



An Exploration of Queer Cinema

Adapted from [Soupbone Collective](#) discussions in June 2020
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Overview

Representation is an ongoing site of struggle and triumph. Over the years, queer visibility has grown through media, and cinema has been an especially important medium in aiding conversations within the LGBTQ+ community and public sphere. While shows and films still abound with harmful tropes (“the token gay friend,” “bury your gays,” queerbaiting), queer media has honed an awareness of how we perceive ourselves and others, along with the ways media can enact the futures we want to see.

We began planning this series around a collection of questions and topics: how queer films reflect the timescapes of queerness, how cinematic viewing experiences encourage intersubjectivity, how media operates as a vital archive in affirming queer experiences. We wanted to celebrate Pride Month, too, despite the pandemic and the physical distances it wrought, yet we wanted to celebrate in ways that felt more genuine and sustained than commercial offerings. Thus, we turned to scholarship and reflection. Throughout this syllabus, you will find the questions and notes that guided our June discussion series, alongside ways to engage with queer media and the LGBTQ+ community at large.

Selected films

- ❑ *Moonlight*, dir. Barry Jenkins
- ❑ *Rafiki*, dir. Wanuri Kahiu
- ❑ *Happy Together*, dir. Wong Kar-wai
- ❑ *Mulholland Dr.*, dir. David Lynch
- ❑ *Mosquita y Mari*, dir. Aurora Guerrero
- ❑ *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, dir. Céline Sciamma

Disclaimer: this selection does not represent a definitive or canonical introduction to queer films. These were simply the films we were interested in and considered accessible enough to cover a large range of themes and topics. Queer cinema is a rich and diverse genre worth exploring further; for recommendations and suggestions, please see the end of this syllabus.

Week 1: Moonlight and Rafiki

Opening question: what were the queer films that you grew up with? Queer awakenings? In terms of representation, what do you wish you had or wish could have been portrayed better?

▣ Moonlight

“This is like a coming-of-age story, but it’s got to have one huge arc with all these peaks and valleys. It’s Eisenstein—the relation’s in the cuts. There is as much story between the stories, as there is in the three stories.” —[Barry Jenkins](#)

Discussion questions:

1. Is queer life inherently political?
2. What do you make of the ‘stages’ in which the film is set? What about the names that Chiron wears throughout the film: “Little,” “Chiron,” and “Black”?
3. There are so many beautiful formal components in this film: the cinematography, the colors, the soundtrack. We want to talk about “art” and what makes an “artful” film, as well as Jenkins’ comment on bringing the streets to art, rather than bringing art to the streets:

“When we shot at night, parents would come out and tell me ‘We don’t usually let our kids out after dark, because there are no street lights, but since you all got your movie lights, it’s a lot safer.’ Kids would come on the set and sit at the video monitors and watch me work and point at me and tell each other ‘He grew up here!’ I could tell from their faces that seeing me — this black dude walking around all this machinery, calling action — was an eye-opening experience.”

4. *Moonlight* is awash with the presence of the Atlantic. What are the implications of using water as a symbol in this film? What does it evoke, and what could it stand for if it had a meaning, especially in relation to queer experiences?
5. Parents in queer narratives can often come across as antagonistic figures: they notice that their child is “different”; they are both protective and hurtful; they stand in the way of their child’s identity, even if well-intentioned or well-meaning. Do you think Chiron forgives his mother? Does the film ask us to forgive her?

▣ *Rafiki*

“When Ziki and Kena are together, time seems to slow down, the colors around them seem to get softer as the two characters are saturated in the pleasure—and the relief—that many queer people will remember from their own first loves. [...] [Kena and Ziki] are forced by circumstance to engage in romance covertly, yet what comes through in the performances is the pleasure of being—truly—*seen*.”

—[Ren Jender](#)

➤ *Important context for the film:*

Rafiki was banned in Kenya, where same-sex relationships are illegal, “due to its homosexual theme and clear intent to promote lesbianism in Kenya contrary to the law and dominant values of the Kenyans.” In Kenya, no constitutional protections exist for LGBT people and sodomy carries a 14-year term sentence. *Rafiki* (‘friend’ in Swahili) was the first Kenyan film to be shown at Cannes Film Festival.

