

From Queer Tragedies to Joy: Expanding the Representation and Queer Gaze in European Cinema

In this essay, I discuss queer representation in European film, taking advantage of preliminary observations made while transcribing young people's interviews from the Finnish REBOOT data. I noticed that the theme of representation came up in several interviews. The young people considered the representation of minorities important and wished for their more authentic representation in films. The interviewees wanted to see the depiction of minorities that originates from the narrative, not from the need to meet inclusivity requirements.

In the last few years, I have watched many European films featuring queer women, such as Arantxa Echevarría's *Carmen & Lola* (*Carmen y Lola*, Spain 2018), Inari Niemi's *Light Light Light* (*Valoa valoa valoa*, Finland 2023), and one of my favourites – Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, France 2019). In the last film, the story set in France in the late 18th century depicts a relationship between a young woman, Héloïse, and a painter, Marianne, commissioned to paint her wedding portrait. All films mentioned have the kind of representation the interviewees wished for: characters who are authentic, multidimensional, even messy.

However, these films have the same, predictable ending. For example, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a heart-wrenching tragedy, which also makes it touching and memorable. But I cannot unsee how typical of an ending it is for a queer relationship portrayed in film: one of the characters dies or submits to heterosexual marriage, or their family is not accepting. Queer tragedies are so common that I find myself checking the ending beforehand and making lists of feel-good movies in a desperate attempt to avoid them. Because representation can be thought of as a phenomenon that constructs and produces reality (Rossi 2015, 80), it is natural to ask what kind of reality this type of queer representation creates.

In a way, the tragedies feel justified. Queer history – and still for many, also the present – is a story full of tragedies, and these experiences should not be forgotten. Sara Ahmed (2010, 105–106) writes about the importance of embracing the unhappy queer: because the world doesn't accept us, we must stay unhappy with this world so that the realities of discrimination, non-recognition, and violence are not concealed. While the representation of unhappy queers shouldn't be overlooked, I suggest expanding the imagery.

Representations have the power to normalise or mythologise queerness (Rossi 2015, 83), and the persistent tragedies establish happiness as an unattainable myth for queers. Therefore, the representation of queer joy is vital in order to normalise queerness. I understand that queer happiness is a privilege and not accessible for all. With that in mind, it is part of the authentic representation that the interviewees wished for and significant not only for this reason, but also because it has the potential to act as a political force to clear the way for others. As Tyler Quick (2020, 33) shows, queer representation in film has resulted in greater self-awareness and community identity. Films with glimpses of queer happiness offer representation with the power to shape reality – both in the lives of

individuals and at a societal level. Similarly, the persistent representation of tragic endings to queer lives deviates us from that hope and potentiality.

In the pursuit of an expanded queer representation, happy queers shouldn't be represented at the expense of diluting queerness to a digestible form for heterosexual audiences. Since happiness tends to come with straight conditions – even with perverse desire, one can have straight aspirations allowing for the possibility of happiness, such as accumulating family possessions – this kind of representation might adopt the forms of happy heterosexuality, which annuls the political power of the unhappy queer (Ahmed 2010, 91, 106, 114).

Ahmed (2010, 113) argues that the risk of promoting happy queers is that it reimagines the world as if there is no discrimination. Because I do not see representation as a binary – completely happy or sad, good or bad – I question whether the representation of queer happiness would require overcoming discrimination and suppressing queer suffering. Ahmed (2010, 117) describes this as being happily queer: encountering the unhappiness of the world but refusing to be made unhappy by that encounter. Drawing from Ahmed, Angela Jones (2013, 2) recognises that queer futurity is not about a utopian society in which everyone is happy, and life is ideal. Rather, it is about making life more bearable in the present by giving hope and creating the potential for a better future (Jones 2013, 2–3).

Since the world remains unhappy with queer love, the hegemony of queerness cannot be ignored while addressing the representation of minorities. Normative whiteness and able-bodiedness can be seen, for example, in European queer film festivals (Vince 2023, 1475). Strategies of visibility and representation are understood as the most important tools for fighting oppression, but visibility renders queer people of colour especially vulnerable to violence (Wiedlack 2023, 922–923). While the white hegemonic individuals have the choice to remain invisible, the racialised oppressed are forced to reveal themselves for the purpose of Western knowledge production (Wiedlack 2023, 926–927).

To establish meaningful queer-feminist solidarity and to take into consideration the vulnerability of hypervisible minorities, new visual practices are necessary (Wiedlack 2023, 932). Katharina Wiedlack (2023, 924, 933) shows how the shift from queer representation to the queer gaze in film can become a starting point for queer solidarity: it has the possibility to build and strengthen connections to vulnerable populations without exposing them. Instead of explicitly representing queer identities, bodies, or desires, cinematographic forms can still be used to sustain queer living, dreaming, and world-making (Wiedlack 2023, 932).

While I see representation as an important form of rebellion, utilising the queer gaze is something to consider. I wonder if ideas from the queer gaze applied to the means of queer representation could support normalising queerness instead of mythologising it into an inevitable tragedy. Could queerness be just one part of a character – a part of their lives, not something that defines and condemns them?

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