ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES: MASCULINITY, HEGEMONY, AND IDENTIFICATION WITH THE ABJECT IN DALLAS BUYERS CLUB

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DEDICATION

To anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.
“Sorry lady, but I prefer to die with my boots on” – Ron Woodroof, *Dallas Buyers Club*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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This thesis explores the visual aspects of and the discourse surrounding *Dallas Buyers Club* to understand the function of the film. The narrative focuses on Ron Woodroof, who is diagnosed with HIV in 1985. Ron identifies as a heterosexual man and he is constructed with hegemonic masculine qualities from the very beginning of the film. The release of the film involved *kairos*, as the timing of film is relevant to consider in terms of current social and political perspectives on gender, identity, and sexuality. The disease presents a threat to his masculinity, which he is forced to renegotiate as a result. In this way, Ron is presented with a crisis of masculinity. This thesis focuses on the documentary style that is utilized in the film, which creates an illusion of reality and authenticity. Due to this style of film, the narrative calls for more emotional involvement and identification from the audience. The main characters, which the audience is asked to identify with, represent the abject through their visibly diseased bodies; they are cast as the “other” and remind the viewer of inevitable death. Typically, the abject functions to allow the rest of the healthy audience to feel superior while marginalizing particular groups of people. Through Ron’s identity crisis, he comes to represent abject masculinity because the disease threatens his hegemonic positionality. The audience is then asked to identify with the abject through the pseudo-documentary style of the film. This thesis will focus on the filming techniques to analyze the function of identification through representations of the abject in *Dallas Buyers Club*. 
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CRISIS AND STIGMA OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

In the United States during the 1980s, AIDS was a national crisis. There was no cure and little information was known about transmission or treatment. The cultural and political temperature of the 1980s defined HIV/AIDS, and therefore the people inflicted with it became culturally and politically defined as well. It was assumed by the general public that gay men, as the most prominent victims of the disease, were the only people who could contract it (Herek & Capitanio, 1999). In fact, health care professionals originally labeled AIDS as the “gay related immune deficiency,” or GRID (Herek & Capitanio, 1999, p. 1130). This was due to the large groups of gay men who were diagnosed with the disease in metropolitan areas around the nation. With that, a stigma became attached to the disease, as well as to the gay community due to the already negative attitudes towards this group of people. This stigma delayed social action and caused hardships for those living with the illness (Herek, Capitanio, & Widaman, 2002). HIV/AIDS patients were blamed for their situation, as unprotected sex and drug use are closely associated with the disease.

As research on HIV and AIDS has progressed, we have learned that the syndrome is not confined to one particular group of people and that there are specific ways of contracting it. This information has changed the perception and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ community. There is no doubt that people around this nation still harbor ill
feelings and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals; however, the general public’s perception has changed with the growing gay and lesbian rights movement (Gross, 2001). This shift is evident from the visibility of gay, lesbian, and transgendered characters in the media (Blake, 2012; Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003). Although there was a considerable amount of negative press surrounding the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, the high levels of attention given to the LGBTQ community certainly helped to accelerate the visibility of this segment of the population in mainstream media (Gross, 2001). This has since led to more visibility of LGBTQ characters in the media, which continues to contribute to the public’s ever-shifting perception of this segment of the population.

*Dallas Buyers Club* (Brennar, Winter, & Vallée, 2013) is one of the many recent films that portray a more contemporary representation of gender and sexuality. The film takes place in 1985 in Texas when little was known about the causes and treatments for HIV/AIDS. The film reflects the shift of public perceptions and political beliefs, while allowing for greater visibility of gay and transgender characters in mainstream media. The film chronicles the life of Ron Woodroof, an uber-masculine cowboy, throughout his battle with HIV and the threat it poses to his identity. Woodroof, who is played by Matthew McConaughey, struggles to accept the news of his diagnosis due to the stigma that situated HIV/AIDS as a “gay man’s disease.” Throughout the narrative, Ron renegotiates his identity as a heterosexual man with HIV because the disease jeopardizes his hegemonic masculinity and sexuality. Through its diverse and idiosyncratic characters, this film represents current sociocultural perspectives and anxieties concerning gender and sexuality. In this thesis, I will explore the rhetorical function of *Dallas Buyers Club*, the ways in which gender and
sexuality are constructed, and the theoretical, political, and social implications of these constructions.

**Thesis Intentions and Importance**

The contemporary timing of *Dallas Buyers Club*, along with its social status as a popular, award-winning film creates an interesting rhetorical situation to be studied. Due to the rhetorical significance of this film, this analysis will address the following research questions: What are the representations of masculinity in *Dallas Buyers Club*? How is gender and sexuality constructed and negotiated in *Dallas Buyers Club*? How can meaning be produced from the representations of gender in *Dallas Buyers Club* and what are the potential implications for these representations?

In recent decades, LGBTQ characters have been gaining more visibility in mainstream films and television shows, which is reflective of the shift in gender ideology that is also occurring in society (Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Shugart, 2003). There has been, and continues to be, a shift from the binary view of gender to the gender continuum, which is particularly evident through these media representations. *Dallas Buyers Club* serves as an example of the way this has occurred in contemporary media. The film also reflects society’s current neoliberal tendencies, as Ron constantly challenges authority and big government throughout the story. *Dallas Buyers Club* portrays the fluidity of identity and the changing perspective throughout one character’s experience. Exploring the concepts of gender, identity, and politics in *Dallas Buyers Club* will contribute to the greater conversations in the public sphere about the LGBTQ community, marginalized groups, and governmental policies, as well as to the ongoing discussion of gender representations in the media.
The immense popularity of *Dallas Buyers Club*, along with the filming techniques used, contribute, in part, to its social relevance. Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto, two of the main actors in the film, won the Academy Award for their roles, as best actor and best supporting actor, respectively. Their performances contributed to the excitement surrounding the film before its release. While considering the popularity of the film as part of its rhetorical power, we must also discuss the filming techniques. Director Jean-Marc Vallée chose to shoot the film in a documentary, realist style. Through this style, the audience is given the illusion of a documentary that accurately reflects reality. This style of film elicits identification from the audience in addition to an emotional connection. The documentary style of the film contributes to the understanding that the narrative is based on a series of true events of a real person’s life.

I argue *Dallas Buyers Club* functions to allow the audience to identify with representations of the abject through the documentary illusion, the visibility of the abject, and the construction of abject masculinity. The abject is made visible through the characters within the film. The abject is an ambiguous form of the “other” that threatens individuals’ stable subjectivities (Kristeva, 1982). It is often represented through forms of death and destruction; in this film, the abject becomes present through the visibly sick bodies of Ron and Rayon. The documentary style of the film calls for identification with the characters, as research suggests the more an audience perceives a rhetorical text to reflect reality, the more emotionally involved they will become (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2012). Through this film, we can gain a better understanding of particular aspects of communication. As views on gender and identity have shifted from the gender binary to a continuum, it has allowed for the prominence of more progressive beliefs on equality concerning sexuality and gender in the
public sphere. This thesis will analyze the function of identification and persuasion, constructions of identity, and the abject to contribute to and extend current knowledge on these theories.

This chapter will focus on *Dallas Buyers Club* as the rhetorical artifact under study and the discourse surrounding it by highlighting the social significance of the film, while discussing the work of other scholars concerning gender and identity. In the following section, I review the current literature on gender, identity, and media representations as a beginning discussion for analyzing *Dallas Buyers Club*. The review of literature will center on the gender continuum, media representations of gender, and hegemonic masculinity to better understand these concepts in relation to the film.

**Review of Literature: Understanding Gender, Identity, and Hegemony**

As perceptions of gender have begun to shift, identity has become a particular important facet of gender to consider. Traditionally, gender has been perceived as a binary or dichotomy, where a person is either masculine or feminine because of their biological sex as a man or woman. This perception has shifted in recent decades as scholars recognize that gender should be viewed as a continuum where there are multiple femininities and masculinities for any person to perform. In the next section, I discuss the gender binary and the gender continuum as differing views of sexuality and identity.

**The Gender Binary**

Gender has traditionally been viewed as a binary construct of biological sex (male or female), which is especially evident in media representations (Butler, 1999; Zayer, Sredl, Parementier, & Coleman, 2012). Traditional gender ideology sets men and women apart socially and biologically by assigning expected norms and behaviors to each sex (Butler,
People learn these norms and behaviors from societal institutions, which assign men to masculinity and women to femininity (Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009). This view of gender uses biological sex to categorize and socialize individuals based on the gender norms set by society. With each gender, there are associated traits, norms, and behaviors that cause each gender to exist in opposition to one another. The gender binary marks particular, different sets of norms for men and women, based on biological, psychological, and cultural ideals and expectations (Butler, 1999; Jensen, 2007). For example, women are socialized to be nurturing and community-oriented while men are taught to be dominating and independent (Knoblock-Westerwick & Hoplamazian, 2011). This binary approach locates identity in a cultural matrix and implies that “there are some identities that do not exist” (Butler, 1999, p. 24). The separation of the genders portrays the sexes as dichotomous and encourages people to adhere to their expected behaviors based solely on their biological sex.

The traditional, binary view of gender perpetuates hegemonic ideals in society. Hegemony is a form of cultural control and power by a dominant group in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hearn (2004) argues, “The notion of hegemony provides a way of talking about overarching ideologies at the level of everyday, taken-for-granted ideas” (p. 53). Gender norms function hegemonically because the public consents to them as we continually embody and teach these norms. Hegemonic ideals are embedded within society so much so that they are often taken-for-granted and disregarded. Hegemony has been tied to masculinity in recent decades as a way to justify the patriarchal hierarchy of society (Hearn, 2004). Schippers (2007) defines masculinity as “an identifiable set of practices that occur across space and over time and are taken up and enacted collectively by groups, communities
and societies” (p. 86). Masculinity can come in many different forms; however, traditional masculinity has been tied to the male body, which often allows hegemonic masculinity to subordinate men over women, as well as those men who exhibit marginalized identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This allows men who demonstrate masculinity to be defined hegemonically as the norm. This traditional view of masculinity contributes to the dominance hierarchy of gender that has become constraining and problematic as individuals continually consent to it.

Hegemonic masculinity locates certain men in positions of power and authority within society. According to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, “Men are structurally and interpersonally dominant in most spheres of life” (Hearn, 2004, p. 51). Scholars argue that there is no concept of hegemonic femininity and that all men can benefit from this system, “even though most men don’t have to be ‘on the front lines’” (Schippers, 2007, p. 87). This specific group adheres to the heteronormative script in terms of sexuality by policing and enforcing heterosexuality as the norm. The gender binary enforces the notion of hegemonic masculinity by setting men above women and perpetuating the patriarchal ideals within society (Kimmel, 1993). Those who do not fit into hegemonic masculine ideals are defined as “other” because they deviate from the norm. Hegemony maintains power not through force, but through continued consent (Gramsci, 1975). This allows gender order to remain stable and to appear natural, as the dominant group perpetuates consent to its prestige through hegemony. Consenting to the hegemonic gender binary allows the patriarchal society in which we live to persist. Hegemony allows men who exhibit traditionally masculine behaviors to maintain a dominant position as the normative gender. Individuals who do not fit in with hegemonic ideals are then subordinated and marginalized. As we passively consent
to the gender binary, it is important to problematize and question the binary and its influence on individual identity. Gender is therefore one of the organizing axes in society, along with race and class, which categorizes people in a hierarchy based on their biological sex (Kimmel, 1993).

**The Gender Continuum**

In recent decades, scholars have begun to discredit views of the gender binary, and instead argue that gender should be viewed on a continuum (Braithwaite, 2011; Butler, 1999). The binary view of gender defines people through inherent characteristics based on their sex, rather than their personal identity. Instead, gender is performative and either sex is capable of performing multiple masculinities and femininities (Braithwaite, 2011). The continuum view argues that gender is not natural, as society has taught in the past, but rather socially constructed. Gender identity is an important part of individual identity because of the way it is continually learned and modeled (Kimmel, 1993). Gender is not inherent from birth but instead is fluid and can change throughout people’s lifetime, as circumstances and people change.

In traditional conceptions of dominance, identity is thought to be fixed and stable. Instead, Shields (2008) argues that individuals have multiple identities, which intersect and overlap with one another. Intersectionality is defined as “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities” (Shields, 2008, p. 301). Gender is used to categorize individuals by their biological sex; however, most people fail to recognize the influence that a person’s multiple identities may have on one another. There are many other social identities that can be considered in addition to gender. Race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few, all contribute to individuals’ standpoint that influences identity. Intersectionality “reflects the
reality of lives” (Shield, 2008, p. 304), as there is no single identity category to describe any given individual. The intersectionality of identities therefore influences performances of gender, since it is unrealistic to discuss gender “without considering other dimensions of social structure/social identity” (Shields, 2008, p. 303). Along with political categories such as race and class, we can also consider the influence of biological factors on gender performance, such as wellness and illness. Individuals may find that their identity shifts, or slides, on the continuum based on certain characteristics they express at any given time. As individuals change and experience different aspects of life, they may also experience shifts in their multiple, personal identities. The social construction of gender can be used to begin to understand intersectionality, as gender continually contributes to the hierarchical society in which we live.

The perspective of the gender continuum offers gender identity as a fluid entity that can shift and change over time. van Zoonen (1992) refers to gender as a “work in progress, as the ongoing construction of identity which takes place in individual, social and cultural settings” (p. 181). From this perspective, the sexes can fluctuate between different genders and the associated characteristics of each. Zayer et al. (2012) refer to this concept as gender fluidity. In contemporary media, this conceptualization of gender has gained more visibility as representations in media perform differing gender behaviors, challenging the traditional ideals. Therefore, gender identity is fluid and ever-changing throughout individuals’ lifetimes. As understandings of gender identity shift within the public sphere, certain media representations are then capable of reflecting more flexible representations of gender and sexuality.
Gender Representations in the Media

The shift in academe toward the gender continuum has opened up space in popular media for a wider range of representations. Much of the power of the media can be attributed to recent societal and technological changes. The ability of the media to disseminate messages is not only easier, but much more widespread than it has ever been before (Gross, 2001). The media has the ability to entertain and educate while creating multiple interpretations for meaning (Winslow, 2010). Media present a distorted reality that is read by viewers as truthful and authentic (Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000). Representations in the media therefore reveal the “current social and economic milieu” (Winslow, 2010, p. 270).