Discussion questions:

1. What are your thoughts on countries/places where deviation from heteronormativity is illegal?
2. What do you think about the ‘entirety’ of Kena and Ziki’s relationship? Is it ‘whole’? What is a ‘whole’ love story/relationship?
3. Does the storyline of their relationship remind you of any other queer films? If so, why?
4. Ziki suggests to Kena: “Let’s make a pact that we’ll never be like any of them down there.” How are rejection and utopia connected? What is being rejected, and what is being embraced?
5. A sense of utopia prevails through the mise-en-scene and aesthetic of film: the lilac of the sky, the “over there”, the luminescence of the club nights and music. Music and dance play an

important role in visualising this (queer) utopia where sexuality does not matter, and heavily opposes the gossiping and policing of Ziki and Kena. One might think of utopia as a place where things are “good”, often posing reality as a place which is not fully complete. Do you think film merely visualizes utopia as a form of wishful thinking, or do you think film has the ability to actualize utopias within an artistic medium?

Week 2: *Happy Together* and *Mulholland Drive*

Opening question: what does it mean for non-queer filmmakers to portray queer stories? What does it mean to treat queerness as an “aesthetic”?

▣ *Happy Together*

“It’s not a gay film. It’s a love story about being lonely with somebody else; being happy together could also mean being happy with yourself, with your past.”

—Wong Kar-Wai

Discussion questions:

1. Wong Kar-Wai’s work retains an exceptionally strong aesthetic: note the switch between black/white and color, the handheld shots, the scenes soaked in hues, the stylised surrealism, as if there is an excess of expression that cannot be contained within rational parameters. How does his cinematic style lend itself to telling and/or enhancing the plot of the film?
2. Let’s interrogate Po-Wing and Fai’s relationship: is it a good one? Are they happy? What does it mean to be happy? (Related, note the symbolism of cigarettes: “every flare-up of the lighter is like a flare-up of their relationship.” Cigarettes are cyclical and addictive with short life-spans, but they also provide temporary respite to smokers—i.e. to take a “smoke break” and sit apart from the world for a moment.)
3. Place is an essential theme in this film. There are references to “the end of the world,” along with Iguazú Falls, as seen on the lamp. Chang, ultimately, is able to roam free “because he has a place he could go back to.” Unable to travel back home, both Fai and Po-Wing are

psychologically and geographically stuck in Argentina, with nowhere to direct their frustration except at each other. Are their desired destinations emotional, physical, or both?

4. In the more tender moments of the film, we see Po-Wing and Fai cooking for one another. One might think back to *Moonlight* and Kevin's meal for Chiron: how does food operate as a mode of love within queer relationships? What types of boundaries (gender, social) are crossed?
5. Wong Kar-Wai states that *Happy Together* isn't a "gay film." One might think of an analogous marketing tactic employed by Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, which was touted as a "universal love story" rather than as a "queer" film. Do such descriptions erase the queerness of their stories? What is lost or gained by those types of statements?

➤ ***A quote to consider in conversation with the film:***

"And after walking around DC and talking with some of the queer Asian Americans I met, I remembered how isolated so many of us are. As queer Asians, I think we fight the isolation by constantly looking for our homes, that place suffused with so much significance and family history. We yearn for the patterns of kinship which have sustained us across centuries and generations, which have helped us to survive the shock of arriving and adapting to this country. Yet, identifying as queer often means the loss of these things. Whoever (nother dead white man) said, 'You can't go back home again' certainly wasn't a queer Asian American. For us, we were never truly home in the first place. Perhaps that is one of the many truths tying our various lives together — we search for home and for family who will accept and love us for who we are."

