Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2 Special Issue 1 (July 2025)

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Beyond the Binary: Intersectionality and Queer Identity in Global LGBTQ+ Cinema

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Abstract: This paper essentially tries to study the representation of queer identities in films through the lens of LGBTQ+ themes and queer theory. The curated selection of seven landmark LGBTQ+ films—Moonlight, Portrait of a Lady on Fire, Paris Is Burning, Call Me by Your Name, A Fantastic Woman, The Handmaiden, and Weekend—showcases the rich thematic and traditional diversity within queer cinema. These works not only portray queer experiences with authenticity and emotional depth, but also engage with broader socio-political issues such as gender roles, race, class, and societal marginalization.
Moonlight is a quiet yet powerful coming-of-age story that explores Black masculinity, queerness, and vulnerability across three phases of one man's life. Portrait of a Lady on Fire offers a radical feminist reimagining of the love story, centering the female gaze and emotional autonomy. Paris Is Burning, a seminal documentary, captures the resilience and creativity of New York's drag ballroom scene, highlighting the intersecting oppressions faced by queer people of color.
Call Me by Your Name paints a tender and poetic picture of first love and sexual awakening within a fleeting summer. A Fantastic Woman gives voice to a transgender woman navigating grief and social prejudice, making a compelling case for dignity and representation. The Handmaiden disrupts traditional gender and power dynamics through an erotic, psychologically layered lesbian romance set in colonial-era Korea. Finally, Weekend brings intimacy and honesty to a brief yet impactful gay relationship, resisting stereotypes by focusing on emotional realism.
The paper aims to analyse how selected LGBTQ+ films represent queer identity, intimacy, resistance, and intersectionality, and how these representations challenge traditional, heteronormative narratives in global cinema. Together, these films illustrate how cinema can both reflect and shape queer lives, offering counter-narratives to dominant ideologies and helping imagine more inclusive, fluid, and liberated futures.

Keywords*: Queer identity, intersectionality, resistance, intimacy, representation.*

Introduction

Cinema has long served as a mirror of societal norms, values, and philosophies, but it also holds the radical potential to reimagine worlds and identities. In recent decades, LGBTQ+ cinema has emerged as a influential cultural and political space, articulating diverse queer experiences while challenging the supremacy of heteronormative narratives. This paper explores how queer identities are represented in seven landmark films: *Moonlight* (2016), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), *The Handmaiden* (2016), and *Weekend* (2011). Drawing from queer

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theory and intersectional frameworks, this study investigates how these films portray intimacy, resistance, and identity across lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

I. Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory and Intersectionality

Queer theory, as articulated by scholars such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, critiques the notion of fixed identity categories and challenges the binaries that reinforce dominant understandings of gender and sexuality—such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual (Butler 23; Sedgwick 8). Rather than viewing gender and sexuality as innate or biologically determined, queer theory understands them as socially constructed, fluid, and performed. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity is especially influential, proposing that "gender is not something one is but something one does—an ongoing series of acts, gestures, and performances" (Butler 25). These performances are shaped by cultural norms and power relations, which reward conformity and punish deviation.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick further expands the discourse by analyzing how societal structures imposes heteronormativity and repress queer desire. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick identifies how the dichotomy of ""in the closet" versus "out" oversimplifies queer existence, and how knowledge and ignorance about sexuality are strategically deployed in power structures" (Sedgwick 9). Queer theory thus dismantles rigid taxonomies of identity and instead explores multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, complements queer theory by emphasizing that "identity is not singular but composed of multiple, intersecting dimensions—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Crenshaw 1244). Crenshaw originally used intersectionality to examine how Black women face unique forms of discrimination that are not reducible to either racism or sexism alone. In LGBTQ+ studies, intersectionality becomes vital in discovering how experiences of queerness are arbitrated by other axes of power and oppression. A queer identity cannot be disentangled from the racialized body that carries it, the socioeconomic context in which it is lived, or the cultural narratives that define it.

Together, queer theory and intersectionality provide a powerful lens for analyzing LGBTQ+ cinema. They move the discussion beyond visibility and representation to ask: Whose stories are being told? How are they told? What power structures are confronted or reinforced through these cinematic narratives? These frameworks allow us to cross-examine the ways in which film not only reflects but also shapes the lived realities of queer individuals—realities that are always molded by overlapping structures of privilege and oppression. As such, they are instrumental in decoding how queerness is arbitrated, performed, counterattacked, and politicized on screen.

II. Moonlight: Black Queerness and Emotional Vulnerability

Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* is a tender, tripartite coming-of-age film that traces the emotional and psychological growth of Chiron, a young Black queer man navigating a world marked by racial, sexual, and economic marginalization. Rather than following a typical "coming out" narrative, the film centers on silence, touch, and longing, using close-ups and ambient sound to reveal Chiron's inner world. "Rather than dramatize coming out or sensationalize queerness, *Moonlight* meditates on silence, touch, and longing" (Fleetwood 163).