Current trends in mainstream film and television reveal and reflect the current public perspectives on the LGBTQ community, as more gay and lesbian entertainment executives are being hired (Gross, 2001). The visibility of LGBTQ characters on screen is reflective of the LGBTQ people who work in the entertainment industry behind the screen.

The media has historically been criticized for a lack of visibility of gay and lesbian characters (Gross, 2001). In recent years, however, this segment of the population has been gaining more visibility, especially in mainstream television. In the early 1990’s, there was a resurgence of more gay protagonist characters on television than there had been in recent years (Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003). The Los Angeles Times disclosed information from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation report that stated for the 2012-2013 television season, there were a total of 701 LGBTQ characters on five major broadcast networks (Blake, 2012). The number of reoccurring LGBTQ characters increased from 2.9% to 4.4% in the 2012-2013 television season (Blake, 2012). It is clear from this data that the numbers of LGBTQ characters are continually growing in mainstream television. Dallas Buyers Club
presents LGBTQ characters, as well as differing representations of masculinity and femininity. Through the lens of visibility, I analyze the representations of gender and alternative lifestyles within *Dallas Buyers Club* in an attempt to understand the function of these representations.

**The Problem with Visibility**

Although there is increased visibility, there are still problematic themes among representations of LGBTQ people. This population is vulnerable to stereotyping, as LGBTQ characters are often portrayed in ways that will resonate with an audience that is presumed to be heterosexual. Scholars have argued that media representations are distorted; however, they often still appear as reality to consumers (Levina et al., 2000). It has also been suggested that the media is capable of influencing an audience’s perceptions of and attitudes towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (Gross, 2001; Levina et al., 2000; Shugart, 2003). These attitudes are reinforced and altered through stereotypical representations. For example, gay men in the media are often humorously portrayed as flamboyant and sexually aggressive (Levina et al., 2000). In the popular television show *Will & Grace*, the character Jack functions in this way, as he is often shown expressing desire for sexual interaction, yet he is constructed in a comic way through his exaggerated and ostentatious behavior. The use of humor desexualizes the population and allows for a wider audience to accept them because the humor creates a less threatening space to identify with the characters (Shugart, 2003). This group is also often represented as victims or villains, which further perpetuates negative attitudes toward the general population of LGBTQ individuals.

Scholars argue that although there has been more visibility in numbers, representations of LGBTQ people in media today still follow a heteronormative script (Dow,
LGBTQ characters in media are defined by heterosexual characters and follow traditional gender ideals for men and women in accordance with the gender binary. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals self-identify as a sexual minority and are compared to the norms and roles that are associated with traditional masculinity and femininity (Gross, 2001). Since this community is often invisible within society, “the media represent a world in which everyone is assumed to be heterosexual” (Levina et al., 2000, p. 742). The implied audience is heterosexual, which means the media follow particular scripts for the norms that perpetuate silence among marginalized sexual identities (Dow, 2001). Therefore, LGBTQ characters in the media are subtly portrayed as conforming to heterosexist norms. As Shugart (2003) explains, “Gay characters, when presented, are seen through the eyes of and function as catalysts for the development of heterosexual characters” (p. 70). For example, gay men are often paired with straight women with suggestions of romance, which adheres to the heteronormative script for cross-sex relationships. In *Will & Grace*, Will, a gay man, is represented with typical heterosexual, masculine qualities and behaviors. Will’s relationship to Grace, a heterosexual woman, further contributes to his perceived heterosexual qualities because they are often portrayed romantically, even though Will identifies as gay. This case provides an example of the way LGBTQ characters are desexualized in mainstream media through adherence to the heteronormative script. It is clear from current research that although the LGBTQ community is gaining visibility in popular media, the current representations are problematic because they still follow heteronormative expectations in regards to the gender binary. This leaves room to continue to explore representations of gender and sexuality that are made visible through media to understand the possible implications of these representations.
Natural and Normal? Problematizing Masculinity

Although much research on gender has focused on discrepancies of women and other minority groups in the media, less research has been devoted to the issue of men and masculinity. In line with the theory of hegemonic masculinity, the white, male perspective is often disregarded due to the assumption that men are not oppressed as the dominant group. Michael Kimmel (1993), who focuses much of his work on the crisis of masculinity, argues that gender inequality is perpetuated in part because men are often not aware of the prominence of gender in their daily lives. Masculinity is taken for granted as normative and natural, and the aggressive behaviors associated with masculinity are then justified (Jensen, 2007). Masculinity is therefore a continual struggle for power as men attempt to conform to hegemonic expectations. The issue of masculinity as a prescribed trait and the pressures of society that are imposed upon men are then not viewed as problematic.

Through the traditional gender binary, men who exhibit a particular kind of masculinity are afforded a normative status. As the dominant group in society, men are expected to be aggressive, competitive, and controlling. Boys are taught to adhere to these behaviors from a young age. The theory of hegemonic masculinity argues that there are multiple masculinities; however, only hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Those who conform to the dominant masculinity do not represent the majority, but are still rendered normative. Individuals who do not align with traditional perceptions of masculinity then struggle with their identity and what it means to be a man. In this sense, the dominant masculinity marginalizes femininity, heterosexuality, and subordinate masculinities by defining them as “other” (Hearn, 2004; Schippers, 2007).

Jensen (2007) suggests that male dominance is “toxic” and hegemonic masculinity makes it
“impossible for men to be fully human” (p. 9). This hierarchy of dominance perpetuates violence and dominance from men to women by placing women as subordinate to men.

Public discourse can be used to create in-group and out-group members by defining particular characteristics within a variety of identity categories, such as race, class, and gender (Winslow, 2012). In this way, rhetoric can be used to include or exclude certain groups of people. In terms of gender, the phrase “hegemonic masculinity” describes a small group of men who represent traditional ideals of masculinity, such as aggression, toughness, and autonomy. As Winslow (2012) explains, “The rhetoric of exclusion offers men a category in which they can define themselves against what they most fear becoming: the effeminate, emasculated, and helpless man” (p. 81). Masculinity is a rhetorical construct and is therefore contingent on a variety of factors; in this way, masculinity is something that is struggled over. Men who specifically represent hegemonic masculinity are rendered normative, while other masculine identities become marginalized along with feminine identities. Throughout this thesis, I have thoughtfully attached hegemony and masculinity together; I specifically discuss hegemonic masculinity to differentiate it from the other forms of masculinity.

As feminist and women’s studies have become increasingly popular disciplines and as more women have entered the public sphere, there has been a perceived crisis of masculinity (Kimmel, 1987). These changes took place toward the turn of the nineteenth century, along with changes in the economy due to industrialization. This shift contributed to a growing anxiety over masculinity and manhood. In media, there has been a vocal concern for the well being of boys and men in comparison to women (McDowell, 2000). There was a collective fear that the growing field of feminism would lead to the success of women at the
expense of men. This perceived crisis can be used to highlight the power of hegemonic ideals, as well as sociocultural anxieties about power, dominance, and identity.

Since masculinity is naturalized, the influence of the social construction of gender has been omitted from men’s social history. American men do not have a history of being gendered in the way that women do, and this is problematic. Gender has remained invisible to men because they are the privileged group in society. Kimmel (1993) refers to this as the privilege of invisibility, because the privileged group, as the norm, “has the luxury of ignoring the centrality of gender” (p. 30). This unawareness is problematic because gender does, in fact, influence even the most privileged group. Invisibility perpetuates inequality and patriarchal power structures. The focus on one form of masculinity causes men to suffer and struggle with their identity. Masculinity must be observed through a gendered lens in order to reduce issues of gender inequality and oppression for men and all other sexual identities.

The current body of literature on gender and media representations leaves a gap for investigating issues of representation, visibility, and masculinity. I contend that it is valuable to continue to explore these concepts in an effort to better understand how they function in mediated texts. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the presence of kairos in *Dallas Buyers Club* by providing a preliminary analysis on the historical timing of the film and the public discourse surrounding its release. I then explore the construction of “other” in regards to gender, the negotiation of masculinity, and the representation of LGBTQ characters within the film’s narrative. I end the following section with a discussion on the documentary techniques that contribute to the film’s realistic sensibility as a basis for textual analysis.
The Opportune Moment: Exploring *Kairos* in *Dallas Buyers Club*

It has long been theorized that the specific historical timing of any piece of rhetoric is important to consider when conducting a rhetorical analysis (Kinneavy, 2000). Scholars have theorized that *kairos* is involved in rhetorical acts because rhetoric involves an opportune moment and situation (Dunmire, 2000; Poulakos, 1999). *Kairos* is the timeliness of rhetoric, highlighting that the right thing must be said at the right time in order to have an emotional effect on the audience (Dunmire, 2000). In relation to *Dallas Buyers Club*, I argue the film was released during an opportune moment in time. Timeliness allows a rhetor to be more persuasive; an audience will not be moved or emotionally involved with a piece of rhetoric that it is not timely (Poulakos, 1999). The two principles of *kairos* are the right time and proper measure; rhetorical acts must be appropriate for both the occasion and the audience to maintain persuasiveness (Kinneavy, 2002). Through *kairos*, a rhetor is able to let an audience know what is possible by moving them toward the future. This creates a greater connection with the audience and rhetor because “the rhetor discloses his vision of a new world to his listeners and invites them to join him there by honoring his disclosure and by adopting his suggestion” (Poulakos, 1999, p. 31). In this sense, engaging in a *kairotic* moment translates to more persuasiveness on behalf of the rhetorical act, and therefore more emotional connection from the audience.

Although many ancient scholars of rhetoric, such as Aristotle and Plato, studied the concept of *kairos*, it has been left out of contemporary theory. Scholars who focus on kairos offer multiple reasons for this omission, the first being an issue with translation. E. Smith (2002) argues, “One reason for the omission is no doubt the absence of any cognate word in English for *kairos*, whereas its partner, *chronos*, appears in a host of forms throughout any
English dictionary” (p. 46). James L. Kinneavy (2002), who is credited with reintroducing *kairos* into contemporary theory, argues that the concept is “not easily reduced to a simple formula” (p. 60). This has caused *kairos* to be left out of many handbooks and indexes on theory. Therefore, Kinneavy and Eskin (1994) argue, “If these general reference works do not respect the term’s importance, students and scholars are not likely to pursue it” (p. 131). Finally, *kairos* has been neglected because Aristotelian scholars have demeaned Aristotle’s use of the word by combining it with Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Although the two concepts have similarities, scholars who focus on *kairos* argue it functions in a particular way that is separate from *Phaedrus*. *Kairos* was particularly important to Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, as he was concerned with the individuality of any rhetorical situation and argued that timing does indeed matter in each situation. Due to its significance to ancient scholars and to the definition of rhetoric, *kairos* is an important concept to consider in rhetorical analyses. Therefore, this thesis will explore *kairos* in relation to *Dallas Buyers Club*.

The timing of *Dallas Buyers Club* and the narrative’s foundation on a series of real events has historical significance in relation to *kairos*. Had the film been released in previous decades, it is unlikely that the public would have responded with the same positivity that they have in today’s society. The rejection Ron faces due to his disease from most of the supporting characters in the film makes this apparent. Ron Woodroof, for whom the movie is based, was a real person fighting for his life in 1985; however, during that time, the LGBTQ community and the notion of gender fluidity on the continuum were not widely accepted, as is represented in different scenes throughout the film. In the society of the twenty-first century, these ideas have begun to change, and the general public has become much more open-minded to differing perspectives on gender and identity. *Kairos* will assist in analyzing
the opportune moment surrounding the release of *Dallas Buyers Club*, as it is clear that the timing of the film contributes to its overall persuasiveness as a rhetorical artifact. I argue *Dallas Buyers Club* came into existence in response to an opportune moment due to the current political climate, as well as current sociocultural concerns and preconceptions about gender, masculinity, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. In order to better understand the *kairos* of this film, I discuss the film background and its social relevance through the discourse surrounding the film.

**Film Background and Social Relevance**

The story of *Dallas Buyers Club* features Ron Woodroof, a rodeo cowboy who discovers he is HIV-positive during a time when the disease was associated with gay men, a very specific segment of the population. The disease threatens Ron’s lifestyle, along with his hegemonically masculine identity. As he struggles with his life situation due to HIV, Ron establishes the Dallas Buyers Club, an organization that distributes drugs and vitamins to HIV/AIDS patients; most of the drugs are unapproved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA). Ron’s attitude is anti-establishment, as he challenges the FDA throughout the film, which places the FDA as the villain and Ron the hero. The Dallas Buyers Club provides an outlet for Ron to negotiate his identity; through the club, he “unwittingly became an advocate and an activist” for a disease and a lifestyle he had once rejected (Kenny, 2013, para. 2). Although he maintains aspects of his hegemonic identity, his perception of the LGBTQ community changes, as does his behavior toward this group. As a rhetorical artifact, *Dallas Buyers Club* provides a space to better understand and analyze contemporary media representations of gender and sexuality through the story of Ron Woodroof.
Even before its release, *Dallas Buyers Club* was highly anticipated among both critics and fans. Much of the discourse surrounding the film discusses the sexualized status of Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto. Prior to his role as Ron, McConaughey played a highly sexualized male stripper in *Magic Mike*, wearing erotic costumes throughout the majority of the movie. McConaughey has long been perceived as a “sex symbol” in Hollywood, and was even featured as *People Weekly*’s “Sexiest Man Alive” in 2005 (Watts, 2005). The usually muscular McConaughey lost more than 40 pounds in order to play the very sick and thin Ron Woodroof (Miller, 2014). McConaughey’s extreme weight loss for his role of Ron created great anticipation throughout the entertainment world (Bradshaw, 2014; Debruge, 2013; Kenny, 2013; Miller, 2014). The *New York Times* described McConaughey as “emaciated” in comparison to his typically toned body (McElroy, 2013).

In addition to McConaughey’s transformation, Jared Leto, another Hollywood sex symbol, portrays a transgendered woman named Rayon in the film. *BuzzFeed* recently declared in the title of an article “Jared Leto defies all aging logic as the sexiest 42-year-old man on Earth” (Yapalater, 2014). It is clear from this title, and the many other articles from different social media platforms, that Leto is perceived as a sexualized and masculine man in society. For his performance of Rayon, Leto lost about 30 pounds. Due to his weight loss and the zealous costuming of Rayon, Leto was described as “unrecognizable” in his role (McElroy, 2013). The transformation of these two male actors, who are usually perceived as prescribing to hegemonic masculine ideals, was drastic, which further contributed to the public’s anticipation surrounding *Dallas Buyers Club*, as well as the significance of gender within the film. Ron and Rayon, the characters they play, negotiate their gender identity.
throughout the film, which is interesting considering the stable, masculine portrayal of the actors in the media outside of the film.

