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The LGBT Subtext of *Surf's Up*: Progressive Understanding in Children's Animation

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Abstract

Studying the Sony Animation Studios film, *Surf's Up* (2007), through a critical queer theory lens reveals that this movie has progressive LGBTQ subtext. This paper analyzes multiple characters, exploring how they challenge gender norms in ways that defy heteropatriarchy. Also analyzed are the settings in the movie and how they represent the characters transition from a homophobic community and mindset into an environment of acceptance. This analysis suggests that the LGBTQ community can interpret *Surf's Up* as a positive example of queer coded characters achieving their dreams and escaping a degrading homophobic community. *Surf's Up* is one of the earlier examples of an animated children's movie depicting queer coded characters making it a progressive film for its time.

Keywords: Heteropatriarchy, gender, queer coded, LGBT, progressive

Sony Animation Studios produced their family friendly, mockumentary style cartoon, *Surf's Up* (Directed by Buck, Brannon, in 2007) following Cody Maverick, a penguin surfer in his hometown of Shiverpool, Antarctica. *Surf's Up* may seem to be a charming movie about surfing penguins. However, a close analysis of this movie will reveal its progressive LGBTQ subtext.

This movie's LGBTQ subtext is subtle. It reveals itself through what queer theorists call "queer coding." The word "queer" is often used as an umbrella term for members of the LGBTQ community. "Queer coding" is the practice of including queer identifying factors while not explicitly noting a character's sexuality. For example, the character of Chicken Joe is given typically feminine interests and appearances despite presenting as CIS male. These signs are often able to be clearly identified by members of the LGBTQ community, especially when characters are purposely queer coded, but a heterosexual audience will generally not recognize such coding right away.

Chicken Joe plays an important role, not only as the first character to befriend the main protagonist, Cody, but also in terms of queer coding. Chicken Joe and Cody instantly bond because they are the only ones in their respective towns who surf. Since this is the first piece of information viewers learn about Joe, the film is portraying him as an "other" within his community. The film also identifies Cody as "other," which this paper explores below. Further queer coding of Chicken Joe is shown through Joe's outward appearance. Shots of the activities on the island show female penguins getting heart tattoos on their rear ends, which Joe quickly imitates. Since heterosexual culture generally associates "tramp stamps" and feminine tattoos with the sexualization of women, Chicken Joe is blurring gender norms.

Blurring of gender norms is a common method of queer coding. It continues when Joe dons a grass skirt and coconut bra, something women are stereotypically seen wearing in tropical environments. In heterosexual culture, this can be interpreted as a sign of homosexuality since men who dress like women are associated with drag queens or cross dressers. To defy gender norms and heterosexual stereotypes becomes indistinguishable from defying the heteropatriarchy. As one critical theorist states "The word heteropatriarchy draws our attention to the fact that patriarchy, because it is biased in favor of traditional gender roles, is always biased in favor of heterosexuality" (Tyson 305).

Although the main character, Cody Maverick, does not defy heteropatriarchy as directly as Chicken Joe, his relationship with Joe and his relationship to being "othered" in Shiverpool are both examples of queer coding. Cody is immediately shown to be the "other" within his community since he is the only one in Shiverpool who surfs. Moreover, being othered creates an inner conflict in Cody, leading him to believe that he must go to Pen Gu Island (surf capital of the world.) In Cody's eyes, a surfing trophy would represent an acceptance into Shiverpool, which has shunned him his whole life for his interest in the waves. As one introductory textbook on LGBTQ literary theory explains,

In a heterosexist culture such as the one we inhabit in the early decades of the twenty-first century in America, gay sensibility includes an awareness of being different, at least in certain ways, from the members of the mainstream, dominant culture, and the complex feelings that result from an implicit, ongoing social oppression. (Tyson 315)

Like many LGBT individuals, Cody is hyper aware of his difference from others in Shiverpool. It is important to him that his community accepts him for who he is, even though he already

accepts himself. This is a complicated inner conflict, since Cody does not want to be “othered” within his community but he also has no interest in joining Shiverpool’s dominant and mainstream culture. He explains how hard the othering is on not just him but on his mother, saying, “Everyone else is looking at her like ‘Cody’s just a bum, Cody’s this Cody’s that Cody’s this.’ Cody’s me bro, let me be me.” (0:07:23) His need for outward validation of his interests and hope that being a “winner” will make his community consider him normal is analogous with internalized homophobia.

Cody and Joe’s relationship could indicate queer coding as well. According to LGBTQ theory, homosocial bonding is “the depiction of strong emotional ties between same-sex characters” (Tyson 325). In a heterosexual culture emotional bonds between two men are often devalued by homophobic anxiety. When Cody is off in the jungle with his surf hero Big Z, Joe goes off into the woods to try and find him. This bond is shown to be reciprocated by Cody at the end of the movie when Cody purposely gives up his trophy in order to let Joe win. Since the trophy is Cody’s attempt to become accepted into Shiverpool, his decision to choose Joe over Shiverpool shows the strength of their bond. The bonds between the characters of *Surf’s Up* are a primary example of the LGBT subtext within the movie.

