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Haptic Aesthetics and Queer Space in the New Queer Coming of Age Film

by

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## Abstract

This thesis concerns a recent, global wave of queer coming of age films which have directed a formal interest in the sensory and spatiotemporal specificities of queer childhood. Emerging from the late noughties to the present, I refer to this contemporary approach as the New Queer Coming of Age Film and parse its artistic and political relevance through analyzing the forms and themes of two of the wave's most significant filmmakers: Céline Sciamma and Barry Jenkins. By grasping queer childhood as a bodily confrontation with/between heteronormative time and place, this project proposes an extensive and dynamic framework of queer film phenomenology that draws from the work of Sarah Ahmed, Lee Carruthers, Rosalind Galt, Annette Kuhn, Laura Marks, José Esteban Muñoz, and Karl Schoonover among others. The subsequent analysis of Sciamma's *Water Lilies* (2007) and *Tomboy* (2011) and Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) highlights the frictions between reductive coming out narratives, which have dominated mainstream depictions of queer youth, and the directors' haptic approaches to coming of age, which align the spectator with the queer child's sensorium using an array of formal strategies. This project ultimately argues that, through taking on such an approach, the New Queer Coming of Age Film can teach us something about queer youth by visualizing the in-betweenness of inner and outer worlds, the liberating and devastating possibilities of disorientation, and the fleeting, utopian quality of queer moments.

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## Introduction

The central aim of this thesis is to understand the artistic and political significance of a recent wave of films which have cinematically represented queer youth through a deployment of haptic aesthetics. Appearing from the late noughties to the present, I call this approach the New Queer Coming of Age Film. While films about queer youth have long been overpopulated with tired and reductive coming out narratives, this influx of global and independent queer cinema has rejected this model. This new approach to queer coming of age cinema seizes upon the medium's perceptual qualities and give spectators access to the queer child's fluid and complex inner world. These films suggest that queer children's engagement with spaces, and the cinematic articulation of such spaces, is crucial in their experiences of self-discovery. I argue that these films help us understand what it means to be a queer child in a heteropatriarchal time and place through their experiential explorations of historically neglected subjectivities.

In order to grasp the complexities of the New Queer Coming of Age Film, I will apply a framework of queer film phenomenology to a close analysis of Céline Sciamma's *Water Lilies* (2007) and *Tomboy* (2011) and Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016). While there is a vast range of global works that I could have turned my analysis towards, I have decided to study Sciamma because her depictions of queer childhood in the French suburbs mark pivotal early instances of the New Queer Coming of Age Film's emergence within the global festival landscape, and I have decided to study Jenkins because his Oscar-winning exploration of Black queer masculinity is arguably the most successful and culturally impactful example of this approach. My analysis of each film will identify what formal techniques the filmmakers utilize to convey the perspective of the queer child, consider how key spaces interact with their processes of self-discovery, and examine how the heteropatriarchal values of their respective settings inform

characters' actions. Observing these issues in a cinematic context will make tangible many of the abstract concepts addressed in my theoretical framework, as the films and the theory will mutually illuminate one another.

Before moving forward, I will explain my research approach with a chapter-by-chapter road map of how my argumentation will proceed. "Chapter 1: The Queer Coming of Age Film" sets the stage for my thesis by situating this new model of queer coming of age cinema within contemporary film culture. I begin this venture by interrogating what models of filmmaking the New Queer Coming of Age Film rejects. I outline how queer coming of age films have been dominated by the coming out narrative, consider the complicated relationship it holds with queer audiences, and identify its homonormative and neocolonial connotations. I then critique a recent example of the coming out film with an analysis of *Love, Simon* (2018), the first film centering a queer teenager to be produced by a major studio. The film's coming out narrative offers an assimilationist and universalizing representation of growing up queer, which is reflected in its colourblind racial politics and normative aesthetics. In contrast to such reductive Hollywood depictions, I then contextualize where we can situate the New Queer Coming of Age Film in film culture, arguing that the films build upon the political legacy of the New Queer Cinema, as outlined by B. Ruby Rich, by taking on a haptic style synonymous with aesthetic trends in global art cinema.

Accordingly, "Chapter 2: A Framework of Queer Film Phenomenology", assembles a theoretical toolkit that will be used to unpack Sciamma's and Jenkins' cinematic styles. In establishing a matrix of arguments which draws from theories of affect in cinema (Laura Marks, Lee Carruthers), queer phenomenology (Sarah Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz), and scholarship on the child in cinema, this chapter recognizes queer youth as a uniquely spatiotemporal experience.

I first specify the political effect of a haptic approach to queer coming of age, arguing that it refutes heteropatriarchal models of growth which see childhood and queerness as oppositional categories. Then, I outline the spatiality of queer childhood, detailing how internal processes of disorientation and transitional phenomena can be captured on-screen. Finally, I describe how a particular engagement with space and time result in shifts in cinematic register which I call queer moments – instances of queer relationality which mark fleeting escapes from heteropatriarchal space-time.