Soon after the movie was released to the public, there was much speculation that Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto would receive Oscar nominations for their outstanding performances in *Dallas Buyers Club*. The film was nominated for best picture, McConaughey for best actor in a leading role, and Leto for best actor in a supporting role. McConaughey and Leto both went on to win the Academy Award in their respective categories. Although there had already been excitement about the film up to that point, these wins made the film more credible as one of social significance. As a socially relevant artifact, *Dallas Buyers Club* functions similar to a documentary due to the filming style used by director Jean-Marc Vallée. Next, I discuss how the documentary illusion is created and how this contributes to the function of the film.

**Based on a True Story: The Pseudo-Documentary of *Dallas Buyers Club***

The documentary filming style of *Dallas Buyers* gives the film a “human interest” angle (Debruge, 2013). Through this specific *mise-en-scène*, *Dallas Buyers Club* offers naturalistic representations of events and characters for the audience to better connect with and feel more empathetic towards. The discourse surrounding the film focuses on this aspect of the film. The director, Vallée, chose to use this style of filming to invite audiences deeper into the narrative (Kenny, 2013). This naturalistic style is used to create a more “real” representation of the events and characters of the film. To construct this illusion, Vallée uses specific camera shots, music, and lighting to signify authenticity. For the most part, diegetic music is used, playing from within the scene itself, whether it is from a jukebox or a radio. For example, in one scene music is heard playing from a radio while Rayon sings along with
the lyrics “life is strange.” Vallée also chose to film using handheld cameras (“Crafting a new cinematic style,” 2013), which translates into the documentary style through the hand movement of the camera frame that is clear in most every scene. The shaky cam effect from the handheld cameras gives the illusion of watching a home movie. For lighting in the film, Vallée used lighting that was naturally available in the environment for majority of the scenes (“Crafting a new cinematic style,” 2013). This naturalistic style creates a more empathetic world for the audience to better identify with the characters and events of the story.

Along with Vallée’s directorial decisions, writers Melissa Wallack and Craig Borten purposefully created strong contrasting characters, which serve to educate the audience about new representations of gender and sexuality. Ron’s aggressive and vulgar behavior functions in a very particular way. In this sense, the film attempts to educate through entertainment by highlighting homophobic behavior as negative. An article in Variety offers an explanation for how this was accomplished:

By choosing such a vocally homophobic antihero, writers Borten and Wallack ensure that no matter how uncomfortable audiences are with HIV or so called ‘alternative lifestyles,’ they will recognize Woodroof’s knee-jerk bigotry as uncool. And thus, the film manages to educate without ever feeling didactic, and to entertain in the face of what would, to any other character, seem like a grim life sentence. (Debruge, 2013, para. 9)

The construction of the characters within the film invites an empathetic response from the audience. There are also potential educational ramifications concerning gender and sexuality in society from the film. The construction and creation of the film contributes to the way the narrative functions for the audience.
Ron Woodroof’s Identity Crisis: AIDS as a Threat to Masculinity

At the beginning of *Dallas Buyers Club*, it is clear that Ron Woodroof identifies as hegemonically masculine. Ron’s “rough edges” create an unsympathetic character at first (“Oscar buzz grows,” 2013). It is this “rough around the edges” demeanor that contributes to Ron’s masculine identity. Ron is described as “skinny as a whippet and fierce as a snapping turtle” (Scott, 2013, para. 1). It is clear from the beginning, and throughout the film, that the rodeo is Ron’s passion (Bradshaw, 2014), a career that further emphasizes his masculine identity. Ron is “flamboyantly heterosexual and crudely homophobic” and relies on cigarettes, liquor, and drugs as his confidence booster (Scott, 2013, para. 2). He uses derogatory language in regards to race and sexual orientation when speaking to others, seemingly in a way to establish his toughness and dominant status. His masculinity is seemingly embedded in his confident, cowboy-like behavior. From the initial moments of the film, Ron is framed as a cowboy, a masculine man who gambles, drinks, and sleeps with prostitutes.

Soon after his diagnosis of HIV, Ron finds himself rejected from all facets of his previous life, causing him to be a social outcast. The poor treatment Ron faces as a “diseased man” from those he once called his friends brings empathy to his character (Debruge, 2013). Due to his disease, he is seemingly forced into a new circle of friends who also have HIV/AIDS. His “newfound outcast status” is what “inspired a sense of empathy towards his HIV-positive peers” (Debruge, 2013, para. 1). Ron transforms from being a very selfish character to a man who gives his life to help those suffering from the same disease. Throughout the rest of the film, Ron slowly accepts his situation and therefore finds ways to reconstruct and renegotiate his identity.
Ron and Rayon: An Unlikely Friendship

In this film, Jared Leto’s character, Rayon, has also been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. The stark contrast between the two characters of Ron and Rayon highlights their gender differences. Unlike the unrefined Ron, Rayon is sweet and sensitive, as she makes friends with anyone and everyone she encounters (Debruge, 2013). Ron tries to purposefully differentiate and distance himself from Rayon, even though they are suffering from the same disease. Soon, he begins to accept his situation and seems to realize that his life will no longer be as it was before. Ron’s shift in behavior “allows him to work side by side with a flamboyant transsexual, a person he not only wouldn’t have given the time of day to in his prior mode of life, but possibly would have given a beatdown to” (Kenny, 2013, para. 2). Rayon’s nonthreatening and queer positionality allows Ron a space to explore parts of society and identity that he had once refused and ridiculed.

As Ron gets to know Rayon, they become close friends and business partners who run the Dallas Buyers Club together. Melissa Wallack, one of the writers of the film stated, “In a short period of time, you can demonstrate everything about Ron Woodroof, when you put him in the room with Rayon” (McElroy, 2013, para. 7). Wallack explained that the character of Rayon was initially created “to help convey Woodroof’s gradual acceptance of a subculture he had dismissed” (McElroy, 2013, para. 7). Prior to his diagnosis, Ron’s behavior and language contribute to his masculine construction. It seems in Ron’s pre-AIDS world that to be masculine is to also be homophobic; the two are congruent. It is not until he is diagnosed with HIV and meets Rayon that he begins to change his attitude toward the gay community. His relationship with Rayon allows him to grow as a person as he is inserted into a community he once openly despised (Kenny, 2013). This relationship brings compassion
and empathy to Ron’s rough character and allows him to redeem himself within the story (Scott, 2013). He is able to become a part of the gay community while also maintaining his masculinity. Ron’s relationship with Rayon is used to highlight his negotiation of his newer identity and his acceptance of his disease. In the next section, I provide the summaries and themes that will be addressed in each chapter.

**Chapter Preview**

In this first chapter of this thesis, I have provided a review of literature focusing on gender, identity, and media representations along with the discourse surrounding *Dallas Buyers Club*. In the following chapter, I provide the methodology through several theories that will be used in the analysis of the film. In chapter three, I offer a rhetorical analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club*. In the fourth and final chapter, I discuss the theoretical implications and conclusions drawn from this analysis.

The popularity surrounding this film, its actors’ strong performances, the directorial decisions, and the visibility of LGBTQ characters contribute to *Dallas Buyers Club*’s relevance as a rhetorical text. The characters of Ron and Rayon provide contrasting representations of masculinity, as well as femininity, throughout the film. The relationship between Ron and Rayon is only one of the many interesting dynamics in *Dallas Buyers Club*. The particular setting and time period in which this movie takes place also contributes to the behavior of and relationship between the characters, particularly in regard to reactions and stigma of HIV/AIDS. The timing of the release of the film is also relevant because of the changes in visibility and representations of particular characters in the media today. I intend to use the relationships, interpersonal dynamics, as well as specific situational factors of Ron’s story within the film to analyze the ways in which masculinity is rhetorically
constructed within *Dallas Buyers Club*. Through this analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club* we can gain a better understanding of the way gender is represented in popular films and what this might mean for perceptions of gender, sexuality, and “other” in society.
CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

When conducting research in rhetorical studies, it is critical to understand the traditional and contemporary theories that define the field. In this section, I discuss the work of several theories that contribute to my analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club*. These theories serve as tools for my analysis of the film and the discourse surrounding it. First, I discuss identification; a concept theorized by Kenneth Burke (1969) that explains how rhetoric functions for speakers and their audiences. Next, I examine documentary realism and how this style of film elicits emotional involvement and identification. I then consider visibility, as it is an important aspect of the film to consider due to the representations of LGBTQ characters as the “other.” Representation and visibility will be tied to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the abject. Her theory will provide the basis for my analysis of the abject bodies represented within the film. I connect these concepts to one another to push forward the analysis that will be provided in the next chapter. Lastly, I discuss the specifics that will be addressed in the analysis and will conclude with a brief explanation of how I engage these theories in chapter four.

**Identification: How A Identifies with B**

The ultimate function of rhetoric is to persuade (Burke, 1969); however, scholars differ on exactly how persuasion is enacted. Past scholars have argued that narrative persuasion in the media is able to shift audience beliefs and attitudes beyond the fictional...
mediated world (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012). For example, de Graaf et al. (2012) conducted a study where two different perspectives of the same event were manipulated to understand how identification functions in narratives. The study found that audience members identified with the character from which the perspective was told. From this study we can understand that audiences are persuaded to feel connected with the people and events within fictional stories, particularly in film. Persuasion therefore occurs through what Burke (1969) has termed identification. Identification will serve as the tool for analyzing *Dallas Buyers Club* as the rhetorical artifact, particularly in relation to the gendered aspects of the film. This theory will serve as the overarching framework for my analysis.

Identification is the idea that rhetoric is about creating a connection with other people, which in turn creates community and collectivity (Burke, 1969). The ultimate human desire is to be social, so we identify with others in order to fulfill this desire (Davis, 2008). Through the process of identification, audiences begin to feel like they are creating and sharing something with a rhetor. Burke (1969) explains the process of identification, stating,

> A is not identified with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. (p. 20)

Identification depends on the shared meaning and symbolic representation that is created for an audience by a rhetor or rhetorical act. Identification is therefore the “act of finding commonality or affirming association with another person or group” (Jones, 2014, p. 150). Burke (1969) explains the process further, stating, “you persuade a man insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitudes, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (p. 55). Essentially, it occurs through things that remain outside the self,
namely symbols and signifiers (Davis, 2008). Implicit in identification is the idea of division, because if you are identified with one thing, you are not identified with another thing. It allows the audience to feel distanced from the “other” in this sense. Identification can function as a means of persuasion by allowing the audience to feel connected to a rhetorical act, and its expressed goals and beliefs.

Within the theory of identification is Burke’s (1969) concept of consubstantiality. Consubstantiality means that there is some substantive identification that ties one person to another (Jones, 2014). You may identify with someone, but not be consubstantial, which is a more specific level of identification, and therefore of persuasion. Burke (1969) describes consubstantiality further, stating,

A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, and attitudes that make them consubstantial. (p. 21)

Expressed another way, consubstantiality is the way in which individuals “establish a sense of identity and the mode by which they establish a relation to one another” (Davis, 2008, p. 126). Consubstantiality therefore involves the essentials of identification. Through identification, individuals can begin “acting together,” which opens the possibility of consubstantiality. A rhetor needs to give signs of consubstantiality by expressing some of the audience’s opinions and beliefs. As Burke (1969) states, the rhetor “can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience’s opinions” (p. 56) in order for persuasion to occur through identification. Through consubstantiality, people can “act together” and will begin to truly identify with one another.

As the driving force behind rhetorical persuasion, identification can either reinforce or weaken an audience’s existing beliefs and attitudes (de Graaf et al., 2012). Identification is
not necessarily simply about persuasion, but can also be about sympathizing with another person. In order to feel sympathy or empathy for another, one must be able to follow the state of mind of another person. Burke (1969) refers to this process as “imaginative identification” where an audience is vicariously connected with a rhetor or rhetorical act (p. 130). Identification therefore allows an audience to feel emotionally connected to the rhetorical event.

Identification has been considered as a mechanism for narrative experience for mediated texts (Cohen, 2001). In mediated rhetorical acts, such as film, the audience is often asked to take on the perspective of the character as a way of identifying with them. This is the way the audience experiences the events of the characters “as if the event were happening to them” (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). Identifying with the characters creates empathy for the events the characters go through within the narrative (de Graaf et al., 2012). In this way, identification works to persuade an audience to feel emotional involvement with the characters. Research has shown that the more an audience views the rhetorical act as reality, the more emotionally involved they will feel (Cho et al., 2012). Therefore, if the audience is persuaded that something represents reality, they are more likely to be persuaded by the text. There are specific techniques of form that can be used to create authenticity and reality in a text that contribute to the possibility for identification. This is particularly true of visual artifacts. For *Dallas Buyers Club*, the documentary style of the film calls for identification from the audience. In the next section, I discuss how reality and truth can be instilled in film through the pseudo-documentary style.
Documentary Realism: Finding Truth in the Visual

*Dallas Buyers Club* presents a film with a documentary style, which gives the impression to the audience that they are viewing real events. Historically, documentaries function as a form of the visual used to portray truth in certain events or situations (Tagg, 1993). These types of images are meant to literally document reality. In his discussion of the history of documentaries, Tagg (1993) explains, “Documentary came to denote a discursive formation which was wider by far than photography alone, but which appropriated photographic technology to a central and privileged place within its rhetoric of immediacy and truth” (p. 8). Therefore, the visual is capable of functioning as evidence in today’s society. The sense of reality and truthfulness that is found in photographs is instilled through institutions within society. Audiences are then able to “fill in the blanks” with their own experience and knowledge, which leads to personal assumptions about the reality expressed within the visual (Finnegan, 2001). We can only view photographs and visual representations as true if society defines them as such.

The documentary style of the visual creates a perceived sense of reality and objectivity for the audience. In this way, the visual is capable of creating a distorted sense of truth. Documentaries are thought to be representations of a real event or a real set of characters; however, they only function as an interpretation of the real based on social and cultural institutions (Tagg, 1993). The documentary style of the visual creates a “privileged place within its rhetoric of immediacy and truth” (Tagg, 1993, p. 8). This style then carries the implications that a film accurately and realistically portrays the series of events within a narrative. Certain techniques are used in popular films to create this illusion of documentary realism, such as natural lighting and handheld camera work. *Dallas Buyers Club* uses this
documentary filming technique, which reminds the audience that the narrative of Ron Woodroof is “based on a true story.” In this sense, the realist style of filming elicits more emotion and identification from the audience.

