

Critical Media Analysis: Marxist-Criticism and Queer Theory Analysis  
application to the TV show Pose (2018)

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### Intro & Summary of Show

The general focus of this analysis will be a Marxist-criticism as well as a Queer Theory Analysis onto the tv series, Pose (2018). Within my Marxist Criticism, I will specifically aim to ask the questions; how does the Logic of Capital (i.e. Profit-Maximizing Strategies) influence business practices or text creation in a way that limits diversity either through stereotypical representations or similar plots/narrative as past successful texts? As well as; how the series itself presupposes capital as a means of power within both the privileged and marginalized communities represented? I will do this through analyzing how class, labor, and wealth are represented within the context of queer subculture, the character nuances of Elektra, and the power dynamics in the show as a result of capitalism. Within my Queer Theory Analysis, I will ask the questions of if representations of Queer identity in the show are stereotypical, how the text celebrates expression of queer identity and LGBTQIA+ sexual orientations, and if the text perpetuates heteronormativity through compulsory portrayals of sexuality. This will be done through analyzing how Queer relationships are expressed and celebrated through the issues faced, how queer identities and experiences are portrayed through the art of ballroom, how sexual labels are not applied to certain characters within the text and how this translates to the audience. I believe this show did an excellent job at addressing many of the framework analyses we have done in class, and therefore could be easily analyzed through any of the perspectives. It is for this reason I attempted a marxist analysis for the first part of the paper, and finished the paper with queer theory; as capitalism as a theme takes large precedence throughout the text, it is not often discussed explicitly within the dialogue as much as queer theory framework. The queerness of the characters and how this is portrayed is arguably the most important plot point

of Pose, so I wanted to round out this paper by addressing how Queer theory can be specifically applied throughout the show to promote greater understanding of sexuality in itself.

Pose depicts a slice-of-life fictional representation of the true stories of queer people living through the HIV-AIDS epidemic in 1980 through 1990, specifically highlighting the stories of transgender women of color and the social and personal challenges they faced in this time as a result of the epidemic, homophobia, transphobia, and class inequality. The show itself highlights these specific stories through the plot, most prominently through how these characters participated in ballroom culture- the underground queer subculture cultivated in this time in which people “walk” by performing, lip-syncing, and modeling certain categories (similar to, yet separate from the art of drag). The categories themselves serve to epitomize and satirize social class, gender constructs, and labor or occupation- bringing to light the absurdity of these topics in a countercultural medium. The plot delves into how ballroom supplied a safe community for queer people at this time, as well as a means of survival- as the oppression and bigotry experienced by these individuals was life threatening not only in the medical sense of contracting HIV, but on a societal level as queer men and transgender women specifically, were constantly the victims of horrendous hate crimes on the basis of homophobia and transphobia.

### Marxist Criticism Analysis

The logic of capital is a recurring theme within the series mainly when it is talked about alongside the validity of ballroom as a means of capital. For many of the characters in the show, the ballroom culture was the first place where characters felt a sense of safety and community, while also getting to earn money from winning the prizes that come with performing the best.

In this time, it was immensely difficult for a gay man or transgender woman to be employed in part due to the societal irrational fear of contracting HIV which was spread through misinformation of the disease. So, the result of this was queer people only having the option to make money through ballroom; or to result to other means of profit through selling drugs, stealing, and sex-work. The show had representation of all these outcomes within the characters who participated in the balls, and the complexities that came with this as even those who participate have conflicting views on these types of work.

Bringing representation to the ball culture as a means of labor in this time for queer men and transgender women is one way the text subverts capitalism, as it strays from the stereotypical idea of “labor” in media, as well as how ballroom is a satirical performance of capitalism itself. For instance, there are many ballroom themes throughout the show which are geared toward making fun of the American dream or nuclear family- and the people who walk try to embody these characters in a campy, satirical way that highlights the absurdity of it. Another way the series does this is through the main protagonist Blanca, who participates in ballroom as a mother figure to the younger queer and transgender characters. Blanca is constantly pushing these characters to build their careers outside of ballroom, as she claims that is how they will be successful- as well as break from the societal oppression that wants them to fail. Her view on work and labor is highly influenced by the desire to defy oppression and prove people wrong about queer and transgender individuals by challenging herself and others to enter into spaces they aren’t represented in. For instance, she helps the character Angel break into the modeling world by highlighting her diversity, not attempting to make her look like other white models of the time, and actively excavates the space for her to be in. So,