My following two analysis chapters seek to put this complex matrix of theory in conversation with more tangible forms. “Chapter 3: Céline Sciamma’s French Suburbs” offers an inaugural opportunity to work with these theories through a formal analysis of the filmmaker’s first two films, *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*. My analysis is concerned with how her protagonists’ queer desires are squandered by the subtle ways in which their middle-class communities seek to orient them towards normative forms of femininity. *Water Lilies* follows a young lesbian’s journey of self discovery through a contentious romance set within the abrasively feminized world of synchronized swimming, and *Tomboy* depicts a gender nonconforming child’s experimentation with a transmasculine identity when they move into a new community. My analysis will observe that Sciamma’s work is filled with queer moments which are regularly stunted when the internalized patriarchal values of her French suburbs prompt characters to abide by straightening devices of compulsory heterosexuality and violence. And while her films are skeptical about the reliance of normative couplings, I conclude that Sciamma’s cinema conceives the supportive relationality of friendships as a wellspring for queer futures to be imagined.

Finally, “Chapter 4: *Moonlight*’s Critical Ambivalence”, marks a shift in my analytical approach. Prior to engaging in a formal analysis of Barry Jenkins’ style, I challenge the political



effectiveness of the New Queer Coming of Age Film's formal orientation by analyzing the discourse around the film's release, in which its depiction of Black queer masculinity was reframed as a universal story within white institutions. Thus, the first part of this chapter interrogates why this occurred, considering how the film's emulation of arthouse aesthetics, flirtation with Black stereotypes, and oblique representation of Liberty City played into its success and misinterpretation in white, heterosexual spaces. Consequently, my formal analysis is energized by a desire to rearticulate the cultural specificity of *Moonlight*'s style which was effaced by white critics, arguing that the film's haptic visuality is deeply and imperfectly political. Taking on an analytical approach of formal ambivalence, the latter half of the chapter places my theoretical framework in conversation with Black and queer scholars' readings of *Moonlight* observing the formal techniques used by Jenkins to depict spaces, disorientations, and queer moments.

Ultimately, my marriage of queer film theory and formal analysis will reveal that cinema is essential in advancing our understanding of what it means to be a queer child under a white supremacist heteropatriarchy.

## **CHAPTER 1: The Queer Coming of Age Film**

In this chapter, I will situate the artistic and political significance of the New Queer Coming of Age Film within the context of contemporary queer cinema. In the first section, I will problematize the genre of the queer coming of age film, its entanglement with coming out narratives, and the neocolonial implications that follow these narratives. In the second section, I will analyze how the 2019 film *Love, Simon* brings these tropes to life, creating an aesthetic of normativity whose temporal strategies are consistent with what Galt and Schoonover call *heterosynchrony*. In the final section, I will characterize how Sciamma's and Jenkins' films are

distinctly anti-Hollywood, outlining how they build upon the promise of the New Queer Cinema through transcending genre distinctions, emulating global arthouse aesthetics, and telling intersectional stories with a greater emphasis on race and gender. Here, I will also discuss how the filmmakers' sensibilities reflect Galt and Schoonover's concepts of *register* and *queer asynchrony*.

#### COMING OUT AND COMING OF AGE

The genre of the queer coming of age film has been regularly entwined with coming out narratives. Whitney Monaghan calls this the *coming out as coming of age* trope, which “sees queer youth coming of age only by coming to terms with their sexuality and/or gender identity and verbally articulating it,”<sup>1</sup> a notion that not only oversimplifies the maturation of queer individuals but also supports the idea that sexual orientation is a fixed category. In his analysis of queer coming of age melodramas of the early 90s, Gilad Padva suggests that coming out has been presented as the only way for a queer teenager to achieve personal, social, cultural, and sexual liberation.<sup>2</sup> This proposal counters radical ideas of sexual fluidity proposed by queer scholars such as Judith Butler. Padva notes that ideas of ever-shifting sexual identity are not necessarily liberating for queer youth and can instead aggravate their agony in search for a social definition of the self.<sup>3</sup> Thus, coming out narratives depict an assertion of a verbally articulated sexual identity that allows queer youth to orient themselves in relation to their families, friends, and institutions, and enables them to enjoy their desires, loves, and devotions.<sup>4</sup> However, a positive entanglement of coming of age with coming out is an idealist prospect typically limited

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Monaghan, “Not Just a Phase,” *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 99.

<sup>2</sup> Gilad Padva, “Edge of seventeen: melodramatic coming-out in new queer adolescence films.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2004): 368.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

to the cisgendered, white, and middle class kinds of protagonists centred in Padva's analysis, while more marginalized queer populations struggle to integrate into heterosexual institutions so effortlessly.