When analyzing the visual aspects of a film, it is important to consider the role of the moving images within it as part of the visual. Ehrenhaus (2001) uses the film Saving Private Ryan to demonstrate the way films can reflect sociocultural anxieties while continually perpetuating them. This becomes particularly powerful after traumatic events, as the story of Saving Private Ryan occurs during World War II and the film was released after the Vietnam War. Ehrenhaus’s (2001) article serves as an exemplar for analyzing the filming techniques within a film. In Saving Private Ryan, Ehrenhaus (2001) argues the film functions to shape the collective memory of the Holocaust by representing Christian identity and Judaic principles woven together in the main characters. Ehrenhaus (2001) compares the guilt felt by the American people during the Holocaust to the guilt felt during the Vietnam War. In this way, the film works to realign the national identity and reframe the collective memory for the American people. Through a film’s narrative, identity and reality can be reshaped and reinforced. This function can be applied to other films; I argue Dallas Buyers Club works to shape the collective memory of what it was like to be a victim of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s in the United States by opening up the possibilities of experience through the narrative.

In Saving Private Ryan, which is full of action, the camera angles and shots function to signify meaning for the audience. Director Steven Spielberg utilized certain filming techniques to draw emotion from the audience. In this way, the particular usage of the camera in each scene connotes something to the audience. For instance, in a very intense battle scene toward the end of the film, quick shots are used to signify the “intensity and
urgency of the chaos” (Ehrenhaus, 2001, p. 237). The camera techniques used within a film therefore play a critical role in producing a range of meaning for the audience. The mise-en-scène of a film is the way a story is told within the frame of the camera. Directors can create a deliberate mise-en-scène by utilizing various filming techniques such as lighting and setting. In the following chapter, I analyze the distinctive mise-en-scène in *Dallas Buyers Club* as a pseudo-documentary to better understand the function of the film and the possibility for identification and emotional involvement from the audience. Based on the focus of the camera in *Dallas Buyers Club*, I turn to discussing theories on representation, visibility, and the “other” that will be analyzed through the lens of documentary realism and identification.

**The Power of Visibility: Reinforcing Ideas and Shaping Reality**

The visual has rhetorical power because it is capable of shaping attitudes and beliefs (Foucault 1977; Gallagher & Zagacki, 2005, 2007; Vivian, 1999). In this sense, the visual is also capable of sparking social change by communicating something to an audience (Vivian, 1999). Institutional structures in society tell us what to believe and therefore shape our reality. This means that until something lies within the realm of reality as defined by society, it is rendered invisible or unknown. Foucault (1977) argues visibility is how discipline and control are maintained in society; we internalize messages of surveillance through the concept of visibility. It is in this way that certain groups are able to maintain power in society. Although Foucault’s (1977) work was introduced many decades ago, it is prophetic in the sense that it still can be applied to the current state of society. Historically, power is given to a sovereign leader who makes his or herself visible to the public (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Those who are afforded visibility within society are also afforded more
power. This is because as something is repetitively made visible, it is also rendered normative (Gordon, 2002).

The visual operates rhetorically by taking an abstract concept and making it visible to the audience (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2007). It is important to note there is a difference between the visual and visibility: the visible is what is seen, while visibility is a way of understanding and perceiving reality. Foucault (1977) argues that visibility is a trap because it is capable of putting the audience in a certain mindset. In this way, certain representations can function to include coded meanings for the audience. The concept, idea, issue, or group of people that has been made visible may have been previously invisible, or unknown, to the audience. Visibility therefore, shapes reality and understanding by making the abstract concrete and personalizing the concept for the audience (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2007). Often, visibility creates awareness, as the experiences of marginalized groups are left out when they are rendered invisible.

Visibility creates an “epiphanic moment by contributing to an unfolding process of articulation and interaction that enable the ‘other’ to become known as a human being with specific and acceptable human traits and qualities” (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2007, p. 121). Often, when things are made visible, there are certain connotations that are carried with it (Vivian, 1999). Challenging these preconceived ideas is an important aspect of visibility. In terms of people, a certain group may be marginalized as the “other” and is therefore pushed into a certain frame in the media. When this group does gain visibility through media representations, it brings to light something that was not there before. It allows the audience to identify with the “other” by challenging stereotypes and other preconceived notions (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2007). It can cause people to rethink the way things are in society.
Visibility is then capable of reshaping the audience’s perspectives, particularly in relation to marginalized groups that become defined as the “other.”

**The “Other”**

The process of identifying a person, or group of people, as the “other” is a way to marginalize and discriminate that group (Johnson et al., 2004). Othering can be defined as “a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from one self or the mainstream, and it can reinforce or reproduce positions of domination and subordination” (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 253). Othering helps to construct individual identity by defining people by what they are and are not. Certain groups are afforded privilege in society, while those defined as “other” are not. The group that defines itself as the “one” must do so by also defining the “other” (de Beauvoir, 1952/2009). The “other” is therefore the marginalized groups, which in the current society includes women, people of color, and individuals with gender identities that lie outside of the traditional gender binary. The “other” is therefore defined in opposition to the mainstream group, or the “one” (de Beauvoir, 1952/2009). Those cast as “other” incur different life experiences than the “one,” as they are not afforded the same visibility, privileges, or power. Although there are differing ways to conceptualize and theorize the “other,” the abject provides a framework for analyzing the marginalized “other” in comparison to the rest of the general population. I argue that in *Dallas Buyers Club*, the “other” functions through representations of the abject. Next, I explore the theory of the abject and connect it to hegemony and masculinity.

**The Abject as the Undesired “Other”**

Scholars have long theorized on the abject in relation to the “other.” Kristeva (1982) describes the abject as that which is in opposition to I as the subject; this poses a threat to
individual identity by putting the self in “perpetual danger” (p. 9). The abject is “that which
the self must reject and expel in order to define itself” (Leyda, 2012, p. 249). We are
fascinated, yet repulsed by the abject at the same time. In this way, it becomes something to
fear. Kristeva (1982) argues the abject can come in ambiguous forms that disrupt “identity,
system, order” (p. 4); the ambiguity of the abject allows it to defy order. In her book The
Powers of Horror, Kristeva (1982) introduces the abject to the reader, stating,

> Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that
dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you. (p. 4)

Other scholars have used a more literal definition of the term to create a better understanding
of the concept, stating the abject is “a state of misery or degradation” (Harold & DeLuca,
2005, p. 279). In this sense, the abject is often compared or related to death and destruction,
as these are considered to be undesirable states of being. In addition, the abject is frequently
related to natural bodily functions, such as blood, sweat, and vomit. Although these things
are natural, they are considered disgusting or embarrassing. These bodily secretions have
been referred to as the horror of the body (Leyda, 2012). In this way, the abject is defined as
the abnormal; it is considered gruesome, and therefore unstable (Sisco King, 2009). These
negative notions come from individual desire to remain healthy and in constant control of our
bodies (Leyda, 2012). The abject presents a threat to identity, so we cast it aside, reject it, and
mark it as the “other.” In reality, however, the abject is something we cannot escape, as it is
embedded within ourselves.

There are mixed feelings of desire and rejection that come with the abject, as it
“simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). One way of
understanding how the abject works is through the corpse, which represents “death infecting
life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

Death is unavoidable; however, it is viewed as undesired, so it is a part of being human that we try to ignore or reject. An image of a corpse would function as the abject because it reminds the audience of their inevitable death. Kristeva (1982) explains, “Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (p. 3). As the abject, a corpse, although harmless, reminds the viewer of the fragility of life, and therefore that they are denying death as they continue to live. Another example of the abject occurred during World War II, as the Jewish people were defined as the abject in order to perpetuate feelings of anti-Semitism that fueled the war because this group became associated with weakness, hatred, and, in the end, death.

We come to fear the abject because it contradicts “the Western myth of a united, coherent, and stable subjectivity” (Sisco King, 2009, p. 369). The subject, or I, is the desired, while the abject is the non-subject and therefore the undesired. The abject is fluid and ambiguous, which allows it to be represented in many different forms. In terms of the body, we can consider certain desired and undesired states of being, such as healthy or sick, alive or dead (Harris, 2009). The abject is that which escapes the binary of Western identity categories, poses a threat, and therefore must be cast aside. The abject in bodily form could be represented by frailness, a weak and sick body that is dead or dying. In this way, the abject functions to make the rest of the population as the audience feel healthy and stable, and therefore superior (Harold & DeLuca, 2005; Kristeva, 1982). The audience compares themselves to the abject as “other” in order to feel better about their own subjectivity.

The self and the abject are in a constant struggle, as the self desires to be separate from the abject. The abjection of the self involves an ego split as a person experiences the
abject while simultaneously trying to reject it (Kristeva, 1982). Explained another way, “abjection is an attempt to satisfy an appetite that cannot be sated” (Hahner, Varda, & Wilson, 2013, p. 365). This may cause a person to experience a loss of self. In this sense, the abject is an alter ego that constantly permeates an individual’s subject position. Kristeva (1982) conceptualizes the abject as disease in relation to the self, stating, “In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject” (p. 11). Kristeva (1982) takes this point further, explaining that the abject as a symptom that can be thought of as,

A language that gives up, a structure within the body, a nonassimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. (p. 11)

The abject is therefore capable of functioning as the undesirable “other.” This concept can be applied to film as a way to understand the function of representations of the “other” or marginalized groups. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, the abject is made present through the sick bodies of the characters and the crises of identities that occur within the film. These representations are also characteristic of marginalized identities, allowing them to take on aspects of the “other.” For example, scholars have argued that femininity is reminiscent of the abject because it reminds the viewer of the castration complex, and therefore is a subconscious threat, particularly to hegemonic ideals (Kristeva, 1982; Sisco King, 2009). With the abject is an implied loathing of the undesired that is always necessarily present for the subject.

Since the abject is the undesired, it is where the viewer is not. The abject is not given space in the public sphere and is often rendered invisible (Harold & DeLuca, 2005). Groups of people are capable of being “othered” through association with the abject (Leyda, 2012). Scholars have provided a host of examples to help conceptualize the abject in practical
theory. Kristeva (1982) uses the example of the thin layer of skin that grows on a glass of milk that has been sitting out for a while. Although she finds the milk to be repulsive, it is harmless. As she finds herself fascinated by her repulsion, the milk comes to represent the abject. The bodies of HIV/AIDS patient, clearly marked with their illness, are another example of the abject in a visual respect. While fulfilling the role of the “other,” the “emaciated body of a person living with AIDS may evoke sympathy” while simultaneously allowing the rest of the population to feel healthy and, therefore, superior (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 279). A recent example of the abject occurred during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Leyda, 2012). The poor, black citizens in New Orleans came to represent the abject because of the destructive state in which they lived. They represented the poor, third world while reminding the rest of the United States that they live in the first world. The abject, while undesired and rejected from society, serves to make the rest of the population feel better about their individual subjectivity, as the abject functions as the “not-us” or “other” (Leyda, 2012).

Recent scholars have used Kristeva’s theory to understand the experience of the “other,” as well as the experience of the abject in relation to the self that occurs through media (Hahner et al., 2013; Harold & DeLuca, 2005; Leyda, 2012). Some scholars believe Kristeva (1982) implies, “that aesthetic works, including film unfold over the terrain of the abject” (Hahner et al., 2013, p. 364). Through visual representations of the abject, the audience can either be liberated or engrained in abjection. The ambiguous nature of the abject is what “pushes the subject to pursue stability and meaning” (Hahner et al., 2013, p. 365). It is through the abject as a signifier of the “other” that we can create meaning and understanding. I argue that *Dallas Buyers Club* works to do both for the audience through
identification with characters that represent the abject in their diseased state. Through Ron’s crisis of masculinity, the film also comes to represent what Sisco King (2009) calls abject hegemony. This concept allows us to understand hegemony as a function of the “other” through abjection. Next, I discuss the concept of abject hegemony and how this can be tied to representations of masculinity.

Hegemony, Masculinity, and the Abject

Hegemonic masculinity is able to maintain power in society in different ways than other gender identities because it is the dominant gender identity. In her analysis of the film *Fight Club*, Sisco King (2009) argues that white masculinity is able to maintain its hegemonic status through representations of the “other.” In these instances, masculine characters are able to attribute and absorb certain characteristics of those deemed as the “other” because of their normative status. Sisco King (2009) utilizes abject bodies as a trope for analyzing representations of hegemonic ideals in relation to masculinity. Contradictions for what constitutes hegemonic masculinity throughout time contribute to the understanding of white masculinity as abject. Hegemonic ideals are continually challenged and resisted because what constitutes hegemony shifts throughout time. Sisco King (2009) refers to Lucaites and McDaniel’s (2004) reading of hegemony as “carnival,” as hegemonic institutions perpetuate themselves while simultaneously allowing for their “carnival undoing” (p. 368). Hegemony is contingent on these “carnival moments” to reinforce and reassert what Sisco King (2009) calls “hegemonic ideological formations” (p. 368). These kinds of moments or challenges present a crisis or threat to hegemonic masculinity. Representations of masculinity are often able to reaffirm hegemonic power through these types of moments, referred to as “reversal and fissures” (Sisco King, 2009, p. 368). Hegemonic masculinity is
therefore capable of maintaining a dominant status by constantly reasserting itself, even in moment of crisis.

Hegemonic privilege is given to bodies that are “limitless, variable, and adaptive” (Sisco King, 2009, p. 370). Hegemonic masculinity is able to take on signs of femininity because it is the normative gender and is afforded a dominant position over feminine representations. In this way, it is capable of absorbing features of the “other.” From this understanding, hegemonic masculinity comes to be defined as abject. Sisco King (2009) explains how this is accomplished, stating,

By allowing for and accommodating what is contrary or threatening, hegemonic ideological formations herald their potential destruction at the same time they ensure their continued survival – a paradox that should not be underestimated. (p. 368)

White masculinity therefore survives by “absorbing otherness” (Sisco King, 2009). Established masculine characters are then afforded more fluid representations through moments of destruction and crisis. Sisco King’s (2009) analysis presents the fluidity of masculinity and an explanation for hegemonic power through the lens of the abject. As the norm, masculinity is afforded more power through its fluidity. Understanding the rhetorical function of these representations of masculinity is critical when addressing gender. Sisco King’s (2009) argument of hegemonic masculinity as a representation of abjection will serve as an exemplary for my analysis in the following chapter.

