
Let's talk about queer cinema

With Ful Massimi

My name is Ful Massimi, my pronouns are They Them in English, ils/elles in French. I'm a professor in the humanities, philosophy philosophy and religion department at John Abbott College, which is situated in Montreal in Canada.

How can we analyse a film through a queer lens?

So, maybe not as simple as it might seem, but I think the best way to start when we think about analyzing or looking at a film from a queer perspective, maybe on the surface it might seem quite easy to be like oh we can just like pick a film that has queer content in it, but it might be a bit more complex or multi layer than that. So we always try to look also at the film from a queer angle or a queer perspective.

Sometimes films that don't have necessarily upfront queer content in it or LGBTQ content in it can still be read in a queer way if we're able to find signs of queerness in them that can be maybe in the style or in the hidden intention of the filmmaker. A film that always comes to mind because it's a film that signed me as a child was Batman and Robin, the Joel Schumacher film from the early 90s because it's a film that on the surface is not queer.

But if you look at the aesthetic of the film that is very camp, the way the costumes of Batman and Robin were styled, the way the eye of the filmmaker is looking at the male body, you can and even the female body sometimes you can definitely tell that there is like a queer eye behind the film.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

So sometimes it's really looking at the signs of queerness that can be hidden in a film either in the way it is shot, in the way it is presented, in the way the camera lingers on certain bodies, and in the this kind of yeah hidden signs that we call kind of writing or reading between the lines, uh, which is a classic historical way that queer viewers have also attuned themselves to find this science in a film when they were not readily available for them because for a very long time, especially in Hollywood films, queerness was illegal and censored, so it couldn't be represented like very positively or very obviously on screen. So we have to train ourselves and our eyes to find what's hidden in the picture.

How does the representation of queer people or LGBTQ+ people in film affect the public?

So, this is an interesting question uh because I was just like thinking about it recently and discussing it with some friends because especially for what you said for a more maybe mainstream public The first thing that you see is whether there is a queer story or a queer character or a queer person in the film. And I find that sometimes there is a bit of a split between what I tend to call a gay film and a queer film.

Like a gay film that in my mind is more films in which queer characters are presented in a way that can be more readily understandable for mainstream public.

I'm thinking for example a Brokeback Mountain which may be still to this day is one case of a film that kind of broke the mainstream in terms of visibility, but it's a film that tends to present quite a tragic representation of queer characters and a love story that because it's not extremely transgressive or extremely sexual can still be perceived by a lot of mainstream audiences without maybe being maybe repelled is a strong word, but kind of pushed back by seeing too much sexuality on screen.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

So that to me is more of a gay film, a film that everybody can um approach and that might convince some people what I'm quote convince some people that maybe you know gay people are not so bad as long as they behave in a way that it's like you know understandable and it's just like oh it's about love, it's a universal love story or I'm thinking about characters like Cameron and Mitchell in modern family like this kind of portrayal that is very similar to how straight or since people would behave, but simply instead of having straight or cis people, you have gay people in that role.

Versus maybe a queer film where you might have a more transgressive portrayal, maybe more sexually open, maybe um more in your face. And that might be a film that although is more comforting or reassuring or um we as queer audiences can see ourselves in it might not be as readily available to an audience who's not prepared to confront themselves with that.

I'm thinking about more recently this uh new A24 film Pillion which was a Cannes which is about a BDSM uh gay relationship between an older man older in his 40s and I younger man in his 30s, and it's quite graphic in its representation of this dynamics. And I don't know how many people would be in the mainstream more open to watch this kind of film. So, that would be my distinction maybe between a more gay representation and a queer representation in a more political sense.

One of the most heated debates is that of auditions for roles played by transgender people.

Mhm. Yeah, I think that that's another big issue because I think that whereas the sexuality part like whereas it's I think at this point okay for a queer person to play a straight person and vice versa. I would say as long as there were equal opportunities in the roles that are given out to them. to have a trans person who's represented on screen by a cis person creates a sort of problem.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

There are not just in terms of not giving trans people the opportunity to have acting roles, but also and more importantly that he might pass on to the viewers a lot of um misconception and stereotypes and full on transphobic ideas. For example, I'm thinking about the Danish girl. Like the idea that a trans person is not the gender that they identify with, but they're just either a man dressing up as a woman or a woman dressing up as a man.

