

# ***The Rise and Assimilation of Western Queer Cinema: Resistance and Dilemma in the Mainstream***

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**Abstract:** Queer cinema has risen to prominence in recent years, frequently featured at major international film festivals and gaining a foothold in the global market. As an extension of queer theory, which highlights the fluidity of gender and sexuality, queer cinema initially aimed to challenge traditional gender norms and heteronormativity through radical narrative structures and visual expressions. Early queer films often subverted mainstream narratives, offering an alternative, politically charged lens to explore marginalized identities. However, as queer cinema has increasingly entered the mainstream market, it has been subjected to assimilation and commodification pressures. This has led to a dilution of its radical and subversive elements, as the narratives are increasingly shaped to fit within heteronormative frameworks. Queer characters, once at the centre of challenging societal norms, are now often marginalized or simplified to meet the expectations of broader, more mainstream audiences. This paper examines how capitalism and patriarchy have contributed to the assimilation and marginalization of queer cinema, limiting its political expression and cultural impact. While Russo highlights how Hollywood perpetuates lazy stereotypes of queer characters, White suggests that cinema, as a tool of capitalist and patriarchal power, helps maintain normative gender and sexual roles. Despite these challenges, queer cinema remains an important cultural tool for breaking down stereotypes and resisting the dominance of heteronormativity. To maintain its relevance and continue its political and cultural resistance, queer cinema must resist commodification and strive for more diverse, authentic representations of queer identities.

**Keywords:** Queer Cinema, mainstream movie, assimilation, marginalization, Queer theory.

## **1. Introduction**

Over the past decade, American Queer cinema has undeniably entered the mainstream with *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) winning the 2017 Oscar for Best Picture [1]. However, as queer cinema continues to evolve within mainstream markets, its initial goal of critiquing and subverting traditional gender norms through narrative structure and visual language has been increasingly shaped and regulated by a heteronormative lens. The concept of heteronormativity, first introduced by Michael Warner [2], represents a basic form of human interaction implicitly endorsed by heterosexual culture, where heterosexual relationships are seen as the ideal model, and other sexual orientations are regarded as non-mainstream or abnormal. In the mainstream film market, exemplified by Hollywood,

heteronormativity serves as the dominant ideology influencing film production. According to White [3], cinema often functions as a tool of capitalism and patriarchy, perpetuating what is considered to be "normal" or normative identities regarding gender and sexuality. The heteronormative film industry simplifies and distorts queer identities, creating stereotypes to cater to or entertain audiences, leading to an inaccurate and narrow perception of queer individuals. Hollywood films, for instance, frequently use light-hearted humour and shallow social commentary to reinforce lazy, stereotypical depictions of homosexuality, without reflecting the complexities and realities of queer lives [4]. Amid the rise of the sexual liberation and LGBTQ rights movements, queer cinema entered the independent film scene, with anger, exhaustion, and passion becoming central to the New Queer Cinema movement [5]. However, as queer films began to enter the mainstream market, both their narratives and characters became increasingly adapted to meet the expectations of a wider, more general audience. This shift often resulted in queer films becoming more commercialized, aligning more closely with mainstream values. Since queer cinema in the East emerged relatively late, this paper will focus primarily on Western queer cinema. In this review, queer cinema is defined as films produced by individuals with queer identities, whether among the actors or crew, or those depicting the lives of queer communities within the storyline, or films featuring queer characters as main protagonists. In this review, my argument is that, although queer cinema has gained visibility in the mainstream market, queer narratives have been assimilated and queer characters marginalized within a heteronormative-dominated film market. To preserve the diversity and authenticity of queer culture, resistance is essential.