Connecting Theoretical Frameworks

For my analysis, I take scenes from the movie, as well as critiques about the film, to discuss the way in which masculinity is constructed within *Dallas Buyers Club* and the importance this has for gender roles in society. I will address specific characters, relationships, and behaviors in the film to further analyze gender, identity, and hegemony. I
will discuss how these factors change or do not change throughout the film to explore the negotiation of gender representations. I intend to address the visual aspects of the film, particularly the documentary realist style of filming, to understand how identification is created within the narrative.

Through the lens of identification, I argue that the documentary style of *Dallas Buyers Club* calls for the audience to identify with the abject representations that are made visible in the film. By combining identification with the abject, we can understand identification in a new way. I utilize Burke’s (1969) identification, Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the abject, and Sisco King’s (2009) analysis of abject hegemony as tools for analyzing the function of *Dallas Buyers Club*. The characters of Ron and Rayon represent the abject through their diseased bodies. Ron’s diseased state causes him to experience a crisis of masculinity, which functions to make him an empathetic character as the film progresses. Tagg’s (1993) argument on documentaries and reality will be combined with Finnegan (2001) and Ehrenhaus (2001) to understand the signification of the camera work in relation to the film’s function. In the analysis, I will discuss the how the specific filming techniques used by director Jean Marc Vallée contribute to the documentary illusion. Identification will be considered in relation to this in an attempt to understand how the audience is hailed to identify with the main characters in *Dallas Buyers Club*. I analyze the abject in Ron and Rayon while discussing the aspects of visibility, the “other,” and the crisis of masculinity. The abject will therefore be analyzed through the theoretical lens of identification. By utilizing these concepts, I provide an examination of the function of *Dallas Buyers Club* in an attempt to better understand the abject and the process of identification. In the next chapter, I offer the analysis, which is driven and inspired by these rhetorical theories and scholars.
CHAPTER 3
IDENTIFICATION WITH THE ABJECT: 
ANALYSIS OF DALLAS BUYERS CLUB

“I got one . . . one life, right? Mine. But fuck, I want somebody else's sometimes. Sometimes I just feel like I'm fighting for a life I just ain't got time to live. I want it to mean something,” Ron Woodroof (Brennar et al., 2013).

Dallas Buyers Club is a major motion picture depicting a fictional story that was inspired by a real person. Director Jean Marc Vallée used filming techniques in order to create the illusion of a documentary, signifying a sense of truthfulness through the camera work. The film is based on the life and events of Ron Woodroof, a real person who was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s and who challenged the Food and Drug Administration on treatments for HIV/AIDS patients, as is portrayed in the film. This aspect of the film contributes to the illusion that the film accurately depicts reality, rather than a construction of Hollywood. Although the narrative within the film was inspired by true events, the story does not necessarily follow the events fact by fact. Major motion pictures in Hollywood often use creative license to produce more entertaining films. Documentaries, however, are understood as films that represent reality (Tagg, 1993), rather than fictional events. The documentary realism style of films allows fictional narratives to function under the illusion of truth, reality, and authenticity.
The documentary *mise-en-scène* used in *Dallas Buyers Club* is created through the specific use of light, sound, and sight. This is evident from the naturally lit scenes, the diegetic music, and the use of the “shaky cam.” Most of the camera shots are either extreme close ups or long shots. These types of shots, while visually different, are still usually focused on the characters within the scene, either close ups of their faces or long shots of their bodies in full. The shakiness of the camera frame, which is referred to in film as the shaky cam, is reminiscent of a home video. Vallée used mostly handheld, digital cameras to create this effect. Sound is also an important technique used by Vallée, as it makes the viewer feel as if they are experiencing the same thing as the characters in real time. The film utilizes diegetic music that comes from within the scene and contributes to the ongoing narrative. Often there is no music heard at all, only various noises from within the scene, as would occur in a documentary as events unfold in real life. In this sense, the music, or lack thereof, is important to the construction of the scene. As Ron’s disease progress, a high-pitched sound can be heard as a reminder of his pain. It can be related to the sound of a microphone that is not working properly, and is comparable to the feeling of a migraine headache. It is implied that only Ron is hearing this noise, and the audience, by extension, is witnessing an intimate part of his experience. These aspects of the film contribute to the overall function of the narrative because together they create the illusion of a documentary.

The documentary illusion is further perpetuated when the audience is reminded that the story is based on true events. At the end of the film, white text tells the audience what happened to the real Ron Woodroof at the end of his life. The note reads, “Ronald Woodroof died of AIDS on September 12, 1992, seven years after he was diagnosed with HIV.” Research on narrative persuasion notes that the more an audience perceives reality in a
rhetorical text, the more emotionally connected they will feel to the text and the events it portrays (Cho et al., 2012). Therefore, the more likely they are to identify with the characters and feel empathy for the events the characters experience. Thus, the documentary style of the film is critical to consider when analyzing the function of *Dallas Buyers Club*. In the next section of this chapter, I analyze the pseudo-documentary aspect of the film by highlighting particular scenes where it is most evident.

**Inspired by Real Events: Analyzing the Documentary Illusion**

As Ron’s illness progresses and he becomes increasingly weak, he finds himself in the hospital following a fainting incident. Dr. Eve Sachs gently wakes Ron up as he lies in the white hospital bed. As she talks to him about his condition, the clacking of heels can be heard as someone walks down the corridor outside his room. The frame of the camera watches from the foot of Ron’s bed and moves slightly, signifying that the camera is handheld. The lighting of the scene creates a sterile feel, as the yellowness from the fluorescent hospital lights glow overhead. It is during this hospital stay Ron first meets Rayon, as the two find themselves sharing a room as patients. Rayon introduces herself and tries to engage Ron in conversation; he responds by telling her to “get the fuck out of here,” even threatening physical violence if she gets close to him. Rayon still shows kindness to Ron, offering a game of cards and even helping him when his leg cramps. This interaction highlights Ron’s blatant homophobia and Rayon’s sweet demeanor. The two begin to play cards, with the sound of a ringing phone and muffled conversation audible from the hallway. Their dialogue is conversational. In this scene, the camera shoots from the same side of the room as the person speaking, yet never through their actual perspective. The outside noises that can be heard in the hallway further add to the construction of authenticity within the
film. It gives the illusion of being in a hospital room. This gives the feeling that the camera is in the room as Ron and Rayon interact, watching without interrupting as a documentary would.

Soon after Ron discloses the news of his illness to his close friends and co-workers, he comes home to find an eviction notice taped to his front door and “faggot blood” written across his trailer in red spray paint. In angry desperation, he yells at no one in particular, “I still live here, you hear me! I still fuckin’ live here!” He uses his shotgun to break the padlock off the door, only to find the inside of his home has been ransacked. Ron exhibits a mix of anger and panic, while the camera closely follows him frantically searching his house for hidden valuables. The camera bounces around dramatically, emulating Ron’s frantic behavior as he grabs wads of money from hiding places in his home. In this sense, the camera shots function to signify meaning. Ron’s face is tense throughout the scene. Close-up shots are used to show the emotion on Ron’s face as he grapples with this situation. The flood of individual lights in the trailer park illuminates the scene, creating an ominous and eerie setting. No music is heard in this scene. The only sounds are Ron’s movement, his panicked breathing, and the profane words he yells in frustration at the rest of the trailer park. The audience also hears the high-pitched sound that functions to remind us of his illness and physical decline. The audience is asked to experience Ron’s panic and anger alongside him through the camera shots. In this moment of panic, Ron seems to realize how his life has necessarily changed because of his diagnosis.

Shortly after Ron and Rayon become friends, the camera follows them around a grocery store. The camera tracks them as they move through the market, making their sickly bodies noticeable in the frame. The fluorescent light of the dairy aisle illuminates their path.
The camera shakes slightly as Ron and Rayon argue about what food products to get from across the aisle. The shaky cam functions to remind the viewer that the camera exists, similar to a home movie on handheld camcorder. As Rayon moves away from Ron to put an item back on the shelf, the audience is shown a long shot of her body. It is in this instance the frailness of her physical state is made obvious. At one point, the camera shoots through the glass door of the frozen food section as Ron continues to shop, as if watching his movements without interfering. The only sounds to be heard in addition to the dialogue are the rattling of the metal shopping carts and the running freezers filled with various frozen dinners. In this way, the sounds, lighting, and camera work in this scene are capable of signifying a sense of authenticity for the audience. The pair run into T.J., Ron’s friend who has rejected him because of his disease. The two men engage in small talk, remaining civil but terse. T.J. makes a comment about there being “fucking faggots everywhere,” when Ron decides to introduce him to Rayon. T.J. refuses to shake her hand, a sign of disrespect and ignorance, which immediately angers Ron. He puts T.J. in a headlock and forces him to shake Rayon’s hand. The camera focuses on Ron and T.J., shooting over Rayon’s shoulder, moving as the men move in their struggle.

After T.J. sulks away after shaking Rayon’s hand, the camera cuts to a shot of Rayon’s face, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly agape in shock. The camera cuts to Ron, who shrugs it off, and then back to Rayon, whose face has changed into a small smile of approval. This scene functions to further establish Ron and Rayon’s friendship, but also to highlight Ron’s shifting attitude toward LGBTQ individuals that he had previously cast as “other.” Due to the way he is constructed at the beginning of the film, there can be no doubt that Ron would not have defended Rayon in this way before his diagnosis and the events he
experiences as a result. It is in this instance that Ron’s character begins to take on a more sympathetic nature, allowing for the audience to feel more identification with him. The documentary style of the film contributes to this, as it creates an illusion that the camera is watching the events unfold in real time.

These particular scenes highlight the distinctive *mise-en-scène* of a documentary that is utilized throughout the film. This style of film instills a sense of reality and authenticity within the story. The characters and the narrative are capable of being perceived as a reflection of reality, and therefore call for more empathy from the audience. The more an audience perceives reality from a rhetorical text, the more emotionally engaged they are likely to become. In this way, the film calls for the audience to identify with the characters and their experiences. While the camera signifies certain meaning to the audience, it also makes visible certain representations. In this film, the abject is rendered visible through the HIV bodies of the two main characters Ron and Rayon. Through the visibility of the abject, the characters’ bodies mark them as the “other;” however the documentary style of the film asks the audience to identify with these representations, which is an unusual function of the abject. The audience is therefore called to identify with the characters in the camera frame that represent the abject due to their diseased state and their position as “other.”

**Abject Bodies: Representations of The “Other” in *Dallas Buyers Club***

*Dallas Buyers Club* makes the abject visible through the bodies of the HIV/AIDS victims within the frame of the camera. The camera shots highlight the sick bodies of Ron and Rayon. Ron’s body goes through a transformation throughout the film as his illness worsens. These characters are visibly marked by their disease; their bodies are frail and sickly. The thinness of their bodies represents the abject as it also represents death. Ron’s
thin, white t-shirt hardly touches his body and his jeans would fall down if it were not for the tightly bound belt around his waist. Rayon’s body is similar to Ron’s; she is so thin that her clothes seem loosely draped around her. Their bodies are grotesque in their diseased state. They can be compared to images from the liberation of concentration camps during the Holocaust. The thin bodies of the prisoners functioned to remind viewers of death and to let the viewers bare witness the horror that had been occurring, as they looked like thin skeletons rather than people (Zelizer, 1998). The state of Ron and Rayon’s bodies function to remind the audience of the inevitable death that comes with horrible trauma and illnesses. They are often shown in the hospital, with tubes and wires connecting their bodies to machines that work to keep them alive. Rayon is also shown getting physically sick as her illness progresses. Both characters also have marks of needles on their bodies, from both narcotic and prescription drugs. Through the film, the audience is constantly reminded of the decaying state of Ron and Rayon. It is in this way these characters come to represent the abject. The gaze of the camera in *Dallas Buyers Club* focuses on the frail bodies of Ron and Rayon as representations of the abject, making the abject present. There are specific instances in the film where the abject is particularly visible that I use to highlight its importance in the film.

While looking for treatment at the beginning of his diagnosis, Ron makes a trip back to the hospital to speak with the doctors. A nurse at the front desk offers to help him. He responds in a frustrated tone, stating sternly, “You want a list of my problems? My lungs are bleeding, my skin’s crawling, I’ve got a fuckin’ jackhammer in my head.” Ron sways back and forth slightly, holding a dark blue bandana to his mouth in an attempt to suppress his continuous cough. He seems exhausted and desperate. There is a scabbed wound on
forehead that seems to be fresh, yet unable to heal. His neck is thin, which makes his head seem heavy on his body. In this way, his sickness is ever-present, reminding the audience of death. From Kristeva’s (1982) understanding of the abject, this should allow the audience to feel healthy in comparison to Ron. Before his transformation, I would agree with this function; however, as he becomes a more likeable character, he also becomes more empathetic. As Ron’s disease makes itself visible through his body, so does the abject.

Before Ron and Rayon become close, Ron tries to convince Rayon to help him in his endeavor to sell alternative forms of treatment to other HIV/AIDS patients. They have a discussion in Ron’s car about this potential partnership, as the camera shoots from the backseat. Ron counts his money from what he earned so far as he tells Rayon he does not have enough treatment to sell to her and her friends. This highlights the homophobic attitude Ron has as he reasserts his hegemonic position to Rayon. He uses his identity as a position of dominance. She responds in disdain, “You don’t deserve our money, you homophobic asshole” and gets out of the car. She sashays down the street away from Ron; he slows the car to match her pace. Rayon refuses to look at Ron as he calls to her from the car slowly rolling down the street. In this moment, the camera shoots from the passenger side of Ron’s car and out of the window, creating a long shot of Rayon’s body. As they argue back and forth, she continues to move forward down the sidewalk. When Ron agrees to make a deal with her, Rayon stops abruptly and faces the car straight on. The camera captures her body in the full frame, making the thinness of her body visually evident. Her shoulders protrude as the rest of the body sinks below them. Her knees stand out like round pegs holding her thin legs together. This long shot creates a clear image of Rayon’s thin body and the abject that is associated with it.
Throughout the film, Ron and Rayon are shown taking both prescription and illegal narcotic drugs. It is implied they are drugs addicts, especially Rayon, which further contributes to her rapid, physical decline. Ron is often shown injecting himself in his upper thigh with Peptide T, the alternative treatment for HIV he brings back from Mexico. His leg is covered with bruises from previous injections and his thigh is very thin. These bruises are both grotesque, yet necessary to keep him alive. The needle track marks function as the abject on Ron’s body, as they represent his rejection of death through his medical treatment. The abject is that which a subject must “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). It is something to fear yet it is necessary to survive. Ron and Rayon both represent the abject, yet in seemingly different ways. I analyze how Ron and Rayon represent the abject in their state of bodily decline to understand how the abject is capable of functioning in this film.