Like he creates this misconception about trans identity as not being real but as being a costume that has like a lot of political and violent repercussions in the real world.

Does the rise of independent films influence mainstream cinema?

I would say yes, I think that this is an historical phenomenon in the sense that if we think about the nuclear cinema of the 90s which is like a slow of films that were presented at the time at the Toronto film festivals especially or at the Sundance film festivals like films like Todd Akins' first films or Paris's Burning tongues untied by Marlon Riggs, like films that were at the time considered underground, experimental, um and uh art house, independent films, those then open the door at least for some of these filmmakers to go into let's call it a mainstream still within the independent kind of like somebody like Gus Van Sant or Todd Haynes or Gregg Araki are now making things like 13 Things Why on Netflix or like films that went on to win Oscars.

So, I think that that can open some doors The question remains always if it's like an equal chamber in the sense that we know what independent films are. We know what art house films are and we consume them because we love films and because we we watch them and we are cinephiles or because we have access to them.

But I don't know again how much of the mainstream public would then be able to readily access these films or would be willing to watch them.

So it's also a question of also access Desire to watch them ability to watch them in terms of where you live or also financially how much you can afford to go to the movies

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

and how much these films are advertised and maybe taken over by you know bigger companies like even having focus features producing some of them or the Sony Classics or even having them on Criterion or movie obviously it's helpful but how many people know what movie and Criterion are it's also a question that we should ask ourselves sometimes yeah.

What are the challenges that queer creators and queer contents facing today in the industry of film?

Yeah, so I would say I mean I speak not from experience in the sense that I don't work in the film industry so what I can tell is based on what I can see in terms of the films that come out and who is producing them.

I'm thinking thinking about like the films, at least the main, let's call them main like queer films that came out this year, which would be pillion from A24 and the history of sound that was taken by movie, for example. This went on to be at major film festivals. Um but this one is like from a first time filmmaker, the others is from a filmmaker that has worked for a long time but is mostly being relegated to this idea of queer filmmaker or gay filmmaker.

So I think that maybe one of the challenges is still being able to breach that gap between just being relegated to this corner that is oh this is just a person who makes gay films or queer films and becoming somebody who is recognized to making films in general that also can have either a queer sensibility or queer content.

So, I think that that's maybe one of the challenges on top of obviously the challenges of being able to access funding, access like somebody who will distribute and produce your film like and once it is produced and distributed being able to be seen widely and not just a one film festival here or it's one one small theater is there because there are a lot of films that just like premiere at film festivals and then you never see them again.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

So that's another aspect that it's always how do you get out of the queer bubble uh when that label is kind of put on you, I would say.

And what will be the biggest challenge tomorrow?

Yeah, I think that that's like the challenge remains. This is something that I talked to with my students all the time that even though they are the new generation who are seeing like my students are usually 17 to 19 years old, so they are the one who are maybe less phased by the fact that there is queer representation because they see it all the time maybe on Netflix or you know you see something like hard stopper, and it might seem that it's not that big of a deal to talk about queer representation, but because of the political situation we find ourselves in where I find that especially in the states, things are kind of regressing to a more conservative state where we're thinking about still gender is only binary and we're trying to eliminate the T from the LGBTQ, and like there are all of this like threatened, like real threats to the life of queer people that I'm afraid that the representation is going to become less and less possible because of the funding obviously that are given to these films.

And so the challenge I think is going to be to still be able to get out of the situation where all we are getting is crumbs. Like every year we can count on the fingers of one hand what are how many queer films there are. They are kind of like piercing that bubble.

And so I think it would be that this is a totally idealistic and utopian future, I feel that once we arrive to a point where to see a queer film is not that big of a deal anymore, that might be the point where we made it.