## 2. Queer Theory

A timeline will be used as narrative logic to illustrate the development of the Queer theory. Queer theory was first proposed in the 1990s as a new wave of sexuality theory that emerged from the United States, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler as the pioneers of the idea. Sedgwick [6] describes that the word Queer is derived from the Indo-European root *twerku* and is also a derivative of the German word *quer* (transverse) and *torquere* (twisted) in Latin, the word itself carries the connotation of crossing over, and the traditional cultural currents represented are opposed to separatism and assimilationism. The introduction of the theory of queer not only deconstructed the binary concept of gender but also led to a wide-ranging discussion on the fluidity and diversity of identities. Butler [7] proposed the concept of gender performance, which emphasises that people's homosexuality, heterosexuality, or bisexuality are not derived from a fixed identity, but rather from the ability of an actor to perform in an ever-changing manner. Her theory of gender performance further deepens the understanding of identity fluidity by emphasizing how individuals construct their gender identities through various performances and practices in social contexts. Sedgwick [8] agrees with this conceptual framework and argues that the sexual orientation binary (heterosexuality and homosexuality) has limitations, revealing that sexual orientation is affected by a complex range of social and cultural influences and is not fixed. This perspective overturns the traditional view of gender identity, and hence Butler's theory of gender performance becomes a key tool for understanding gender fluidity and the complexity of gender identity. At its core, Queer theory questions and structures binary divisions of gender and sexual orientation, challenging fixed, normalized identities and promoting diversity and uncertainty in gender and sexual orientation. The queer theory rejects the hegemony of heteronormativity, whereby society acquiesces to heterosexuality as the normal and naturalized sexual orientation. This concept resonates with Gamson and Warner's [2] discussion in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, where he points out that queer identity is not only a sexual orientation, but also an ongoing socially reflexive and critical force, and that to be queer means to question and challenge the power structures and dominant ideologies in society. For example, there is a socially constructed 'normal' gender order that Queer Theory disrupts and

questions heteronormative norms. The non-fixity of gender and sexuality is emphasized by the theory of the Queer, where the identity of marginalized individuals within the social structure is focused on. This theory is often communicated to the public through film. As a medium of mass communication, the film is capable of reinforcing or deconstructing norms of gender and sexual orientation through visual narratives, projecting the heteronormative hegemony of society condensed on the screen and transmitting it to the audience. At the same time, Queer theory has had a profound impact on film studies, providing new perspectives for analysing gender performance and identity in film. Rohy [9] argues that gender norms in mainstream film narratives have been subverted by the image of the queer community, a phenomenon where women were once gazed upon by men in narratives controlled by men. In addition to resisting the heteronormative gaze, there is also the presentation of queer characters who have been marginalized in the past, making a disruption to the gender norms of narratives in mainstream cinema.

### 3. History of Queer Film

In early films, queer representation was often concealed and implied. Obscenity laws and local regulations in the early 20th century forced Hollywood to "veil references to any forms of sexuality"[10]. The imposition of codes that banned explicit depictions of homosexuality in films led to the use of suggestion, metaphor, or villainous roles to represent sexual minorities. A typical stereotype was the "Pansy," described by Benshoff [10] as "a flowery, fussy, effeminate soul given to limp wrists and mincing steps." Such homosexual male characters appeared on-screen as early as 1910-1920, in films like *Algie the Miner* (1912) and Charlie Chaplin's *Behind the Screen*(1917). In the 19th century, lesbianism was viewed as a disease or contagion, with the vampire often symbolizing lesbian desire. The vampire became a powerful representation of both attraction and repulsion, desire and disdain, as Whatling [11] argues. Queer characters were typically portrayed as dangerous, tragic, or immoral, reflecting society's repression and demonization of homosexuality. As Russo [4] notes, homosexual characters in horror films were often depicted as predatory and weak. However, with the rise of the sexual liberation and LGBTQ rights movements, queer cinema entered a new phase. Independent films became a vital platform for queer expression, as they were less constrained by the demands of major studios and mainstream consumer expectations. These films embraced political expression while maintaining a self-reflective attitude, offering more diverse explorations of gender and sexuality compared to mainstream media [12]. *The Boys in the Band* (1970) internalized homophobia, capturing an almost intolerable social experience while offering a more politically and aesthetically uplifting perspective [13]. Independent films not only revealed the complexity of homosexual identity but also provided broader reflections on queer culture by examining social oppression. At the same time, the outbreak of AIDS prompted queer filmmakers to explore the relationship between gender, disease, and death. Russo [4] described how religious zealots exploited the AIDS health crisis to reinforce existing "anti-gay prejudices," with the media portraying it as a crisis of fear. Conservative forces, using medicine as a pretext, vilified the queer community, while films like *Parting Glances* (1986) and *La ley del deseo* (1987) became powerful tools for queer voices. After a long period of dormancy and growth, queer cinema experienced a surge in the 1990s. Benshoff and Griffin [10] introduced "New Queer Cinema," which was edgier, angrier, but also theoretically rigorous, and "unapologetic in their frank look at sexuality, combining stylistic elements drawn from AIDS activist videos, avant-garde cinemas, and even Hollywood films." Films like *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Poison* (1991), and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) broke the traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality in cinema, emphasizing the diversity and fluidity of queer identities. Apart from independent films, the representation of queerness on screen has rarely been true to reality. Queer characters are often depicted through a heterosexual lens, while commercial films frequently display overt fear and hatred toward queer individuals, reinforcing audience biases [4]. These

