of terror, the mixture of fear and exhilaration as events unfold, the opportunity to confront the unpredictable and dangerous, the promise of relative safety (both in the context of a darkened theater and through a narrative structure that lasts for a finite amount of time and/or number of pages), and the feeling of relief and regained control when it's over. ... *We have confronted the threat and survived.* These feelings of anxiety, fear, relief, and mastery are certainly an integral part of the pleasure that people derive from the genre.²⁷

There are aspects of watching horror that are, then, necessarily unpleasant—but that unpleasantness factors into the overall pleasure of the experience; in fact, the pleasure relies on it. And though a lifelong combination of being squeamish and easily scared has, by and large, kept me away from all but the campiest horror movies, my simultaneous revulsion from and attraction to Christmas movies had begun to resemble nothing so much as the dark thrill described by horror aficionados and scholars as the result of their preferred genre. Christmas Magic, for all its amorphous properties and insistent cheerfulness, had to me become a movie monster that successfully kept a seemingly infinite supply of women in line, its body count growing more impressive with each “happy ending” under its belt.

Since at least the introduction of the 1934 Hays Code in the United States, queer people have always consumed film and TV differently, particularly when it takes the moralizing, antagonistic approach to deviance from societal norms that the Code compelled.²⁸ Horror films in particular have been widely theorized as using both literal and figurative monstrosity to represent queer people metaphorically as malevolent forces whose destruction allows society to return

²⁷ Thomas Richard Fahy, ed. *The Philosophy of Horror*. Paperback edition. The Philosophy of Popular Culture. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012, 1-2. My emphasis.

²⁸ See, among others, Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

safely to normal, an ingenious way of simultaneously playing to the demands of the Code while also laying a fertile foundation of subtext for in-the-know viewers.²⁹ As such, horror is a standout example of a genre that offers starkly different interpretation tracks to its queer and non-queer viewers.³⁰ Because queerness in horror movies has historically been deployed in the form of monsters or monstrous forces, queer viewers have found themselves identifying with unexpected characters and enjoying the viewing experience in unconventional ways, often feeling sympathetic less with the protagonist and more with the monster whose destruction has already been generically foretold by its inclusion.³¹ Film scholar Harry Benshoff points specifically to how heterosexual romance figures into this in his 1997 book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. According to Benshoff, “Since the demands of the classical Hollywood narrative system usually insist on a heteronormative romance within the stories they construct, the monster is traditionally figured as a force that attempts to block that romance.”³² Inversely, as a movie monster, Christmas Magic is a force that blocks a heroine’s self-actualization as a non-normative subject and keeps her tied to the same heteronormative romance that a traditional movie monster would seek to block—in a horror movie, the non-normative self-actualization might in fact be anthropomorphized as the monster because of its potential to interfere with heteronormativity.

My experience of made-for-TV Christmas movies, then, is a normative, even non-queer response *to horror* as Benshoff describes it, in that I sympathize with the victim rather than the

²⁹ See: Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan-- and Beyond*. Expanded and rev. Ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Inside Popular Film. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

³⁰ Benshoff’s list of ways “the experience of a horror film or monster movie [is] gay, lesbian, or queer” is worth describing here in full. According to him, there are four ways for a viewing experience to be queer: when the film contains “identifiably” queer characters; when the film is written, produced, directed, acted, etc. by a queer person; when queerness is expressed through “subtextual or connotative avenues”; and when the spectator is or “might be considered” queer. See Benshoff, 13-16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

monster. However, responding to Christmas movies as if they are horror is in itself a non-normative, queer response, and though queer viewers may latch onto the faint ghosts of possible queerness in romance heroines, *Christmas Magic* was never intended to be monstrous; it is, rather, instrumental to the exact restoration of the status quo that characterizes “happy” endings in both the romance and horror genres. It seems that no matter how creatively you spin it, heteronormativity-monsters win in the end, while queerness-monsters rarely do.³³ To a normative viewer, both of these resolutions are “happy endings.” To a queer viewer, potentially neither are. The happy ending (potentially, hopefully) lies offscreen, when a queer viewer can breathe that post-horror sigh of relief that they aren’t a Christmas movie heroine, that the only monstrous forces standing between them and being comfortably queer are altogether human.