“Life is Strange”: The Abject in Rayon’s Decaying Body

It is clear Rayon is further along in the disease from her quickly decaying state. In desperation for money to pay Ron back for his help, she seeks help from her father. Rayon wears a full suit in an attempt to look more like a man and less like herself. The suit hangs on her thin frame, making her seem thinner than usual. She does not wear any make up and her hair is pulled into a low ponytail at the nape of her neck. From the awkward and emotional interaction between Rayon and her father, we can understand their relationship is strained due to Rayon’s identity as a transgendered woman. This is reflective of some of the attitudes the general population has toward trans individuals; social acceptance is often scarce for this group of people. As she cries to him, she softly says, “I’m sorry, Daddy.” Rayon explains that she is sick, yet her father refuses to help because he rejects her lifestyle as an “other.” In
the scene that follows, the camera shows Rayon in the motel room where she lives. The focus is on her body as she slowly moves to her vanity, wearing only underwear. The camera frame shoots from the side, making it noticeable that the outline of her rib cage can be seen on her back. Her body seems weak and tense. The camera shifts focus to her face looking into the mirror, holding a pink dress against her body. She says to herself, “God, when I meet you, I’m going to be pretty. If it’s the last thing I do.” She breaks down in tears, covering her mouth with her hand. This implies she knows the end of her life is approaching, making the abject ever present with the looming threat of death.

Knowing the quick progression of her illness, Rayon sells her life insurance policy to pay Ron back for all of his help. Ron seems surprised and touched by this gesture. He moves slowly toward her, with his hand outstretched for a handshake to thank her. The scene is quiet, other than the dialogue and movement of the pair. Two yellow lamps light the motel room where they are staying. As they shake hands, they slowly pull each other into a hug. The camera shoots over Ron’s shoulder at Rayon’s face. As she wraps her arms around Ron, multiple sores on her hands are made visible. There are dark circles under her eyes and her face is ghastly pale. Although the two are both very thin, Rayon is significantly smaller than Ron, making her state of illness visibly obvious in comparison. The emotional connection bond between these two individuals once again displays Ron’s shifting attitude, making him a more likeable character to identify with.

While Ron travels in search of alternative treatments, Rayon’s condition worsens. She is shown lying in bed with black stockings on; her legs are so thin that the stockings are loose on her. She listens to and sings along with a song crooning from the stereo, “life is strange.” She begins to cough violently, leaning herself toward the edge of the bed in an effort to
control the cough. She realizes she is coughing up blood and begins to sob in fear. She expresses that she does not want to go to the hospital to the friend that is with her at the time. Her friend, who also appears frail and thin, tries to help her out of bed and out the door to get help; the camera shoots from within the room. Rayon pushes the friend away from her toward the open doorway, causing light to spill in around his body. The camera focuses on the silhouette of his thin body, making the abject ever clear in this moment. The silhouette can be compared to an x-ray of a human skeleton; all that is visible is the outline of bones. Rayon cries, “I don’t want to die” while the film bounces around by her face, imitating the fear and panic she is experiencing. The fear Rayon feels toward her inevitable death reflects the function of the abject as discussed by Kristeva (1982); as a reminder of death, the abject is something to fear as an ambiguous and destructive condition of the self. The sores that were on her hand are now visible on her face as well; her decaying body can no longer heal itself. Rayon is taken to the hospital, where the camera focuses on her body from across the room. She lies in bed, seemingly unconscious and clearly near death. In this progression of her illness and the decline of her physical body, the audience is constantly inundated with the abject. She dies soon after this scene, causing Ron much grief and sadness.

The bodily fluids and the state of Rayon’s physique represent the constant threat of death. The frailness of the bodies in the film, the presence of blood and wounds, and the constant reminder of death come together to represent the abject. This state of being is undesirable, which allows Ron and Rayon to function as the abject. The abject usually functions to let the audience feel superior to the abject; it is in this way the abject represents the “other,” by representing that which the viewer is not. Their diseased bodies ask for sympathy from the audience, particularly toward the end of the film as Rayon’s disease
rapidly progresses. Through the lens of visibility, we can understand the abject as capable of shifting the knowledge and preconceptions of the audience. Visibility has the potential to cause awareness and shape reality (Foucault, 1977; Vivian, 1999). In *Dallas Buyers Club* the visibility of the abject through the alternative lifestyles of Ron and Rayon function to shape the understandings of “other” as part of the abject. Although Ron’s body functions as the abject, he struggles to maintain and negotiate his identity, and therefore comes to represent abject masculinity in his life crisis.

**“Rock Hudson Bullshit”: Abject Masculinity and The Struggle for Hegemony**

In *Dallas Buyers Club*, the representations of masculinity and the crisis that is posed through Ron’s disease are important to consider in relation to the gendered functions of the film. Masculinity is represented through a combination of Ron and Rayon’s separate identities and their state of abjection. While Rayon represents the abject through her decaying body, Ron comes to represent the abject through his struggle to maintain a hegemonic masculine identity as his body steadily declines. There are multiple masculinities; forms of masculinity that are in trouble or under threat are capable of functioning as the abject, which is evident through Ron’s illness. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS as the gay man’s disease during the period of the film contributes to this perceived crisis. The disease functions as a threat to Ron’s manhood and his desire to maintain a traditionally masculine identity. He must therefore find ways to renegotiate his identity through his illness. This is an important aspect of the film to discuss, as it can be telling of current sociocultural anxieties about hegemonic masculinity and the “other.” The more we can understand the construction of gender and the abject in the narrative, the better equipped we will be at understanding the process of identification within the film and the possible sociocultural implications. This
theme will be analyzed to understand the possible function of gender roles in relation to the abject in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

From the beginning, the film illustrates Ron’s hegemonic masculinity through his dominant and aggressive behavior toward others. He attempts to assert himself over both women and men within the very first scene; this occurs through his sexual interaction with two women and his deceptive game of gambling with a group of men at the rodeo. He uses the rodeo to signify his hegemonic masculinity. Ron seemingly does whatever he wants, unafraid of the consequences of his behaviors. In this way, his behavior seems normative in relation to his identity; it is implied that as a man, he is naturally aggressive, violent, and profane. Although he portrays traditional masculine characteristics, such as aggression and toughness, it is clear something is wrong from his excessive coughing, thin body, and the aggravating, high-pitched sound that is constantly heard. Ron’s disease challenges his hegemonic status and forces him to reassert and renegotiate his dominant position.

In the opening scene of the film, Ron is shown having sex with two women in a dark area of a rodeo arena. He appears to be in a hidden stall that looks into the center ring. It can be inferred that Ron is with women, as the audience is shown the long, blonde hair of one of them. The camera shoots from Ron’s perspective, filming from over his shoulder as one of the women is pushed against the wall. Their faces are shown for only brief moments, making their female identity ambiguous. The majority of the camera focuses on Ron in this scene, highlighting his dominance over the women. Ron asserts power over the women by maintaining control of the encounter. The blonde woman is forced against the wall of the stall, while Ron covers her body with his. Ron is rough and forceful in his movements, further showing his hegemonic masculinity and dominant position over the women. Ron’s behavior
is reminiscent of traditional ideas of hegemonic masculinity, as it is often associated with
toughness, autonomy, and dominance.

Through the slats of the stall, the audience is shown the rodeo that is ongoing during
Ron’s sexual interaction. The scene comes to an end as the man riding the bull in the center
ring is thrown from the animal and lies face down in the dirt. As this is the beginning of the
film, it foreshadows Ron’s fate. The rodeo serves as an analogy for Ron’s masculinity
throughout the film, both beginning and ending with it. This rider in particular functions to
foreshadow the struggle and crisis Ron experiences throughout the narrative. The rider
struggles to stay on the bull similar to how Ron struggles to maintain his masculine identity.
His diagnosis throws him from the expected trajectory of his life and his identity, which can
be compared to the way the rider is thrown from the bull. During this scene, the audience is
introduced to the high-pitched sound of pain that comes from Ron’s perspective. This noise
foreshadows the pain Ron will experience throughout the narrative, representing the abject as
the undesired subject position.

Along with his identity, Ron’s illness is also established at the beginning of the film.
He finds out that he is sick in an unintentional way; after an accident at work, he is brought to
the hospital where the doctors, running standardized tests, discover he is HIV-positive. His
first response is to angrily declare the diagnosis as “cocksucking Rock Hudson bullshit.” The
doctors ask routine questions, including if Ron has engaged in intravenous drug use. Before
they can ask if he has had a homosexual relationship, he cuts them off by shouting, “Did you
say homo? Are you fucking kidding me? I ain’t no faggot mother fucker.” He responds
defensively, almost laughing at the possibility that he could have HIV/AIDS because he
identifies as heterosexual and hegemonically masculine. This highlights his initial
homophobic attitude and his disdain toward the LGBTQ community, before the shift in his attitude has taken place. He questions the credibility of the doctors, shouting, “Look at me, what do you see? The goddamn rodeo, that’s what you see!” Ron curses at the doctors, stating they must have made a mistake. Ron’s vulgar reaction to the diagnosis illustrates the threat he feels toward his identity. He uses his identification with the rodeo in an attempt to establish himself as a heterosexual man and to therefore discredit the diagnosis that threatens his masculinity. In this way, the rodeo represents what Sisco King (2009) refers to as a hegemonic ideological formation. The rodeo functions to allow Ron to assert his hegemonic status in an obvious way to the characters within the film and to the audience who serve as witnesses to his narrative.

Throughout the film, Ron incessantly tries to find treatment for his disease, and eventually finds a staff member of the hospital who agrees to illegally sell him AZT at an elevated price. During one of their meetings, the man tells Ron he cannot get any more AZT for him. Ron feels ripped off and angrily takes a swing at the other man. Due to his weak, abject body, he misses and falls on his face, which causes him to become unconscious. The high-pitched noise is heard, making it evident of his decaying body. Ron is unable to exhibit toughness the way he once would have because his body is failing him. In this instance, the abject makes itself clear through Ron’s weak state. This moment is part of the crisis for Ron; however, he uses the crisis to reassert his masculine subject position. Once again, Ron is admitted to the hospital, making the abject present once again.

As Ron sits on the hospital bed in a typical, open-back hospital gown, he comes to represent abject hegemony, and therefore abject masculinity. His body is decaying, which presents a threat to his masculinity due to the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and his
physical state of being it creates for him. His disease causes him to be labeled as “other,” which is characteristic of abject masculinity. Masculinity is capable of absorbing features of the “other” because of its normative position. Ron’s crisis of masculinity and his struggle to maintain a hegemonic identity functions in a similar way as described by Sisco King (2009). Sisco King (2009) argues that white masculinity, which Ron represents, is able to maintain its hegemonic position of dominance through moments of crisis. These moments allow hegemony to take on representations and characteristics of the “other.” Ron’s diseased body represents the abject; yet his masculine identity and the behavior he exhibits as a result constantly present a challenge to it. This is what Kristeva (1982) refers to as the ego split, because Ron experiences the abject, yet attempts to reject it at the same time. The abject is a part of him, something that he cannot get rid of no matter how much he despises it. This causes Ron to experience a loss of self that he must renegotiate and repair throughout the film. Ron’s state of abjection presents a crisis to his masculinity, yet allows it to maintain power at the same time. His hegemonic identity is rigid; however, his disease allows him to recognize and appreciate other forms of identity. Although Ron’s identity is continually challenged throughout the film, the hegemonic status that is constructed pre-diagnosis allows him to remain in a position of dominance, even in a moment of crisis. Ron is initially constructed as an unlikeable bigot; however, his struggle of identity throughout the film and his disease allow him to function as more sympathetic character.

In today’s society there are certain sociocultural expectations that are associated with gender. Men and women are expected to behave in accordance with the gender behaviors, norms, and attitudes that are associated with their biological sex. Ron and Rayon challenge some of these preconceptions of gender. Rayon does this in particular, as her character
represents a male to female transgender identity. As foils, Ron and Rayon portray different traits of gender identity, as Ron is rough and controlling while Rayon is friendly and sensitive; in this way, Ron represents hegemonic masculinity and Rayon represents traditional feminine characteristics. Heteronormativity is challenged in a sense, as Ron becomes defined as the “other;” however, it is clear from his behavior he still identifies as a heterosexual, masculine man. During the initial diagnosis, his masculinity is marginalized as he struggles to maintain and negotiate that identity throughout the film. Ron is still able to maintain power and dominace through his crisis because of the hegemonic status he asserts prior to the diagnosis. He continues this behavior throughout the narrative; he often overcompensates through “tough” behavior. This includes his vulgar and violent use of language, as well as his interactions with others, particularly women and gay men. Ron continually reaffirms his dominance in an attempt to make up for his masculinity is crisis.

Ron’s experience with HIV/AIDS creates a threat to hegemonic masculinity, as he identities as a tough, heterosexual, rodeo cowboy. It shakes his life as he is shown being rejected from his friends, from his home, and from his job. His disease forces him to connect with the LGBTQ community that he had previously rejected. This group seems to take him in with open arms, despite his previous behavior toward them. Through Ron and the abject, we can come to understand a different function of hegemonic ideological formations. Hegemony is capable of functioning through the abject. Although Ron retains much of the vulgarity and aggression that contributes to his masculine identity, his attitudes and beliefs shift through the relationships he forms as a result of his illness. In his diseased state, Ron is marked as “other” and the abject. In this way, he experiences a transformation of character.
A Call for Empathy: Identification with the Abject

As discussed throughout this chapter, the character of Ron evolves during the course of the film. He begins the story as a homophobic man who exhibits aggressive behaviors toward anyone who crosses his path. Due to this, his character is marked in a negative way. Through his disease, his identity as a masculine rodeo cowboy is threatened and he comes to represent the abject. As he negotiates his illness and his attitude begins to change, he becomes a more sympathetic, likeable character. This opens the possibility of identification with Ron for the audience through the documentary illusion that is created within the film. Identification is a form of rhetorical persuasion in which individuals feel connected, or consubstantial, with one another. The more identification an audience experiences, the more likely they are to be persuaded.