The coming out narrative is a contentious issue in queer culture and Michael Bronski's article "Positive Images & the Coming Out Film: The Art and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Cinema" touches on many of the genre's core problems. Bronski argues that the coming out narrative has become a tired and overused depiction of queerness, lamenting that the genre no longer says anything new and fails to challenge viewers emotionally, artistically, or politically.<sup>5</sup> The pressure for queer filmmakers to produce positive images deters them from making interesting or challenging art.<sup>6</sup> Because coming out is deeply ingrained into queer culture and is one of the most important moments in a queer person's life, Bronski notes that coming out films are innately political, but labels these oversimplified narratives as "progay propaganda."<sup>7</sup> He argues that the political salience of the genre has diminished with each repetition, elaborating:

While most gay and liberal viewers can see the importance of this – "coming out" should be presented as a positive and healthy action – the irony is that this simplistic look at the world actually reduces the importance, and even the imperative, of the action of coming out. It also misjudges the harshness of homophobia in the world. All too often – even when films acknowledge real problems caused by homophobia in the world – they create a fantasy world in which coming out has only minor consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Bronski is certainly not calling for a return to tropes of queers dying at the end of their stories and there will always be a need for positive media that assures queer youth that it is okay to be gay. However, the coming out film depicts only a fraction of queer experience and often confuses self acceptance and narrative closure for the end of one's encounters with homophobia.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Bronski, "Positive Images & the Coming Out Film: The Art and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Cinema," *Cineaste* 58, no. 4 (2000): 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

We can align Bronski's critique of such progay propaganda with a similar argument regarding BIPOC representation in Robert Stam and Louise Spence's article "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," which suggests that an insistence on positive images "obscures the fact that 'nice' images might at times be as pernicious as overtly degrading ones, providing a bourgeois façade for paternalism, a more pervasive racism."<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, cheery repetitions of the coming out narrative in Western media threaten to uphold normative and universalized standards of queer youth that benefit heterosexist and white supremacist structures. These works of progay propaganda tend to communicate an ideology of what Lisa Duggan calls *homonormativity*, which promises the possibility of a "privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."<sup>10</sup> Rather than destabilizing heteronormative institutions and values, the coming out as coming of age trope is complicit with the neocolonial discourses of popular queer cinema identified by Galt and Schoonover, which "[limits] queer aspirations to the same bourgeois citizenship, repressive institutions, and limited lives that hetero society prescribes."<sup>11</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, this neoliberal project works in tandem with idealized figurations of childhood in mainstream coming of age cinema.

A shift from the radical, boundary-pushing work of the New Queer Cinema (NQC) of the early 90s to the popularization of coming out films is nicely summarized in B. Ruby Rich's article "Death of the New Queer Cinema." She suggests that the aesthetic and political

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," *Screen* 24, no. 2 (1983): 3.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. by Russ Castronovo, and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 179.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 167.

radicalism of the NQC began to fizzle out by late 90s as a sort of gentrification of queer cinema took place:

the draw of the queer dollar and the aura of a queer fashion began to attract heterosexual directors eager to make their mark and skilled enough to do it well. [...] Identity politics doesn't meld well with market considerations, so the new films dumped the politics overboard. Love stories, coming out stories, and star-crossed romance tales sweetly proliferated, all executed in the normative dramatic style and deeply soothing to audiences long deprived of any such thing. Soon enough, distributors were blaming the glut of product for the receding public: lesbian and gay ticket buyers were no longer reliable and could no longer be counted on to rush to the box office in support of queer work.<sup>12</sup>

The mainstreaming of queerness marked a turn to a commercialized, complacent, and bland cinema that failed to match the bold exploration of queer subjectivities and political consciousness of the NQC. This can again be understood as a product of globalization during which, as Galt and Schoonover note, “popular representations of lesbians and gay men read as Western colonialism rather than queer radicality.”<sup>13</sup> One could suggest that the queer coming out film has such a lasting market value because its structure indefinitely involves a queer person explaining their sexuality to a straight public. Easily adaptably to the coming of age film as well as the romantic comedy – genres based around the temporalities of heterosexual life – it is the most palatable and narratively satisfying way to depict a queer child on screen. Meanwhile, the complications of representing the interiority of a queer child *before* they verbally disclose their sexual orientation calls innovation at the level of film form, leaving the exploration of such trickier temporalities to independent filmmakers.

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<sup>12</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 168.