VII: Make the Yuletide Gay

Christmas Wedding Planner (2017)

Aspiring wedding planner Kelsey Wilson (Jocelyn Hudon) is planning her first wedding, which just happens to belong to her cousin Emily (Rebecca Dalton), who is getting married over Christmas. When Kelsey sees Emily’s ex-boyfriend, Connor (Stephen Huszar) loitering at the engagement party only a few days in advance of the wedding itself—Christmas trees already festooning the palatial manor of Kelsey’s Aunt Olivia (Kelly Rutherford)—she panics, but it turns out he isn’t trying to come between Emily and the groom out of his own romantic interests; instead, Connor has been hired as a private investigator to find dirt on the groom, Todd (Eric Hicks) and ruin the wedding. At first Kelsey is outraged, but then she catches Todd flirting with

³³ Wood argues that the more subversive horror films are the ones in which the ending is not particularly “happy” or even conclusive. See Wood, 107.

another woman (or so she thinks), so she teams up with Connor to spend three days trailing him. A montage full of stakeout hijinks hints that Kelsey and Connor have formed a deep bond during their time spying on Todd, which is confirmed when Kelsey confides in him that the person she has been texting with updates throughout the whole movie is actually her dead mother, whose phone bill she still pays. Twists and turns follow, including one interlude during which Kelsey temporarily rejects Connor because of her certainty that he was at one time paid a large sum of money to break up with Emily, as well as the revelation that Connor co-owns a restaurant with a chef played by Joey Fatone. As the movie seems to be wrapping up, Connor interrupts Emily's wedding to announce that Todd got another woman pregnant, but all is not lost: In the immediate aftermath, pews still warm from the butts of Emily's guests, Kelsey and Connor decide to get married in Emily and Todd's place. As the credits roll, Kelsey's voiceover reassures her late mother that she is making the responsible choice: "There are times in our lives when we simply must take control. Not give in to silly ideas, or romantic notions that love conquers all. We have to be grown-ups."³⁴ The jury is still out on how marrying a man she met less than a week ago accomplishes that.

There are certain occupational hazards to being a queer person obsessed with straight Christmas romcoms, and they have only increased since the first few gay Christmas romcoms came straggling out of the gate. When the same friends and family to whom I've consistently recommended movies for being "so bad it's good" ask me expectantly what I think of *Happiest Season*, for example, it's hard to explain that the draw of disastrous heterosexuality is a unique pleasure that can't be replicated by even the most similarly disastrous homosexuality—or, rather, that overtly gay characters simply can't be as disastrous as straight characters can, regardless of

³⁴ Justin G. Dyck. *Christmas Wedding Planner*, 2017.

how poorly written and over-the-top they may be. Even the worst Christmas movie centering gay romance, no matter how nonsensical its plot twists and empty its prop coffee cups, is on some basic level intentionally engaging with the question of possibilities beyond heterosexuality, and not just for its throwaway comic relief characters. A gay Christmas movie may minoritize queerness to the point that only two gay characters seem to exist in its entire world, but it has still managed to wrest Christmas Magic away from its usual job of stepping in to stop women from questioning heteronormativity, instead reappropriating it for the purpose of bringing together the movie's two gay people in a bland approximation of heterosexual coupling that is, nevertheless, not heterosexual. Without the chillingly conflicted dynamics that can only be conjured by the knowledge that, no matter how much she complains, a protagonist will end up "happily" and heterosexually married, Christmas Magic has lost its villainous power. Gay Christmas movies, unless they find a new way to inspire terror in their queer viewers without resorting to overt homophobia,³⁵ run the risk of simply putting them to sleep.³⁶

But what if, in classic horror style, heterosexual Christmas movies allowed for the occasional straggler, a queer someone who only just manages to dodge the clutches of Christmas Magic and survive its reign of terror? That, to me, is a much more intriguing possibility than a

³⁵ *Happiest Season*, a detailed discussion of which is again outside the scope of this paper, certainly inspired terror in many of its queer viewers, though this particular queer viewer would blame that *precisely* on overt homophobia. Perhaps by virtue of largely excluding queer people from their stories (at least on the surface), Christmas movies that center heterosexual romance may erase, elide, and minimize queerness, but almost never show the kind of casual homophobia on display both among *Happiest Season*'s characters, and in its narrative structure.

³⁶ Of course, there are queer commentators who favor this outcome; see Drew Goins, "The First Gay Hallmark Movie Will Be so Boring. That's Great News." *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2019, sec. Opinion. For more on the important political role "boring" gay TV characters play in the advancement of culturally assimilationist goals, see Ron Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties." *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 2006): 184–215. NB Becker unfortunately cites conservative commentator David Brooks's widely discredited 2000 book *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, but still makes good points about the social purpose of milquetoast homosexuality on television.

parallel stream of cookie-cutter gay Christmas romcoms that are barely distinguishable from their straight counterparts—and there is precedent for it, if you know where to look.