Chiron's queerness is shaped not only by personal repression but by systemic forces that criminalize Black male vulnerability and queer desire.

The film's subtle, sensory style emphasizes the emotional costs of conforming to rigid ideals of masculinity. As Rich argues, "Black queer cinema must navigate the intersecting stigmas of race and sexuality" (Rich 36). This is most poignantly felt in the final act, where Chiron confesses to Kevin that he hasn't been touched since their adolescent encounter. Mercer

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interprets this as evidence of "sexual repression but the systemic denial of tenderness for Black queer men" (Mercer 121).

Through its quiet intimacy, *Moonlight* reclaims emotional depth and softness for Black queer identities too often rendered invisible.

III. Portrait of a Lady on Fire: The Female Gaze and Erotic Resistance

Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* reimagines the romantic period drama by centering female desire and eliminating the male gaze. Set in 18th-century France, the film explores the growing intimacy between Marianne, a painter, and Héloïse, her subject. Their relationship unfolds through acts of mutual observation, creating what Doane calls "one woman looking at the other with equal agency" (Doane 95). This visual reciprocity challenges traditional cinematic dynamics that render women passive.

Sciamma's resistance lies not only in content but in form—her camera emphasizes emotional nuance and shared glances over objectification. As Mulvey notes, "the male gaze traditionally positions women as passive subjects of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 62), but Sciamma counters this by portraying mutual desire and emotional autonomy. The film also resists queer tragedy by focusing on memory and longing rather than loss, embodying Halberstam's idea of "queer temporalities" that reject linear, heteronormative endings (Halberstam 109). Through its gaze and structure, the film becomes a radical act of queer storytelling.

IV. Paris Is Burning: Ballroom Culture and Structural Oppression

Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990) is a seminal documentary that captures the vibrant drag ballroom culture of 1980s New York, centering the lives of queer and trans Black and Latinx individuals who created spaces of visibility, expression, and resistance amid systemic oppression. The ballroom scene—composed of categories like "realness," voguing, and house affiliations—functions not merely as entertainment but as a complex site of identity formation and survival. As Bailey observes, the pursuit of "realness," or the ability to convincingly embody roles such as a businessman or a wealthy white woman, becomes a tactical performance that offers "temporary relief from structural marginalization" (Bailey 364). In this way, the ball becomes a space where fantasy and aspiration intersect with lived trauma and social critique.

Livingston's film provides a rich visual ethnography of queer life under duress, documenting how performance becomes both a personal and communal tool for reclaiming dignity in the face of poverty, racism, transphobia, and homophobia. The film celebrates the artistry, wit, and resilience of its subjects, revealing how the ballroom is not only a stage, but a haven of chosen family, affirmation, and subversive creativity. Yet, the documentary also raises significant questions about authorship, power, and gaze. bell hooks critiques *Paris Is Burning* for its framing, arguing that it reflects a white, external gaze that extracts spectacle without fully empowering its subjects: "the film reproduces white spectatorship and does not grant subjects full narrative control" (hooks 149). This tension situates the film as both a celebration of queer culture and a contested site of cultural commodification.

Ultimately, *Paris Is Burning* stands as a foundational text in queer and documentary cinema—one that simultaneously illuminates the beauty and struggle of its subjects while provoking ongoing debates about ethics, agency, and the politics of representation.

V. Call Me by Your Name: Desire, Ephemerality, and Queer Nostalgia

Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) offers a lush, introspective exploration of first love through the unfolding relationship between Elio, a precocious 17-year-old, and Oliver, a confident graduate student staying with Elio's family in northern Italy during the

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summer of 1983. The film's aesthetic—marked by slow pacing, warm lighting, classical music, and idyllic landscapes—creates a dreamlike atmosphere that evokes nostalgia and sensuality. This atmosphere allows the narrative to focus not on overt declarations of identity, but on the subtleties of queer longing and emotional awakening. As Andrews notes, the film "subtly explores the emotional complexity of queer desire" rather than engaging directly with identity politics (Andrews 211), portraying queerness as a deeply felt, personal experience rather than a political statement.

The film has sparked debate, particularly around the age gap between Elio and Oliver. However, many readings emphasize that *Call Me by Your Name* captures the bittersweet and universal experience of ephemeral love. The relationship is brief, but its emotional impact is profound, highlighting what Edelman calls "queer temporality"—"a nonlinear experience of time shaped by longing, loss, and fleeting moments of connection" (Edelman 41). Queer love in the film is not framed as deviant or tragic, but as formative and deeply human.