portrayals in both types of films contribute to a lack of understanding regarding the significance of sexual orientation in the lives of queer individuals, leading to their assimilation or marginalization in mainstream society. Alternatively, such portrayals cause audiences to subconsciously associate queerness with tragedy or danger, further promoting discrimination against the queer community. By the turn of the century, New Queer Cinema had largely merged with mainstream film, completing its shift from the margins to the centre. What was once a fringe queer culture became more easily categorized and commodified as a commercial product. With that history of New Queer Cinema laid out, more concentration will be placed on the difficulties faced by Queer cinema entering the mainstream as they enter the new century.

#### 4. Assimilation of Queer Identity

As queer cinema enters the mainstream market, it has gradually deviated from its original purpose of challenging mainstream film culture and showcasing diverse expressions of gender and sexual orientation. Assimilation of queer identities has become an increasingly prominent issue. Queer film narratives and character portrayals have shifted toward mainstream aesthetics to appeal to a wider audience, which has consequently weakened their challenge to heteronormative standards. Richards [14] observes that, after successfully gaining attention at international film festivals like Cannes and Sundance, queer cinema has become a commercial product aimed at a broader audience, slowly being absorbed by mainstream film companies. For instance, *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) was distributed by a subsidiary of Comcast. The film, set against a tone of "pathos and the pathetic," uses melodrama to portray how homosexuality remains a difficult and emotional topic [15]. Unlike previous radical queer expressions, the film places homosexual love within the frame of a forbidden romance, making it more acceptable to mainstream audiences. Despite being centred on queer themes, the narrative structure of the film closely mirrors that of traditional heterosexual love stories, aligning with mainstream audience expectations. Pellegrini [16] argues that heteronormative narratives in mainstream cinema, through predictable, linear progression culminating in marital bliss, enforce a restrictive and exclusive life path tied to compulsory timelines of heterosexual marriage and family norms. Queer romantic comedies like *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999) and *Saving Face* (Alice Wu, 2004), while featuring queer storylines, follow similar structures to other romance genres: meeting, misunderstandings, and ultimately leading to a happy ending [1]. When *A Single Man* (2009) was marketed, the Weinstein Company removed queer elements from its trailer to cater to a broader audience, showcasing the commercialization of cinema. Independent films, which were once positioned against the mainstream market, now adapt to the demands of major film festivals and the market itself [14]. Although queer films have succeeded in pushing LGBTQ+ themes into the mainstream, their narratives have followed heteronormative cultural perspectives, thus diminishing their initial intent to challenge these norms. Media, as Dyer [17] points out, is not only a tool for oppressing queer communities, but public critiques of queer representations often rely on problematic heteronormative aesthetic standards rooted in anti-gay ideologies. While mainstream films have begun incorporating queer characters, this inclusion is often superficial, with these characters being shaped to align with heterosexual mainstream values. Russo [4] explains that many queer characters in films and television are portrayed by heterosexual creators, and the "closet mentality" only worsens this distortion, as queer artists are often unable to discuss their identities openly. As a result, queer representations remain restricted to rumours and innuendos, leading to the assimilation of queer roles. This process, influenced by capitalist and hegemonic forces, results in queer characters being diluted or adjusted to fit mainstream expectations. Keeling [18] describes how queer characters in film and television are often reduced to simplified identities, moulded into aesthetic representations that conform to mainstream norms. Just as capitalist forces shape minority group images to meet market demands, the assimilation of queer identities is closely tied to the influence of capital and hegemonic

power. This economic and aesthetic "unification" drives film and television to present queer identities in ways that lead to assimilation. The assimilation of queer identities has caused queer characters in mainstream films to lose their original radical and political expressions. While this phenomenon has increased the commercial value of queer cinema, allowing it to reach a broader market, it has also made queer narratives more homogenous, catering to heteronormative social standards. The uniqueness and rebellious spirit of queer cinema have gradually been weakened through this process of assimilation, resulting in a loss of deeper exploration into the diversity of gender and sexual orientation.