—"Love Letters from the movement," Ann Yuri Uyeda, from *The Very Inside*

▣ ***Mulholland Dr.***

"I wanted the film structure to tell that love always has a future, that 'I love you' is always something you will say deeper and deeper in the future," she said. "I thought a lot about 'Mulholland Drive.' I was looking at what love stories do in cinema and how their shape actually proposes a politic of love or philosophy of love. David Lynch found the right structure, which is so mysterious to everybody, but it's simple, he's always doing really simple things, actually. It says, 'I love you is always something you say in the past.' These two women meet and then they are in a bed and you're like, 'What?' And then one says, 'I think I'm in love with you.' And you're like, 'Already?' It's because everything has already happened." — [Céline Sciamma](#)

Discussion questions:

1. First thing's first: what the *fuck* is happening in this film?
2. Surrealism runs thick in *Mulholland Dr.* Many of its scenes are dreamlike, unexpected, startling, weighted with semantics and symbols. What are some of the objects and images that stand out to you? (Examples: the Blue Box, the cowboy, the figure behind the dumpster.) In making sense of these elements, one might try an approach analogous to Rachel Mennies' [poetics of bewilderment](#): what do these objects and images help you understand?
3. Michael Koresky has described *Mulholland Dr.* as [a formative part](#) of the New Queer Cinema movement. Would you consider *Mulholland Dr.* a “queer film”? How does its queer label converse or conflict with its blatant male gaze toward female characters? Does it ever fall into the realm of voyeurism?
4. There's a metanarrative of acting and performing in this film—Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla are both closely embedded in the Hollywood bubble of stardom and filmmaking. In what ways could these themes be related to queerness? What parts of queer identity involve performing, acting, pretending to be someone you are not (or someone you aspire to be)?
5. Arguably, one of the film's overarching themes is the *dream*: how dreams constitute a lived space, how dreams can feel as real as not-dreams, how dreams allow for both the possible and impossible. In what ways can queerness be understood as a dream-space?

➤ *A quote to consider in conversation with the film:*

“All the anxiety we bear with us, all our thwarted dreams, the incomprehensible cruelty, our fear of extinction, the painful insight into our earthly condition, have slowly eroded our hope of an other-worldly salvation. The howl of our faith and doubt against the darkness and silence, is one of the most awful proofs of our abandonment and our terrified, unuttered knowledge.”

—Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*

Afterthought: film as having the potential for this “other-worldly salvation”?

Week 3: *Mosquita y Mari* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Opening question: this week, we're thinking about *memory*, specifically the way films can be archives and memory-making devices. If we understand archives as things we *return to* in order to understand our present, then what are some of the films that constitute your personal archive?

▣ *Mosquita y Mari*

“What was challenging, however, was thinking about “dramatizing” situations I had lived. That’s when the lines between fiction and real life can get complicated. Part of what took me so long to write was this feeling or pressure I felt to add “drama” to the story [...] But whenever I did that my wonderful and smart writing mentors would flag it as feeling fake. And, yeah, I agreed with them. When writing the “drama” I didn’t feel connected to it anymore. Then I realized that I didn’t have to veer too far from the truth when ultimately the story I wanted to tell was a very intimate and honest story.”

—[Aurora Guerrero](#)

Discussion questions:

1. Much of this film sits in the discomfort of high school. (One might think of Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* as a literary counterpart.) Adolescent interiority is hidden, somehow incomprehensible, to the adults in this world. There is the sensation of being *invisible*, which is double-edged: terrifying when adults won’t take you and your desires seriously, yet powerful in protecting a sense of self amidst the piercing, invasive gazes of fellow peers and gossipers. How does this film portray adolescent desire? In what ways do you relate to or find incomprehensible these forms of desire?
2. There’s a clear dissonance between schoolwork and romance, as outlined by Yolanda’s parents. In trying to move up the social ladder, what sacrifices does that entail? When is queer desire, or any romantic desire for that matter, at odds with one’s social and economic background?
3. Music is an important shared experience across characters: Yolanda and her parents dancing to music, Yolanda sharing music with Mari. What do you think is alluring about music for these characters? What was your relationship with music during teenagehood?
4. Transportation is, in and of itself, a transformative space: train tracks, driving your first car, the sense of being able to escape, the feeling of the world being larger than the stretch of street that you walk down. In what ways can we relate travelling (the sense of moving, inhabiting the space between places) to queer experiences? Is it a no-man’s land, or is it a type of freedom?

5. Like in *Rafiki*, community plays an important role in this film. What can this film tell us about negotiating the space between what others expect of us and what we want? Are desires, even queer desires, supposed to be determined as *our own*? When is a desire *my own*?