But at the same time, it makes me also sad because that's one of the special things about queer cinema is that it's so special and transgressive and unique that maybe making it mainstream would go against the very fact that it's queer because queer and

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

mainstream are basically opposite concepts. So the idea that they would never be the same makes total sense. But But, until that point, a queer film remains in any case a political act because there are not that many and they might be less and less as we go.

I hope not, but I think that that could be the challenge moving forward.

Three titles of film that, in your opinion, have made the history of LGBTQ+ cinema

Good question. Oh, wow. Now, what what I what I live in and what I live out. Um, so I think well, for me the first and foremost is always Paris is burning.

I think that that's like number one on my list in any case because this is a film that has made the history of queer cinema, but the history of queer representation and queer history in general in the sense that it unveiled a community and a culture that nobody knew about like the ballroom culture of the 80s and 90s and it's a film that does a great job at giving trans and queer people black and Latina of the time the tools to tell their own story even though the filmmaker was white and not part of the community.

They tried the best they could for the time, although it was quite a controversial film after it was released to give the people from Balmoral the ability to tell their story themselves. So I would say that's a fundamental viewing. Um I'm trying to think maybe something a little bit more current, otherwise I'm going to go into the old archive of films.

Like a film that I really really appreciated that came out maybe a couple of years ago was Great Freedom, which is a film about a real historical fact which is the paragraph 175. So this legislation that was in place in Germany from the late 1800 to the 1990s that basically criminalized homosexuality. quality so that if you were caught in any homosexual act, you would be sent to prison.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

And so is the story of a man who repeat basically spends almost his entire life in prison due to paragraph 175. Um and he's played by Franz Rogowski, the German actor who was great in that film. And the film really makes you understand the life that this man like had to live.

They were constantly in this liminal space of being outside and inside, but it spent so much time in prison that he had no idea how to behave in the real world anymore outside of jail. So that one is one that I really really loved although it's like a a hard watch. So maybe I should find something a little bit more uplifting now and nothing much comes to mind maybe.

No, I think it's not maybe necessarily too uplifting but it's such a beautiful film like Portrait of a Lady on Fire which is the Celin Sima kind of like for me it's a masterpiece of of cinema. It's a beautiful love story between two women at a time where they couldn't love each other and yet the film represents their love in a way that it's very it manages to do something that it's very hard to do in lesbian cinema which is to evade the trap of the male gaze.

So because it's a film that is shot by a lesbian filmmaker with only when almost an entirely female cast and it's focus on this female to female relationship.

The way also the sensuality of the relationship, the romance, and the sexual aspect of it is presented in a very sensitive and sensible way that doesn't fall into the trappings of objectifying the sexuality of women on women relationships, and I find that that's quite unique, and also it's like just a beautiful film. It's just like stunning to watch.

I feel like all these three films in different ways will break your heart, but you will also come out maybe transformed by them, so I think that that's the power of clear cinematography away.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808

Is there anything you would like to say that we haven't asked you about?

Yeah, I think maybe the the only thing that I wanted to to stress a little bit more that that I don't want to finish the interview without kind of like making clear that when we talk about queer cinema on where we talk about even just like queer topics or queer theory in general, it's never disjointed from trans theory or from feminist theory from trans cinema and feminist understanding of the world in the sense that I want to make sure that this different aspects that maybe for some people are disjointed are actually part of a larger way of looking at these films and of looking at the world that should be in constant kind of relation with each other that I don't think that there is we can talk about queer cinema without talking about intersectionality and for that reason we cannot consider let's say feminist ideas as separate from queer ideas or separate from trans ideas.

They should all be in dialogue with each other because otherwise it becomes a very exclusionary way of looking at this media landscape and even looking at at reality. So that maybe the only asterisk that I that I forgot to to insert there.

WE Frame: Collective Views for equality is a project by:



Dipartimento
di Giurisprudenza



TRACES® DREAMS



Co-funded by
the European Union

CERV-2024- CITIZENS-REM-EUINTEGRATION | CERV-AG-LS 101196808
WE Frame | Project No. 101196808