## 5. The Marginalization of Queer Characters

Aside from the assimilation of queer images in mainstream cinema, the marginalization of characters has also been a long-standing issue. Queer films produced after 1985, as byproducts of the queer political movement, combine ethnography and autobiography to construct and present their identities, offering information that resists hegemonic mainstream media [19]. The blending of documentary styles allows creators to actively express themselves, giving voice to the community and incorporating resistance narratives. However, as these films enter the mainstream market, they face pressures of commodification and mainstream acceptance, which restricts their narratives and provides more palatable representations for mainstream audiences. Within the heteronormative narrative framework, although queer films have gained some visibility in the mainstream market, their characters and narratives do not hold central positions. They are often adjusted through a heterosexual-dominated perspective. In films like *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), queer characters occupy centre stage only in the absence of reproductive heterosexuality, yet they are still portrayed as "inhuman" [9]. In earlier films, queer characters primarily served heterosexual characters and acted as tools for entertainment. Creekmur and Doty [20] argue that lesbian characters in Hollywood are negatively portrayed, often serving male fantasies in erotic films, and otherwise are either invisible or depicted as villainous figures, as exemplified by characters in Claude Chabrol's *Les Biches* (1967) and Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1944-45). The challenges faced by lesbian characters stem from the male gaze, as they are primarily displayed for the pleasure of the male viewer, rather than to portray authentic and complex queer narratives. Goldin [21] argued that, in classic Hollywood cinema, men were the only true subjects, represented as the "eye of the camera," while women in the film served merely to attract male attention. Under the male gaze, female characters are often sexualized and objectified. In this visual language, driven by the male gaze, lesbian characters are reduced to objects designed to satisfy the desires of the audience. In contrast, their own identities and desires are ignored. Whatling [11] noted that in some films where lesbian characters seduce heterosexual women, audiences experience a sense of illicit and stolen desire, yet they remain confined within the heteronormative narrative framework. Through the presence of queer characters, audiences experience voyeurism and a sense of control, and this narrative mode reinforces heteronormative power structures. A 'lesbian subtext' exists in many commercial films, meaning that the film does not directly portray or explicitly express lesbian feelings or identities. However, the audience can surmise the underlying meanings through the film's hints, symbols, or plot [20]. The lesbian identities of these participants may not be shown directly but rather presented in certain implicit ways, and the audience needs to use these hints to identify and interpret the portrayal of coolies in the film. The limitations imposed by the gendered perspective reduce mainstream audiences' inclination toward queer films. Mainstream film audiences, even before entering the cinema, are often accustomed to and have already accepted traditional gender and sexual roles, which makes them more inclined to accept only narrow narrative choices when encountering queer characters [22]. This preconditioning of the audience, formed by rigid gender and sexual role frameworks, limits their ability to accept queer narratives, and thus, queer characters find it difficult to break away from these

established frameworks. As a result, resistance narratives are weakened, further deepening the marginalization of queer characters in mainstream cinema. In summary, although queer films have gained some visibility in the mainstream market, queer characters are often instrumentalized within the heteronormative narrative framework. Both in narrative content and visual language, queer characters are marginalized, unable to express their identities fully. This marginalization highlights the pressures of commodification that queer films face in the mainstream film market.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, queer cinema has gradually established a foothold in the mainstream market, but the persistent challenges of assimilation and marginalization continue to hinder its full development. Queer characters are often instrumentalized, used as secondary roles to support the development of heterosexual characters, and their identities and desires are frequently overlooked or diminished within heteronormative narrative frameworks. This narrow representation of gender and sexual orientation is evident in both the narrative content and visual language of these films. Heterosexuality, narrative, and reproduction are commonly perceived as closely linked, yet queer identities are imagined as something that resists and opposes this heteronormative narrative logic [23]. Under the influence of capitalist and hegemonic forces, queer films that challenge heteronormative narratives have lost much of their original radical and political expression. Whatling [11] points out that when audiences view queer cinema, even in its compromised form, they may unconsciously interpret these works through a heteronormative lens, thus perpetuating homophobia and reinforcing the dominance of heterosexual culture. Since queer cinema is a powerful cultural tool for dismantling stereotypes surrounding gender and sexual orientation, the limitations imposed by the mainstream market must be overcome to allow for the presentation of more authentic and diverse queer narratives. By exploring the history and current status of queer cinema, it becomes evident that queer films are more than just forms of cultural expression; they represent an essential means by which the queer community resists the oppression of mainstream culture. Moving forward, queer cinema must continue to challenge and resist the dominance of heteronormative hegemony, striving to create a broader societal understanding and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. This requires not only the persistence of queer narratives but also the advancement of authentic storytelling that reflects the true complexity of queer identities.

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