▣ *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

“Love, in Sciamma’s films, carries a liberating aftertaste. The sense of emancipation she evoked in the interview boils down to a struggle to renew yourself; to desire is to give birth to something you’ve been carrying inside you all along. Long before Haenel and Merlant’s first kiss, Sciamma populated her films with characters who heed to their impulses, and transform themselves in the process. There is something empowering about this: it’s the idea that love can change the way you carry yourself into the world, because it helps you understand the space you occupy inside it, embrace the image you project into it, and ultimately, rescue some of it from oblivion.”

—[Leonardo Goi](#)

Discussion questions:

1. How does *Portrait* compare or converse with previous queer films we have seen? What is new, different, or contrary about this film, if anything?
2. In a sense, this is a multidisciplinary film. It traverses sound, image, and text as major themes within its plot: there’s painting, literature, brief yet mesmerizing encounters with music. How can *Portrait* be understood not only as a love story between its characters, but also a love letter across forms of art?
3. This is clearly a feminist film: lesbian love, tight-knit sorority, the presence of men so sparse that, when men do appear, they feel at odds and out of place with the environment. In what ways does *Portrait* do justice to female experiences? What type of world—or, to borrow Foucault’s term, “heterotopia”—does it envision?
4. Héloïse asks Marianne: “Do all lovers feel like they’re inventing something?” Similar to how Romeo and Juliet “invent” their love through shared sonnets, how can we understand love itself as a creative, artistic act?
5. *Portrait* is a film that teaches you how to gaze upon someone or something. The way you look at someone while painting is very different from how you look at them normally—the subject turns into an object, and your gaze informs what they become—yet by the end, Marianne’s

portrait resists objectifying Héloïse. Similarly, the film resists objectifying the audience: the beauty of art, as with the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, is interpretation. It is not always about the outcome of the story, but about the tension the story puts you in as a reader and viewer. Where does the final scene leave us? What does it gift us, if anything?

Related material on *Portrait*:

- ❑ Ela Bittencourt, “[Portrait of a Lady on Fire: Daring to See](#)”
- ❑ Vittoria Benedetti, “[Turning Womanhood into Art: How Celine Sciamma Crafted the Most Important Scene of the Year](#)”
- ❑ Max Richter, “[Vivaldi Recomposed: Summer 3](#)”
- ❑ Céline Sciamma’s [lecture](#) on letting desires dictate writing

Further film recommendations:

- *Thelma*, dir. Joachim Trier
- *Saving Face*, dir. Alice Wu
- *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*, dir. Céline Sciamma
- *Tangerine*, dir. Sean Baker
- *Beats Per Minute*, dir. Robin Campillo
- *La Belle Saison*, dir. Catherine Corsini
- *Desert Hearts*, dir. Donna Deitch
- *Weekend*, dir. Andrew Haigh
- *Supernova*, dir. Harry Macqueen
- *Pariah*, dir. Dee Rees
- *The Way He Looks*, dir. Daniel Ribeiro
- *The Watermelon Woman*, dir. Cheryl Dunye
- *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*, dir. David France

Scholarly readings:

- Ahmed, Sarah. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006)

- Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films* (2007)
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003)
- Gates, R. (2017) ‘[The Last Shall Be First: Aesthetics and Politics in Black Film and Media](#)’, *Film Quarterly*, 71 (2): 38–45.
- Ocean, Frank. Foreword to *Moonlight* screenplay book, published by A24.
- Rodriguez, Lydia & Lopez, Sergio. “The crossroads of time,” *The Culture of Invention in the Americas*. 2019.
- Zaman, Farihah. “Song of Myself”, published in *Film Comment*, Vol. 52, No. 5. 2016.

Resources for allies and ways to support LGBTQ+ communities:

- ❑ [Human Rights Campaign](#): tools for equality and inclusion.
- ❑ [The Trevor Project](#): information preventing suicide and resources for LGBTQ youth.
- ❑ Most importantly, search for local organizations that you can engage with and support. [Here is a resource to locate your nearest LGBTQ community center.](#)

**Note: these resources are based in the U.S and by no means encompass or speak for all queer people. We recognize that there is a greater LGBTQ+ community in need of international resources—if you have suggestions and/or recommendations of organizations to highlight and support, please reach out to us at soupbonecollective@gmail.com.*