labor is then not only the work these individuals had to do to make money, but also the work they had to do in order to make space for themselves in the professional world with queer or transgender identity. This labor perspective I believe subverts the narrative of capital as limiting diversity, as Blanca is constantly pushing the idea of developing a practice based off of skills or attributes the characters already possess. She does this by urging them to enter into the professional world- specifically by leaving behind the self-fulfilling prophecies instilled onto them through past oppression. Another example of this is how Blanca is constantly pushing Damon to enter into a dance school and be committed to it because of his abilities already being geared toward that. Blanca says multiple times throughout the show that, “the world doesn’t change, people change it”, which I believe explicitly expresses these anti-capitalist values as it goes against the idea of playing it safe or exploiting oneself; returning the autonomy to the person as an individual instead of a worker trying to fulfill a role. Blanca maintains this view as separate from only valuing success in a “professional” scape, as she is never judgemental of the characters who’s only option was to fall back on other means of making money because of societal constraints.

The idea of power is very nuanced within the series. The obvious examples of power are seen through the white rich men, there are many other examples of it that subvert stereotypical examples of power on the basis of identity, however still rooted in capitalist values. This is most evident within the character Elektra- a black transgender woman with a strong persona and confidence, as well as access to lavish clothes and items the other characters do not have. What makes Elektra a prominent character is how she centers “passing” in her identity as a transgender woman in society, as she most values her ability to be assumed as a cisgender

woman through the lavish clothes and material goods she possesses- and at the beginning of the series is judgemental of other transgender women who do not pass to the extent she does. A key moment within the series is when Elektra learns that her self worth and womanhood has been determined by her material goods. When she loses these items- she, for a moment, loses her own power and sense of self. These become regained when she realizes the power of the community and relationships she has with others, and quickly she bounces back as a powerful character. However, she eventually returns once again to consumerism when she has the money to do so. I believe this character arc is very interesting when analyzed under marxist analysis, because she is deemed to be a very capitalist oriented character at first as what she values and exudes are inherently capitalist ideals. Yet, by the end of the series, she values more communal ideals however maintaining a similar aesthetic of lavish materialism. While the arc itself is expressing the importance in not glamorizing consumption as the *sole* means of belonging, Elektra still maintains a materialist way of life, though her values do not match it as much as it did in the beginning of the series. In a sense, the text is only representing the capitalist economic system through Elektra's experience as she still returns to materialism and consumption as a means of expression, which only normalizes capitalism as a means of value in oneself.

Though there are many characters and moments throughout the series which subvert stereotypical representations of capitalism, the show itself presupposes capitalism as the means for having the most power for the majority of the series. This is where many of the challenges of the characters come from because the greater world is still operating under the constraints of capital. For instance, there is the idea of the "yuppie" that is made to be the white, rich, cis man

that works in an office as having the greatest form of power- as it is deemed to be the most secure identity and most protected in society. We see this specifically come through within the character of Stan, as he starts out subverting the expectation for the yuppie character- yet eventually turns back to what is expected of him because of how potent his power is. This power dynamic becomes extremely evident through the plot point of the transgender women being forced to turn to sex work in order to make a living- and the sole demographic for customers are these “yuppies”. No matter how much power or confidence a character seemingly has in her own circles, it changes immensely once she is with a customer. Though there are many representations of how these power dynamics become exacerbated once race and class become involved- I believe the series does this to intentionally discuss the issues behind valuing these ideals in a society. For instance, the action of limiting democratic ideals and principals to make more profit is something we see when Angel is attempting to break into the modeling world, and gets denied over and over on the basis of her skin color before getting her first job due to being “exotic”. This is to highlight the salience of the media conglomerates as gatekeepers, how representation is all based on profitability- as when it was not profitable to be “exotic” anymore, she was let go from that position. The idea of that happening in itself is extremely problematic, but the show’s intention is to bring light to the fact that this is something that *has* happened time and time again. This particular plot point is one of many that is present in order to bring awareness to these happenings and spark conversation- though the action is showing capitalism, it is not promoting it, and expresses it as a prominent issue.