As *Girlfriends of Christmas Past* wraps up, its secondary heroines Murphy and Zoe sit close together on a kitchen counter, sipping wintry drinks and huddling under knit blankets while they puzzle over what they've learned since beginning their misadventures together. Feet swinging from her perch on the kitchen counter, Zoe laments to Murphy, "I don't know. Maybe Carter's right." It's a statement that starts solidly in line with the message carried through the movie's A-plot, but Zoe and Murphy go beyond Livvy's blanket acceptance of Carter's judgment:

Murphy: So, what? We should date down? Ew.

Zoe: No. No. We should date... up. You know, like raise our standards.

Murphy: How? In a world where there aren't any.

Zoe: Maybe that's the problem. Maybe if we... stopped settling for less and started expecting more... others would follow suit. You think?

Murphy: You're really smart.³⁷

Though Zoe and Murphy are making plans to hold their future potential partners to higher standards—contextually, to hold them to the standards of not lying, cheating, or objectifying—they don't seem to have a solution for the problem of living "in a world where there aren't any." The conversation feels skeletal, incomplete, like there's an essential piece that is still missing, something that would explain how the two women are going to find romantic partnership without falling victim to what they themselves have described as the world of men's terminally low standards. And as Zoe sighs and leans her head on Murphy's shoulder before the scene changes, the subtext is undeniable: Zoe and Murphy, whose relationship has developed in

³⁷ *Girlfriends of Christmas Past*.

tandem with Livvy and Carter's throughout *Girlfriends of Christmas Past*, may be able to find their best of both worlds—romance plus high standards—with each other.

Predictably, *Girlfriends of Christmas Past* stops short of allowing Zoe and Murphy the unambiguously kiss-sealed ending reserved for its heterosexual primary protagonists, but it is unusual and almost unique³⁸ in that it allows its two secondary heroines to finish out the movie unattached to men altogether, and even further encourages speculation about the ambiguous couple by strategically cutting them out of the shot at the moment the clock strikes midnight and all the straight couples on screen go in for the kiss. *Girlfriends* still maintains the uneasy balance, typical of the genre, between a normatively heteropessimistic worldview and the tantalizing possibility of queerness held just out of reach, accessible only to viewers who seek it or can't help seeing it. But it also plays with giving its secondary heroines, at least, the chance for their *truly queer* happy ending—not simply the gender-swapped version of a heterosexual happy ending—to unfurl naturally, an ending in which their late-night kitchen conversation is no longer skeletal, but rather permitted to reach its logical conclusion: Maybe Zoe and Murphy don't like men because... they don't like men. Queer viewers can breathe a sigh of relief, for once, before the credits start to run. And the monstrous Christmas Magic, its hands full convincing Livvy that she will be happy with Carter if only she lowers her expectations, (he is a man after all), leaves them to it.



³⁸ The complex and wonderful *Ghosting: The Spirit of Christmas* (not to be confused with the vastly inferior *The Spirit of Christmas*) grants its openly lesbian secondary protagonist a fully formed romantic arc; it is also the only Christmas movie among all 140 I've watched that I would recommend without reservations or caveats, though not specifically for that reason. However, *Ghosting* does not center heterosexual romance, which is why I've resisted delving into it here. Please look forward to me doing so at a later date.

Appendix

Christmas Movie Viewing List

<i>Crazy for Christmas</i>	2005
<i>His & Her Christmas</i>	2005
<i>Holiday in Handcuffs</i>	2007
<i>A Heartland Christmas</i>	2010
<i>Christmas Cupid</i>	2010
<i>12 Dates of Christmas</i>	2011
<i>A Christmas Kiss</i>	2011
<i>A Princess for Christmas</i>	2011
<i>Dear Santa</i>	2011
<i>Holiday Engagement</i>	2011
<i>The Christmas Lodge</i>	2011
<i>The Heart of Christmas</i>	2011
<i>Christmas Crush</i>	2012
<i>Hitched for the Holidays</i>	2012
<i>Holly's Holiday</i>	2012
<i>Love at the Christmas Table</i>	2012
<i>The March Sisters at Christmas</i>	2012
<i>Christmas Belle</i>	2013
<i>Holiday Road Trip</i>	2013
<i>My Santa</i>	2013
<i>The Christmas Spirit</i>	2013
<i>Twelve Trees of Christmas</i>	2013
<i>Window Wonderland</i>	2013

<u><i>A Christmas Kiss II</i></u>	2014
<u><i>Back to Christmas</i></u>	2014
<u><i>Best Christmas Party Ever</i></u>	2014
<u><i>Merry Ex Mas</i></u>	2014
<u><i>Naughty & Nice</i></u>	2014
<u><i>The Christmas Parade</i></u>	2014
<u><i>A Dogwalker's Christmas Tale</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Angel of Christmas</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Christmas in the Smokies</i></u>	2015
<u><i>How Sarah Got Her Wings</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Ice Sculpture Christmas</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Merry Kissmas</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Merry Matrimony</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Rodeo & Juliet</i></u>	2015
<u><i>The Spirit of Christmas</i></u>	2015
<u><i>Wish Upon A Christmas</i></u>	2015
<u><i>A Christmas in Vermont</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Christmas to Remember</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Christmas Wedding Date</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Cinderella Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Husband for Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Puppy for Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>Broadcasting Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>Finding Father Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>Girlfriends of Christmas Past</i></u>	2016
<u><i>Married by Christmas</i></u>	2016
<u><i>A Christmas Prince</i></u>	2017