This affirmation is most powerfully expressed in the climactic monologue by Elio's father, who gently urges his son to honour his feelings rather than repress them: "To feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste." This parental recognition serves as a radical gesture of acceptance, positioning queer love as worthy of reflection, grief, and memory. In resisting shame and validating queer emotional depth, the film contributes to a broader cinematic project of humanizing queer experience, even when it exists within the boundaries of a single transformative summer.

VI. A Fantastic Woman: Trans Representation and Social Exclusion

Sebastián Lelio's *A Fantastic Woman* centers on Marina, a transgender woman navigating the grief of her partner's death while facing institutional and familial discrimination. Played by transgender actress Daniela Vega, Marina embodies a complex, dignified, and emotionally rich portrayal of trans identity—"an exception in global cinema where trans characters are often reduced to stereotypes or played by cisgender actors" (Serano 43).

The film critiques the systems—legal, medical, familial—that attempt to erase Marina's legitimacy. "Whether through misgendering, denial of inheritance, or physical threats, the institutions surrounding her embody what Dean Spade terms "administrative violence" against trans lives" (Spade 57). Yet Marina fights through poise, performance, and perseverance. A prominent scene where she sees herself defiantly singing on stage illustrates the liberatory potential of fantasy in resisting oppression.

Vega's casting is politically significant, challenging the erasure of trans actors and inviting audiences to witness trans experiences from a place of authenticity. As Trujillo notes, "representation without embodiment leads to symbolic annihilation" (Trujillo 211). *A Fantastic Woman* therefore offers more than visibility; it constructs trans subjectivity as resilient, nuanced, and indispensable to contemporary queer discourse.

VII. The Handmaiden: Erotic Sub version and Colonial Context

Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*, based on Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith*, relocates the narrative to colonial-era Korea and transforms it into a visually lavish psychological thriller and lesbian romance. The film's three-part structure offers everchanging perspectives, each revealing new layers of manipulation, desire, and agency.

Unlike Western portrayals of lesbianism, which often axis around tragedy or objectification, *The Handmaiden* centers mutual eroticism and resistance. "Its sexually explicit scenes are neither gratuitous nor voyeuristic but embedded in the characters' quest for autonomy" (Kim 310). Sook-hee and Lady Hideko, first complicit in patriarchal exploitation, eventually subvert

their roles and escape together—physically and symbolically dismantling the structures of male domination.

Colonialism, class, and gender traverse deeply in the film. The Japanese occupation of Korea provides a backdrop of cultural hegemony, and the exploitation of Hideko by her uncle reflects broader systems of imperial and patriarchal violence. Through deception, alliance, and eventually escape, the protagonists endorse a queer form of insurgency—"subverting both the male gaze and colonial power" (Chun 187).

VIII. Weekend: Queer Intimacy and Everyday Realism

Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* is a quiet yet profound film that explores the fleeting yet impactful relationship between two men, Russell and Glen, over a single weekend. Avoiding melodrama or spectacle, the film focuses on dialogue, emotional vulnerability, and the ordinary details of intimacy—trademarks of realist cinema.

What sets *Weekend* apart is its authenticity and refusal to conform to romantic clichés. The film explores issues of disclosure, internalized homophobia, and the socio-political implications of being openly queer. Russell, more reserved and closeted, contrasts with Glen's assertive queer politics, "creating a space for conversations around identity negotiation and self-acceptance" (Dyer 99).

The temporality of their relationship—a mere weekend—highlights the fleeting but transformative potential of queer connection. Rather than romanticizing or pathologizing queer love, Haigh presents it as ordinary, flawed, and deeply human. As Edelman posits in his theory of queer negativity, "resisting normative futures is a form of political resistance" (Edelman 4). *Weekend* quietly asserts this through its embrace of short-lived, non-teleological queer romance.

Conclusion: Queer Cinema as Counter-Narrative

Across diverse topographies, genres, and time periods, these seven films exemplify the array of queer identities and experiences. Each challenges dominant narratives—whether through aesthetics, narrative structure, or casting—and offers a vision of queerness as dynamic, intersectional, and resistant.

From *Moonlight*'s tender portrayal of Black queer vulnerability to *The Handmaiden*'s erotic subversion of patriarchal and colonial hierarchies, these films resist generalization. They interrogate structures of power—racism, transphobia, patriarchy, capitalism—and foreground queer agency and intimacy. Through memory, fantasy, resistance, and love, they present queerness as a lived, felt, and fought-for reality.

The representational politics at work in these films are not deprived of complexities. Questions of appropriation, access, and audience reception remain critical. Yet, as this study has shown, queer cinema is not merely a genre but a radical act of world-building. These cinematic texts expand the possibilities of queer futures, reminding us that representation matters not just for visibility but for existence, joy, and deliverance.

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