### Queer Theory Analysis

Next, I will be conducting a Queer Theory Analysis onto the show, in which I will firstly address how the text presents and celebrates the expression of queerness through the characters. The show does this by writing into the plot real instances and experiences of oppression that transgender and queer people experienced in this time of history, not sugarcoating the reality of the atrocities these people faced. However, as the plot shows these horrendous experiences, it does not presuppose these challenges as the sole experiences of the Queer characters. This in turn allows these characters to be multi-dimensional, as well as not defined inherently by their sexuality or identity. Alongside the awful experiences that these people had to endure, it shows how within the communities there still existed an immense celebration of queerness at the same time it was being oppressed. Pose does this especially through how the ballroom scenes were written- for instance, when the character Damon was experiencing immense hardships from being disowned by his parents at the beginning of the series, and his confidence in his identity and queerness is shot, he finds the light again through ballroom as his identity is celebrated and he is able to explore it through participation within that space- and this eventually leads to him getting jobs within professional dancing from the skills and confidence he garnered in ballroom. This example can be used for many of the characters in fact, as each time someone experienced something homophobic, transphobic, or even just outright bigotry- ballroom served as a space and community in which queerness is celebrated despite what the characters experienced from elsewhere in the world. In this sense, queer people are not just written within the plot to experience these instances of hate and trauma, but also to show the life experiences of these people as more than what their sexuality



is. Furthermore, the plot strays from typical representations of transgender individuals having no power in society through the communities that were created to directly celebrate queer culture, and put queer and transgender individuals back on the pedestal they deserve. This then also shows queer identity as multi-dimensional, rather than other representations being rooted in oppression and challenges as the sole experience of a queer identity. The tv show is able to do this because of the representation of queer identities not only within the actors hired, but also the people writing the script as many queer people who lived through the HIV epidemic were hired onto the show throughout filming to accurately and truthfully portray these experiences. This ensures that the queer characters are created, written, directed, AND portrayed by LGBTQIA+ individuals- as well as grounds the representation within the lived community experience of people living with HIV at this time.

Similar to how the show presupposes capitalism as the highest means of attaining power in order to express the problem behind this idea; the show also portrays LGBTQIA+ identities as abnormal or “othered” from the perspective of a straight cis person interacting with them. This highlights the challenges which homophobia and transphobia caused for queer people at this time. It does this by portraying real hate-crimes which queer people endured, and real-life instances of what queer people had to resort to in order to make money- that can certainly be deemed as a stereotypical representation of queerness. However, I believe this is intentionally done in order to spread awareness, similarly to how being rich is expressed as having power within the plot. I want to mention that stereotypes are in fact stereotypes for a reason, and this reason is often rooted in further oppressing a group as a result of being marginalized. This marginalization then only allows for the group being stereotyped to be defined by this

one-dimensional idea of the group. For example, a stereotype in media for transgender women of color is often for the woman to be hate-crimed, beaten, and even killed when in the presence of a cisgender straight man. The show does not shy away from showing these instances- as the stereotype is grounded in real experiences of trans women- and is attempting to show the stance of queer identity as “deviant or morally incorrect” as an incredibly problematic and dangerous stance. For example, we see this within the character Candy’s story- as she is a transgender black woman who was brutally murdered by what we can assume was a straight cisgender client of hers one night on the job. Sadly, this story went entirely the stereotypical route as the murderer was never found and presumed to be a white man with money, and Candy did not get justice in the sense of her killer being punished or even found. However, the text subverts the stereotypical experience of this instance because it chose to then follow Candy’s spiritual experience after death. Doing this also allowed her to continue to be in the lives of her friends and family in order to heal each of those individual relationships before she truly passed on. Though this plot point was not necessarily rooted in reality, I believe it was a beautiful subversion of the stereotypical queer experience following a hate-crime. Instead of focusing on the brutality of the murder itself (as this theme has been done to death in queer media), the show focuses on the love and community that queer people were able to garner in this time of immense grief and little hope. I will however mention that the representation of queer cis women, lesbians, or AFAB queer people were not as multi-dimensional within the plot- as there existed one named lesbian character who is portrayed as very butch, and is only present in the plot as a nurse to HIV patients. While this is a somewhat accurate representation of what lesbians at this time in history were doing, it is very common in queer media to only