<u><i>A Rose for Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>A Royal Christmas Ball</i></u>	2017
<u><i>A Very Country Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Christmas Festival of Ice</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Christmas in Mississippi</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Christmas in the Heartland</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Christmas Inheritance</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Christmas Wedding Planner</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Engaging Father Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Falling for Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Four Christmases and a Wedding</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Second Chance Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>Snowmance</i></u>	2017
<u><i>The Christmas Calendar</i></u>	2017
<u><i>The Rooftop Christmas Tree</i></u>	2017
<u><i>The Spruces and the Pines</i></u>	2017
<u><i>The Trouble With Mistletoe</i></u>	2017
<u><i>You Can't Fight Christmas</i></u>	2017
<u><i>A Christmas in Royal Fashion</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Christmas in Tennessee</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Christmas Prince: The Royal Wedding</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Christmas Switch</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Majestic Christmas</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Midnight Kiss</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Snow White Christmas</i></u>	2018
<u><i>A Very Nutty Christmas</i></u>	2018
<u><i>Christmas Around the Corner</i></u>	2018
<u><i>Christmas Catch</i></u>	2018
<u><i>Christmas Contract</i></u>	2018

<i>Christmas Cupid's Arrow</i>	2018
<i>Christmas Pen Pals</i>	2018
<i>Christmas Perfection</i>	2018
<i>Christmas With a View</i>	2018
<i>Every Day Is Christmas</i>	2018
<i>Every Other Holiday</i>	2018
<i>Hometown Holiday</i>	2018
<i>Life-Size 2</i>	2018
<i>Love for Christmas</i>	2018
<i>Marrying Father Christmas</i>	2018
<i>No Sleep 'Til Christmas</i>	2018
<i>Santa's Boots</i>	2018
<i>The Holiday Calendar</i>	2018
<i>The Princess Switch</i>	2018
<i>The Truth About Christmas</i>	2018
<i>A Christmas Movie Christmas</i>	2019
<i>A Christmas Prince: The Royal Baby</i>	2019
<i>A Christmas Princess</i>	2019
<i>A Christmas Recipe for Romance</i>	2019
<i>A Christmas Wish</i>	2019
<i>A Cinderella Story: Christmas Wish</i>	2019
<i>A Date By Christmas Eve</i>	2019
<i>A Holiday Boyfriend</i>	2019
<i>A Storybook Christmas</i>	2019
<i>A Sweet Christmas Romance</i>	2019
<i>Always and Forever Christmas</i>	2019
<i>Christmas 9 to 5</i>	2019
<i>Christmas A La Mode</i>	2019
<i>Christmas Camp</i>	2019

<u>Christmas Crush</u>	2019
<u>Christmas Cupcakes</u>	2019
<u>Christmas Hotel</u>	2019
<u>Christmas on Holly Lane</u>	2019
<u>Christmas on the Range</u>	2019
<u>Christmas Reservations</u>	2019
<u>Ghosting: The Spirit of Christmas</u>	2019
<u>Grounded for Christmas</u>	2019
<u>Holiday in the Wild</u>	2019
<u>Holly Star</u>	2019
<u>Let It Snow</u>	2019
<u>Love on the Slopes</u>	2019
<u>No Time Like Christmas</u>	2019
<u>Random Acts of Christmas</u>	2019
<u>Same Time, Next Christmas</u>	2019
<u>SnowComing</u>	2019
<u>Staging Christmas</u>	2019
<u>Sweet Mountain Christmas</u>	2019
<u>The Christmas Cabin</u>	2019
<u>The Knight Before Christmas</u>	2019
<u>The Magical Christmas Shoes</u>	2019
<u>Twinkle All the Way</u>	2019
<u>A California Christmas</u>	2020
<u>A New York Christmas Wedding</u>	2020
<u>A Winter Princess</u>	2020
<u>Christmas Unwrapped</u>	2020
<u>Dashing In December</u>	2020
<u>Happiest Season</u>	2020
<u>Holidate</u>	2020

<u><i>The Christmas Edition</i></u>	2020
<u><i>The Christmas Setup</i></u>	2020
<u><i>The Princess Switch: Switched Again</i></u>	2020

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