The camera often uses close up shots to focus on Ron’s face in a state of emotion. As he begins to accept his diagnosis and after he has learned more about the disease, there is a scene where Ron is shown praying. This is a different side of him that has not been shown before. In this moment, he seems vulnerable and sad, as if he feels hopeless. The camera shoots from across a prayer alter filled with the red glow of flickering candles. These lights are blurry, as the shot provides a close up of Ron’s face. His eyes are closed and his voice sounds choked up, as if he is holding back tears. As he begins to pray, the high-pitched sound can be heard, reminding us of his sickness and his state of abjection. In typical fashion, he swears and drinks liquor while he prays. Directly after this scene, the same ruby glow from the candles at the alter illuminates the strip club where Ron sits at a table in front of the stage, almost as if the camera has zoomed out and he was there the whole time. There is a sympathetic sense to this scene, as Ron seems out of character in his vulnerability, opening
up space for identification. The emotion that is involved in his vulnerable state contributes to this as well, as identification can also occur through sympathy. This highlights Ron’s identity struggle between masculinity and disease. Through his struggle, he still maintains his identity; however, his attitude and values clearly shift. Burke (1969) argues identification can occur through expressing attitudes and ideas. As the audience is asked to witness Ron’s story through the film, we can understand the change in his beliefs and goals. As Ron’s attitude toward others changes, he becomes a more persuasive character for the audience to identify with. This is part of the process of identification (Burke, 1969, Davis, 2008). This scene, although short, functions in a way to allow the audience feel identification with Ron in his state of desperation.

Throughout the film, Ron refuses to give up in fighting for his life. He strongly disagrees with the Food and Drug Administration’s policies on unapproved treatment for terminally ill individuals. He argues that as a dying man, he has the right to try any drug he believes will help him live. His fight for himself and others suffering from HIV/AIDS is admirable, as he refuses to take no for an answer and continually finds innovative ways to go around the law. He goes as far as dressing up as a pastor in an attempt to gain easy access back over the United States’ border from Mexico. After Rayon dies, Ron offers to sell his car in order to pay for the treatment of a man who cannot afford it. This highlights his commitment to his cause and the shift in his attitude toward the LGBTQ community as he continues to help them at whatever cost. Ron’s change in behavior makes it possible for the audience to feel emotionally connected to the narrative. As he becomes more likable, he also becomes more engaging. The documentary style of the film contributes to this, as it creates an illusion of authenticity for the audience. The audience is asked to view the events that
unfold within the film as an accurate representation of reality, and therefore asks the audience for empathy. This allows the audience to feel like they are sharing in something personal with the characters in the film.

Ron goes to trial in San Francisco in an attempt to fight the FDA’s policies. The judge on the case agrees with Ron’s side of the argument; however, the case is dismissed, as it is ruled there is no legal authority. While at the trial, Ron seems to be having difficulty moving quickly, making the advancement of his disease evident. The high-pitched sound can be heard faintly throughout the scene. He wears a suit that covers the thinness of his body; however the abject is still made visible through his emaciated and tired-looking face. After the trial, he returns home to the buyer’s club headquarters, defeated by this loss. As he opens the front door, his friends stand around applauding him for his efforts. He seems confused at first, as he lost the case, yet touched and happy by their show of approval. This moment functions to illustrate how Ron’s attitude, life, and character have changed so drastically throughout the film. It calls for identification from the audience as a scene filled with emotion. The documentary filming techniques used throughout the film work to create a sense of reality and therefore ask the audience to identify with the characters and the events within the film’s narrative. This scene in particular reminds the audience of the hardships Ron has experience through his disease and how it has changed his attitudes toward others in a positive way. The identification in this instance asks for empathy from the audience with Ron because it reminds the audience of the immense transformation he has undergone.

The final scene shows Ron back at the rodeo where the film began. This time, he is getting on a bull to compete in the ring. The high-pitched sound can be heard as he prepares to enter the ring, while the muffled voice of an announcer can be heard over the speakers.
The final camera shot comes through the slats of the rodeo ring, capturing Ron as he fights to stay on the bull. In this sense, the story comes full circle and the audience is confronted with the rodeo analogy once again. Similar to how he struggles to stay on the bull, Ron has fought for his life and for the lives of others he cares about. He struggled with his identity, his disease, and with the FDA. Although much as changed for Ron, including his values and beliefs, he is still able to retain his masculine identity.

At the very end of the film, before the final credits, the audience is reminded that the film is based on the true story of a person named Ron Woodroof. The white text sits in the middle of the screen to finish Ron’s story. The audience learns that the real Ron died in 1992. The text reads, “A lower dose of AZT became widely used in later drug combinations that saved millions of lives,” implying that Ron’s work contributed to this change in policy.

Throughout the film, the audience is shown Ron’s perspective of his experience. We follow his story from diagnosis to death. In fictional narratives, such as film, the audience is asked to take on the perspective of the characters. It is in this way that identification can be created. As the audience views the unfolding narrative of the film as reality through the documentary illusion, they will come to identify with the characters and events within the story.

Through the visibility of the abject and the documentary style of the film, *Dallas Buyers Club* calls for the audience to identify with the representations of the abject. The documentary style of the film creates an illusion of reality and authenticity. The more something is viewed as a representation of reality, the more emotional involved the audience is likely to become (Cho et al., 2012). As a persuasive tool, identification is capable of reinforcing or weakening in audiences preexisting attitudes (de Graaf et al., 2012). This opens up the possibility of sociocultural implications of the film because of the
representations of “other” within the narrative. The two main characters, Ron and Rayon, represent the abject through their diseased bodies and the crisis the disease poses to their identities. The documentary style of the film therefore calls for the audience to feel emotionally engaged and to identify with the characters in the story. The abject is usually cast aside and functions as “other” to make the audience feel superior. Through the documentary filming of *Dallas Buyers Club*, however, the audience is asked to identify with the abject. This film allows for a deeper understanding of the function of the abject, identification, and hegemony that will be considered further in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The rhetorical analysis provided in this thesis examines the film *Dallas Buyers Club* through the lens of identification. Since its release, the film has experienced much success. It was nominated for both an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for best picture. The popularity and success of the film contribute to its justification as a socially relevant rhetorical artifact to study. Through this thesis, we can gain a better understanding of how the illusion of reality can be created through specific filming techniques. The abject can also be understood in a new way through the lens of visibility and identification. This analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club* provides a new way to understand how identification functions through the visual and through representations of the “other.”

When I first watched this film during the summer between my first and second year of graduate school, I was initially struck by the story. My mother had seen it in theaters and encouraged me to watch it, telling me she knew I would enjoy it. I have been interested in gender, particularly gendered representations in the media, for quite some time. It was this prior interest that drew me into the film and the story it presents about a straight man with HIV in the 1980s. McConaughey’s portrayal of Ron caught my interest, as I found his character to be rude and unlikeable at first because of his homophobic attitude. As the story progressed, I found myself drawn to the character of Ron and feeling sympathetic toward him. Initially, I found this to be similar to Kimmel’s (1987) crisis of masculinity because of
Ron’s hegemonic identity. As I dove into my analysis and continued to learn about rhetoric and communication as a master’s student, I was able to view the film in a new way and to extend the theories I had been learning.

This thesis began by asking questions about the construction of masculinity and sexuality in *Dallas Buyers Club*. With a focus on the representations in the film, I have addressed the research questions through the lens of identification in relation to the representations the abject that I have explored within the film. In chapter one of this thesis, I defined key concepts concerned with gender that I found to be important in regard to this research. Hegemony, masculinity, and the gender continuum were all posed as critical aspects of identity to understand, particularly in today’s mediated world. In chapter two, I explained the theoretical tools that were used in the analysis. I combined the work of Burke (1969), Kristeva (1982), and Sisco King (2009) as a way to interrogate the film and open the possibilities for its functions. In chapter three, I provided the rhetorical analysis of the film, focusing on the documentary style, identification, and representations of the abject. This final chapter will now offer a critical discussion of the theoretical and practical implications for this film. I will also discuss possible limitations of this analysis and ideas for future research.

**Critical Discussion**

Gender and identity play a significant role in the narrative of *Dallas Buyers Club*. Traditional views of femininity and masculinity are constantly being challenged in academe as we continually gain a better understanding of identity and how it is constructed, maintained, and negotiated. The gender binary has been replaced by the gender continuum where there are multiple identities that can be performed by any sex. Gender performativity is not something that should limit individuals to particular set of behaviors based on their sex.
Rather, we should consider the intersectionality of the multiple identities of any given individual. *Dallas Buyers Club*, although still with its problems which I discuss later in this chapter, offers a more contemporary view on gender identity through the alternative characters that are made visible. The film focuses on the story of a heterosexual man; however, the relationships he forms with LGBTQ individuals throughout the story contribute to his character transformation and opens up the possibilities of identification from the audience.

*Dallas Buyers Club* allows scholars to view the abject in a different way through the documentary realism style. In this film, the audience is asked to identify with the abject that is made visible through the decaying bodies of the characters that come to represent death in the film’s narrative. This is unique, as the abject usually functions to allow the audience to feel superior in comparison to what has been marked as the “other.” In the case of *Dallas Buyers Club*, the abject functions to ask for empathy and emotional involvement from the audience because the illusion of reality is created by the filming techniques of the film. Abject masculinity comes to be represented through the abject bodies and the crisis of identities that are expressed in the film, particularly with Ron and Rayon. In this way, the film asks for identification with representations of the abject. This can give us a better understanding into the process of identification, particularly in relation to the “other.”

In reflecting on my analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club*, I would like to discuss the interpretations I have drawn. The documentary style used in fictional film calls for more emotional connection from the audience. The more a film is perceived to be truthful and realistic, the more identification an audience is likely to experience with the events and characters within the film (Cho et al., 2012; Tagg, 1993). The visual is capable of functioning
as a reflection of reality in this way, which may have implications in regard to sociocultural and political notions. This is particularly relevant to *Dallas Buyers Club*, as the film focuses on a man who embodies neoliberal behaviors and ideals. The film also offers more visibility to alternative representations, which reflects the growing visibility of LGBTQ characters that has occurred in contemporary media. The gendered aspects of the film are also important in this regard, as they are capable of shaping preconceived ideas and concerns about gender, sexuality, and hegemony.

The pseudo-documentary style that is created in the film calls for this identification; however, we are asked to identify with representations of the abject, which are made visible through the sick, HIV-bodies in the film. In particular, the camera focuses on the bodies of Ron and Rayon, whose physical states transform drastically throughout the film. The presence of blood, bruises, and the reminder of death allow the abject to become visible in this way. Previous understandings of the abject define it as an ambiguous and fluid form that is undesired, and therefore, rejected by the self (Kristeva, 1982). The abject functions as the “other,” allowing the general population to compare themselves as superior to it. The identification that is called for through the filming style of *Dallas Buyers Club* allows the abject to function in a unique way, as the audience is asked to feel sympathy, empathy, and an emotional connection to the characters and the story.

In the film, Ron represents abject masculinity. HIV presents a threat to his hegemonic masculinity; through this crisis he struggles to maintain and reassert his dominant position to others. Although his masculinity is in crisis, it still retains power as the dominant and natural gender. He is asked to give up his hegemonically masculine identity, yet Ron constantly struggles to reassert his dominant position, particularly to women and other marginalized
identities. Ron represents the abject in his sickly state, which allows hegemonic masculinity to function through the abject. His attitudes shift throughout the narrative, but because his hegemonic position is constructed before his diagnosis, he is able to maintain parts of his previous identity. Identity is taken for granted as a fixed and stable entity; however, gender is in a constant state of flux. This is true for all gender identities, as there are multiple femininities and masculinities that can be performed by any sexual identity. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form in our society and is therefore regarded as natural and normal. It is in this way that it can maintain power, even through something as threatening as disease. Even while in crisis, Ron is able to maintain his hegemonic status because of this. He consistently exhibits traditional behaviors that are associated with hegemonic masculinity. Although Ron experiences a threat to his identity, his assertive, and often aggressive, behavior toward others suggests he still perceives himself as a dominant male. This allows for a deeper understanding of the immense power of hegemony he is able to consistently retain, even when it is tested and challenged.

From this analysis, we gain a better understanding of how gender, hegemony, and the visual function to create persuasion in a mediated rhetorical text. With this, there are sociocultural and political implications that must be considered in relation to this film, as the media is capable of shaping and reflecting reality (Levina et al., 2000). Next, I connect the rhetorical analysis in chapter three to the current social and political climate in an attempt to understand how the film functions in regards to the *kairotic* moment.

**Practical Implications: Understanding Sociocultural Anxieties through *Kairos***

The concept of *kairos* is concerned with the opportune moment a rhetorical text is released into the public sphere. This concept suggests that the historical timing of a piece of
rhetoric is important because if the right thing is said at the right time, it is more likely to have a persuasive effect and is more likely to invite an emotional response from the audience (Dunmire, 2001; Kinneavy, 2002). Kairos helps move an audience toward the future, as the rhetor can use the timeliness of the rhetoric to let the audience know what is possible based on the current situation (Kinneavy & Eskin, 1994). It has unfortunately been left out of contemporary rhetoric as I mentioned in chapter one of this thesis; I discuss it in this analysis in an attempt to highlight its relevance and importance to the field. I argue Dallas Buyers Club was released during an opportune moment in society and in an appropriate way, as many of the ideas it presents are likely to be well received based on current perceptions and ideas in society. I will connect kairos to the current political climate and to what I believe are current sociocultural concerns regarding gender and sexuality to better understand how kairos can affect the function of Dallas Buyers Club.

Film has the capability of reinforcing, reflecting, and perpetuating sociocultural anxieties (Ehrenhaus, 2001). I argue this is accomplished in several ways through Dallas Buyers Club. The concepts of hegemony, masculinity, neoliberalism, and identity are all expressed through the film’s narrative. The documentary illusion that is created through the filming techniques is capable of signifying authenticity to the audience (Ehrenhaus, 2001), which contributes to the realistic portrayals of these concepts. The crisis of identity Ron experiences throughout the film can be telling of current sociocultural anxieties on political matters, as well as perceptions of hegemony and masculinity.