highlight experiences of queer men, or individuals assigned male at birth. While Pose was aimed at highlighting both the experiences of queer men and transgender women especially within this historical time of HIV affecting these specific identities- there also existed many experiences queer AFAB individuals at this time which were not nearly depicted as much as the other AMAB queer peoples' experiences.

Lastly, the text subverts heteronormativity through the experience of the character arcs of a person "coming out" or transitioning as the beginning of their character arc, rather than the end. What I mean by this, is that in many traditional queer media, it often focuses on the experience of acceptance of queerness in one's identity as the plot in itself- to the point where the end of the show is when the character is able to "come out" or transition" as a reflection of them accepting their queerness (i.e. Love, Simon, The Fosters, etc). Pose however goes against this by mainly having the coming out stories or transitions of the characters happen at the beginning of the series, or never a plot point at all with certain characters. Though you could argue that coming out or transitioning does immensely change the character's life, it is not the line that separates the character from heteronormativity- as it shows these characters as queer despite their ability to come out or transition, as sexuality and identity is preset regardless of the public's awareness of it. For example, the text especially shows this through its representations of what makes a queer person queer, or a trans person trans, in the dialogue itself; as when Angel tells a cis woman "looking at my genitals is the last place to look in order to know who I am"- broadening the expectation of queerness and identity as something far more expansive than simply coming out as such. Furthermore, Pose portrays sexuality as incredibly versatile and non-dichotomous, as many sexualities and gender identities are recognized within

the text such as transgender, bisexual, asexual, and pansexual- furthermore a label is not even necessary to bestow on someone in the text for them to be queer. We particularly see this within the character Papi- as his character's sexuality is brought into question throughout the series, yet is never actually specified as he is seen with many different types of people of all sexual orientations and identities. His sexuality is one that is portrayed as very versatile and non-conformative to a certain label- which I believe is many people's experiences with sexuality though is not often popularized. Sexuality is not something that can often be simply identified because it is entirely dependent on the individual's experiences with what they like and what they are attracted to- which can go far beyond the constraints society has for gender, as we see in the show when Papi becomes confused of his sexual "label" when he falls in love with a transgender woman (though there's no need to label what that experience is sexually, as well that it is reflective of a straight relationship, he at first believes he needs to label himself as something else due to societal expectations). So, I believe the show did an excellent job in achieving this representation of sexuality, because it is not dichotomous, and many queer characters within the show freely practice sexuality with all types of people, and forego a label for it.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Pose under a marxist analysis shows the series' nuanced take on capitalism as it presupposes it as a means to ultimate power, the inequities under that system, and the necessity for marginalized communities to conform to it in order to survive. Pose under a Queer Analysis brings to light the issues queer people experience under the expectation of

heteronormativity as well as homophobia through the representation of multi-dimensional queer characters- and also expresses how dichotomous labels onto sexuality and gender often essentialize queer people into stereotypical roles even today. While the text itself is driven by capitalism and the expectation of heteronormativity within society, it does this in order to bring awareness to how deeply ingrained these ideals are historically within all structures as it is entirely intersectional to identity. To not tell the story in this way would be doing a disservice to the marginalized communities who actually lived through this time and endured the obstacles of classism, materialism, homophobia, and transphobia of the era in conjunction with race, sexuality, and gender identity. By analyzing this text through a Marxist Criticism and Queer Analysis, I believe I am able to uncover a fuller scope of the intersectional oppression faced at the time; how little choices queer and transgender people had in terms of labor within society, the pressure to have a labeled sexuality or pass as cisgender to fit a societal role, as well as the necessity for queer people to create spaces for themselves within the broader professional world to survive.