A more complicated LGBTQ subtext occurs in the portrayal of Tank Evans, the movie’s villain. Tank exhibits classic homophobia within the movie, attacking both Cody and Chicken Joe for aspects of their character that are queer coded. Tank is depicted as extremely masculine, taking the trope of the overly masculine sports player, in this case surfer, and making a mockery of it. The most prominent example occurs when Tank shows the film crew that is documenting their experience “his ladies.” His ladies are not actual women, but are his trophies he keeps in a decorated back room. He is a strong example of toxic masculinity, and by making a mockery of the relationship between sports and masculinity, *Surf’s Up* is directly combating the patriarchy and therefore the heteropatriarchy.

By queer coding the heroes of the film, *Surf’s Up* shows LGBTQ characters in a positive light. Likewise, creating a homophobic villain encourages viewers understand Tank’s homophobic actions in a negative way. Although Cody and Joe do not give in to homophobic views, Tank Evans does make snide homophobic remarks about the two friends. For example, when Cody and Tank have their first altercation over Tank vandalizing a Big Z memorial, Joe steps in and tries to stop the violence. Tank immediately throws Joe into the sand where his grass skirt exposes his body, saying “keep your girlfriend out of this!” (0:18:55) Tank represents the homophobic society that judges men harshly for having open emotional relationships with each other whether they are platonic or romantic.

Another way in which *Surf’s Up* reveals its LGBTQ subtext is through its portrayal of Cody’s homophobic community. The only one in Shiverpool who surfs, Cody is immediately shown to the audience as an outcast teenager who is looked down upon by other residents of the town. The elders of the town are interviewed by the film crew talking about the town’s main industry: fish sorting. It is implied that this is a common job within the community, and the penguins being interviewed are extremely proud of their hard work sorting through the different fish piles. Cody himself works at the fish pile as well, but it is primarily to pacify his mother. Cody’s mother is another member of the community who exhibits disdain and disapproval at Cody’s lifestyle. Enduring constant insults and ridicule from close family members such as his brother Glen and his mother, the town of Shiverpool makes it very clear that they do not support Cody.

Through an LGBT lens, Shiverpool's inability to accept him shows the homophobic nature of their attitudes. Cody's dedicated interest in surfing is thus literally depicted as queer, in the sense of being unusual. Moreover, the fact that Cody maintains passionate interest in something that makes him something of an outcast in the community establishes the analogy of queer individuals whose interests are not accepted within heteropatriarchal communities.

The climate and look of Shiverpool, Antarctica are also shown to be nearly the exact opposite of tropical Pen Gu Island, the surf capital of the world in *Surf's Up*. In Shiverpool, the weather is shown to be cold and snowy even in the middle of the summer, when penguins all huddle together. Other aspects of the community also exist in stark contrast. Whereas most characters on Pen Gu Island are relaxed and or active, in Shiverpool, the huddled penguins do not move far from their spots on the ice unless they must. Cody's home is made of ice, as is every makeshift surfboard he uses on the water. The cold not only represents the less than friendly environment the residents of Shiverpool provide, but also is able to portray the difference between Cody's old community and his newfound one on Pen Gu Island. Where Shiverpool is harsh and biting cold, Pen Gu is warm, sunny, and welcoming. From the moment Cody gets on board the whale taking him to Pen Gu Island, he is surrounded by others who share his passion. The homophobic nature of Shiverpool is shown through nature itself, just as Pen Gu shows Cody's transition into a world that accepts him for who he is and what he likes.

Surf's Up also supports its progressive LGBT agenda by creating likable main characters and heroes comfortable in their passions and choices. Cody never doubts his dedication to surfing, nor Chicken Joe. In contrast, Tank Evans, a homophobic villain, goes from being publicly revered by the other surfers to being shunned and left without a trophy. Furthermore, Tank does not score any points in the competition, and is later shown being beat up by the baby penguins he had terrorized earlier on in the film.

The concluding scenes of the film show the protagonists on a private beach surfing and smiling during a beautiful sunset. It is important to note that viewers do not see Cody return to Shiverpool, emphasizing the importance of his new environment on Pen Gu Island. Presumably, the community in Shiverpool no longer matters to Cody because he has a new accepting community of friends who understand his passions and support him. For LGBTQ viewers, this sends an important message about leaving negative and potentially toxic environments for safer and more supportive communities. Members of the LGBT Community can view and interpret *Surf's Up* as a positive example of queer coded characters achieving their dreams and escaping a degrading homophobic community.

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