Ron struggles to maintain a hegemonic status throughout the film, as his diagnosis of HIV causes him to be cast aside as the “other.” I argue that this is reflective of what has been termed the crisis of masculinity. Michael Kimmel (1993) has used the crisis of masculinity as
a way to understand and analyze hegemonic masculinity in U.S. society for decades. Although for Kimmel the perceived crisis occurs due to the rise of feminism, his argument can be applied to Ron’s situation. Ron’s disease functions as a threat to his manhood. His identity becomes fractured due to the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS during the 1980s. As he becomes defined as “other,” his hegemonic status is diminished. He struggles throughout the narrative to find ways to negotiate and maintain his masculine identity. This can be telling of current perceptions and concerns of gender identity in the U.S. In our society, hegemony is viewed as something that should be continually reinforced by those who benefit from the patriarchal structure. Particularly, those who would fall under the category of hegemonic masculinity have a stake in maintaining hegemonic practices, such as the gender binary that places men in a place of power over women and other marginalized identities. Ron’s crisis can be compared to the perception that hegemonic masculinity is under threat as the public’s views on identity, gender, and sexuality become more progressive and as other groups gain more visibility, and therefore power, in the public sphere.

Although there are certainly problems with the representations within *Dallas Buyers Club*, the film allows for the visibility of LGBTQ characters. Rayon, one of the main characters, is a transgendered woman and many gay male characters are made visible to contribute to the story as well. Visibility is capable of reshaping and reinforcing perceptions of marginalized groups who may have been rendered invisible in the past. I would argue that the representations that are made visible are still problematic; however, they do suggest a slow shift in attitudes toward alternative lifestyles. As the public becomes more comfortable with contemporary and progressive ideas on gender and sexuality, mainstream media is reflecting these attitudes. *Dallas Buyers Club* serves as an example of how this is
accomplished in popular film. This highlights the importance of the kairotic moment, as the timing of the film contributes to the possible emotional involvement from the audience. As society becomes more accepting of marginalized identities, films with representations such as *Dallas Buyers Club* are capable of having an emotional, rather than a logical effect because of the timeliness of the rhetoric.

In line with the kairotic moment, there has been a widening of representations of gender and sexuality in the media due to current political issues for LGBTQ individuals. Gay marriage and gender equality are discussions on the forefront of most current political platforms. According to CNN, as of January 2015, 34 states allow same-sex marriage in the United States (“Same sex marriage,” 2015). As society becomes more accepting of “alternative lifestyles” and gender differences, films such as *Dallas Buyers Club* insert themselves into the mainstream media and provide plotlines that may not have been popular in previous decades.

*Dallas Buyers Club* can also be related to contemporary views on the politics. The current political climate has recently shifted to a neoliberal perspective, where big government is vilified and challenges to authority are encouraged (Winslow, 2010). In *Dallas Buyers Club*, the premise of the narrative focuses on Ron’s challenge to authority. Ron brings unapproved treatments across the border from Mexico and is stopped by government officials who are suspicious of his activity on multiple occasions. He greets these officials with a hostile attitude and witty, yet condescending remarks. Toward the end of the film, Ron goes to court with the FDA in an effort to challenge their protocol further, arguing that he should be able to use unapproved drugs. In this way, Ron becomes the hero while the governmental
agency is the villain. This film then enables neoliberal tendencies by encouraging the behavior and making it visible through the film.

Although the film represents neoliberal ideas about big government, it does not completely reject capitalism as a system. Instead, it focuses specifically on the FDA’s extensive policies and approval processes (K. Smith, 2014). The film embodies notions of the free market and capitalism in this sense. This anti-establishment theme is a large part of the premise within the narrative and is critical to understanding the function of the film. It allows Ron to function as the hero, while the FDA becomes the enemy. Ron refuses to back down and continues to fight for his rights throughout the narrative of the film. This is reflective of the neoliberal ideology in current society, as the government is perceived as the enemy and individuals are encouraged to constantly challenge and question authority. In this sense, the film perpetuates, while reinforcing current neoliberal ideas about the capitalistic society of the United States.

Theoretical Implications: Contributions to Rhetorical and Communication Theory

There are multiple theoretical contributions I would like to discuss in regard to this thesis. I have combined different theoretical frameworks through my analysis and I believe this can give us a deeper understanding of how certain theories and concepts are capable of functioning together in rhetorical texts. I do this in an effort to contribute to communication and rhetorical theory. I connect the abject, hegemony, and identification together through the documentary realism style of the film in order to extend these different theories. From this analysis, we can understand that communication can operate in a multitude of different ways, particularly in regard to identity.
First, this analysis serves to extend the current understanding of representations of the “other” through visibility. Visibility is capable of shaping individual realities. Tagg (1993) uses the documentary category of the visual to highlight how truth can be instilled in visual images. This thesis also extends knowledge on representations of the gender continuum, as the characters in the film portray nontraditional lifestyles in terms of identity and sexuality. The visibility of LGBTQ characters and alternative lifestyles opens up the possibilities for individual identities. As a main character, Rayon’s role as a transgendered individual is important to consider in regard to this. The representations in *Dallas Buyers Club* allow us a better understanding of how visibility can function in film, particularly in relation to marginalized groups.

Second, this research also offers a new understanding of Kristeva’s (1982) concept of the abject. Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as an ambiguous form of the “other” that exists through death, bodily secretions, and themes of destruction. It is in this way that the abject comes to fruition in *Dallas Buyers Club*. From this perspective, the abject, in its undesired state, allows the rest of the public to feel morally superior and healthy in comparison to the abject. We try to reject the abject because of this; it threatens the Western understanding of life and the myth of a stable subjectivity. HIV bodies serve as an example of this because it is something the general population is interested in because of their healthy status. We often find ourselves intrigued or fascinated by death, yet it is something to fear as defined by society. I contend that the representations of the abject in *Dallas Buyers Club* ask for empathy from the audience. Rather than being rejected as something to fear, the documentary aspect of the film asks the audience to feel emotionally connected to the characters that represent and experience the abject. As a function of the “other,” I suggest that the abject is
capable of becoming a sympathetic form that elicits identification, and therefore persuasion, from a rhetorical text.

Through this understanding of the abject, the analysis also extends Sisco King’s (2009) analysis on hegemonic masculinity as a representation of the abject. Sisco King (2009) argues that in *Fight Club*, hegemony is able to function through the abject. I would like to take this argument further, to use *Dallas Buyers Club* as an example of how the abject can function specifically through hegemonic masculinity. The abject poses a threat to identity, as it presents an opposition to an individual’s subject position. Moments of crisis or threat allow hegemonic ideals to maintain power by inviting them to assert their dominance. Sisco King (2009) refers to the concept as abject hegemony, which I would like to apply to hegemonic masculinity. In this analysis, I refer to this as abject masculinity. This type of masculinity can be considered as one of the many that can be performed on the gender continuum. Ron represents abject masculinity through his struggle to maintain his hegemony, even through a life crisis. Ron is forced to renegotiate his position in society, as he is cast as “other” because of his disease. HIV presents itself as a threat to his subject position, and therefore allows him to function through the abject. Hegemonic masculinity that is in crisis, or perceived as in crisis, as has been theorized in regards to our current society, represents this idea of abject masculinity.

Ultimately, through this analysis, we can gain a better understanding of Burke’s (1969) concept of identification. Through analyzing the documentary style of *Dallas Buyers Club*, I suggest identification is capable of functioning through the visual. Burke (1969) defines identification as a means for rhetorical persuasion; the more an audience identifies with a rhetor or rhetorical text, the more likely they are to feel persuaded by the message. To
enact identification, a rhetor or rhetorical text must use shared symbols to create meaning for the audience. In film, the audience is asked to view things from the perspective of the characters within the film. Mediated texts are then capable of persuading an audience to feel emotionally involved with the events and characters. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, it is the visual style of the film that calls for identification. The film creates a sense of authenticity for the audience, which asks for both sympathy and empathy.

Within Burke’s (1969) theory of identification is the concept of consubstantiality, which is how shared meaning is formed as people “act together” through common ideas, attitudes, and properties. *Dallas Buyers Club* calls for identification from the audience; however, we can also understand the process of identification and consubstantiality by considering the relationship Ron and Rayon form within the narrative. Throughout the film, Ron and Rayon move from enemies to friends; their relationship development can be viewed through the lens of identification. As Ron’s character transforms, he begins to act on behalf of the LGBTQ community. The disease functions as the exigency to dissolve some of Ron’s homophobic attitudes and to move him toward a substantive relationship with Rayon. In this way, Ron and Rayon begin “acting together” toward the same cause.

There is an ethical component to identification, because “the correlation between identity and property… is an ethical one” (Minifee, 2013, p. 37). Ron and Rayon come to share social substances and properties because of the circumstance presented to them by HIV/AIDS. Individuals are defined by properties, which can be organized “in goods, in services, in position or status, in citizenship, in reputation, in acquaintanceship and love” (Burke, 1950, p. 548). In *Dallas Buyers Club*, it appears Ron’s ethical commitment to establishing the club and advocating for other HIV/AIDS patients allows him to become
consubstantial with Rayon. The film then opens up space for the audience to identify with Ron as he negotiates his ethical principles and becomes a more likable character. The relationship between Ron and Rayon can be compared to the properties of “acquaintanceship and love,” as they communicatively negotiate and construct their place in the world together, allowing them to form a consubstantial relationship with one another.

The characters that the audience is asked to identify within *Dallas Buyers Club*, however, represent the abject. Identification typically involves two beings finding substantive commonalities that create a sense of community and connection. It is in this way emotion becomes involved in identification. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, the audience is asked to identify with the abject, which usually would function in line with Burke’s (1969) concept of division that is implicit with identification. From this analysis, I suggest that identification is also capable of occurring with representations of the “other.”

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Before I conclude this final chapter, I have a few critiques and concerns about the film, particularly in relation to the discourse surrounding it, that I believe should be addressed. I also would like to open the possibilities of future research in regards to this particular film, and the theories used in the analysis.

Much of the discourse surrounding the film argues that the heterosexual character, Ron, is constructed as a hero for the gay population within the narrative. The film has been referred to as the “story of a straight man riding to the rescue of the gays” (Bradshaw, 2014, para. 6). In this way, many critiques argue that the film belittles the experience and struggles of those who were inflicted with HIV/AIDS during this time (Bradshaw, 2014; Kenny, 2013; Scott, 2013). These critiques are concerned that Ron’s story leaves out the larger movement
of the AIDS crisis that occurred during the 1980s and early 1990s. The gay rights movement that occurred during that time is also left out of the narrative. Instead, the film focuses solely on the story of Ron Woodroof, when, in fact, there were large populations around the nation that were struggling and fighting for rights and treatments throughout this period of time. This is certainly something to be considered, and would be interesting to include in further analyses of this kind. The implications from this are still yet to be discovered, and I hope to explore this aspect of the film in future work.

This analysis focused on the visual aspects of the story; however, there is a large body of discourse that problematizes the narrative within the film further. I think this discourse could be applied to the gendered function of the film discussed in this thesis to understand how hegemony maintains power, particularly in subtle ways. Visibility and media could also be applied to this kind of research, as visibility is often wrought with problems. It would also be interesting to juxtapose *Dallas Buyers Club* with other mediated stories concerning the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and early 1990s. This may help understand how our collective memory and national identity is shaped in relation to this event in the United States’ history.

Due to the narrow focus of this particular analysis, some of the possible functions of this film have been omitted. I do not mean to disregard them; I think there are many different perspectives that can be considered in regard to this film, or any other rhetorical text. I mean to offer one possible function in relation to identification and gender. I think it would be interesting to analyze the political functions of the film in regards to the neoliberal ideals that are embedded within the narrative. This would be particularly interesting to study in regard to *kairos*. I think it would be worthwhile to focus on the discourse that discusses this particular part of the film.
Closing Thoughts

In our current society, there are still many discrepancies in regard to gender and sexual identity. As the subordinate gender in a patriarchal system, women still make 77 cents to the dollar (Casserly, 2013). Research also indicates that women whose partners earn a higher wage often work part-time or in lower earning positions (Casserly, 2013). This is not necessarily by choice, but because of the system of patriarchy that dominates our way of life. As messages of patriarchy and hegemony are continually internalized, we continually consent to the structure. Other marginalized identities face many difficulties because of this structure. The LGBTQ community faces issues of marriage equality, violence, youth homelessness, and social acceptance (King, 2015). The media certainly play a role in our perceptions of individual groups, as has been expressed throughout this thesis. I do believe our society is slowly shifting toward a more progressive mindset in terms of identity equality; however, I also believe we still have quite a ways to go before that equality is actualized. I also believe the more we challenge traditional ideas of gender and power, and the more we analyze and understand the function of hegemonic ideals in all facets of society, the more equipped we will be at challenging them with the hope for change.

Through this analysis, I have shown how identification with the abject as a representation of “other” can be possible through a particular style of the visual. Abject masculinity and hegemony are also capable of eliciting identification in this way. This thesis has provided a new way to understand the function of hegemony, the abject, and identification. The “other” is capable of permeating even the most dominant subject position. This thesis looks to understand the function of the “other” in relation to hegemonic identity in order to comprehend how it maintains power in society.
In light of this thesis, I urge every person to challenge and problematize notions of gender in their everyday lives. I think it is important to ask questions of why things are the way they are in order to understand gender is not natural, but rather a social construction. Beginning conversations with others and questioning certain expectations can assist in this. I believe that becoming aware of the power that the gender binary holds in our society can help us continually challenge it in the hopes of breaking it down. Problematizing the traditional binary may serve as a liberatory practice in this way. This will move us more toward the gender continuum, the idea that there are multiple gender performances and that gender is not based on biological sex. Gender is not natural or normal; it is a social construction that we learn from a very young age. It affects all aspects of our life; how we think of ourselves and others, as well as how we treat ourselves and others. There is no right answer for how one person should behave in accordance with gender; it is a matter of personal choice and individual identity. By questioning the strict enforcement of gender roles in our society we can also question hegemonic ideals. With the questions of gender, sexuality, and identity posed by this thesis, we can open up the possibilities for equality and decrease the likelihood of marginalization and the creation of “other.” The theory of the “other” argues that there will also be people defined in this way in comparison with another group; however, I believe we need to understand how the “other” is created and how it functions in order to better challenge hegemony and patriarchy in the world we have socially constructed.
REFERENCES