*LOVE, SIMON'S* NORMATIVE AESTHETICS

Given the success of the coming out narrative in the queer coming of age film, it is hardly a surprise that these films are the ones which Hollywood studios choose to support. The concerns of normative coming of age cinema are encapsulated by Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon*. Produced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, the 2019 film was touted as the first film by a major studio to center a gay teen romance, as it follows Simon (Nick Robinson), a closeted 17-year-old who begins an anonymous online romance with a classmate who goes by the pseudonym "Blue." However, the tranquility of Simon's ideal bourgeois life is threatened when one of his peers, Martin, discovers Simon's messages and uses the information to blackmail him.

Berlanti's film embraces the politics and aesthetics of normality and assimilation. The film's opening moments depict Simon's comfort and investment in his middle-class life, showing images of his white liberal family and perfectly diverse friend group as his voiceover asserts "I'm just like you – I have a totally, perfectly normal life." The opening credits play over a montage depicting his predictably synchronistic morning routine. A Steadicam shot follows him walking through his home and greeting his family members, followed by a montage depicting his carefully timed commute to school. He picks up his best friend Leah, then backs into the adjacent driveway to pick up Nick. They buy four iced coffees, pick up Abby, and go to school. There is a calculated articulation to the rhythms of Simon's life which is in accordance with the straight world. Despite his queerness, he is incredibly comfortable within the white, heteronormative structures of the Atlanta suburb he inhabits.

Simon's normalcy is also reinforced by the film's racial politics. While *Love, Simon* mostly maintains a sense of post-Obama era colourblindness, it is notable that the only other out queer character is a Black, femme-presenting gay man named Ethan. The film is sure to

humanize Ethan just enough, but he mostly exists as a flamboyant stereotype to accentuate how Simon's race and gender expression are compatible with the ideals of his suburban community. Simon is "one of the good ones."

The film's central narrative depicts Simon exchanging increasingly romantic emails with Blue under his own pseudonym, Jacques, which are recounted as voiceovers that allow the audience to access the characters' inner dialogue. Meanwhile, Simon is coerced by Martin to manipulate the configurations of heterosexual pairings within his friend group to help set him up with the uninterested Abby. When Abby rejects Martin, he publicly outs Simon on a school forum. While the violation of Simon's agency and privacy is appropriately upsetting, the repercussions are minimal. Blue ceases communication with Simon and he experiences a brief breakup from his friend group when they come to realize how their social dynamics were toyed with. However, each of his parents give him immaculate speeches of acceptance and he is largely supported against homophobia by his teachers. As Bronski suggests is common of coming out films, the film depicts a fantasy of acceptance into a benevolent heteropatriarchy especially reserved for the right kind of queer.<sup>14</sup>

In the film's climax, Simon solidifies his acceptance through the romantic comedy trope of coupling. Simon purchases a night's worth of Ferris wheel tickets at the local carnival and makes a public post asking Blue to meet him there to reveal his identity. Rather than alienating himself, Simon renders himself into a spectacle, with dozens of straight students watching and cheering him on as he waits for Blue to arrive. When it appears as if he has been stood up, Bram, Simon's classmate, reveals himself at the last minute. The heterosexual crowd applauds when the

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<sup>14</sup> Bronski, 23.

two model twink's kiss at the top of the Ferris wheel in a moment which is perhaps emblematic of the film itself – an oversimplified depiction of queer youth fastened into a tried, true, and repetitive piece of machinery (Figure 1).

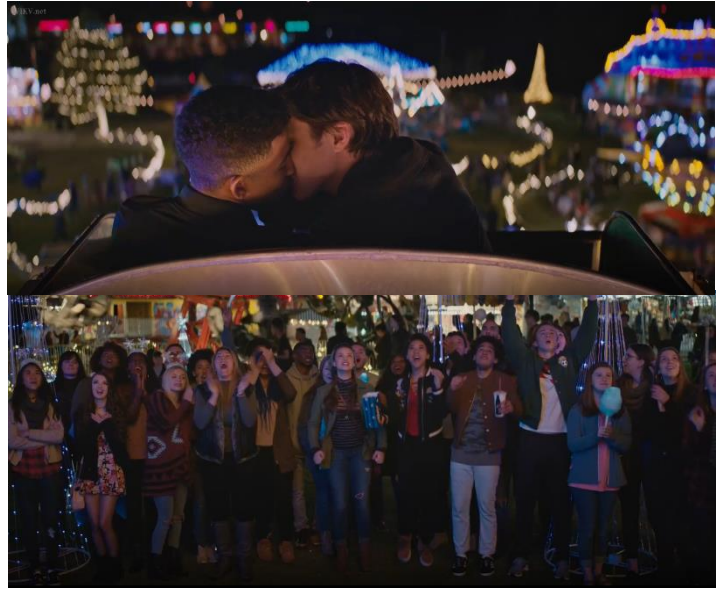


Figure 1: The straights approve in *Love, Simon*

The film's problematic colourblindness is further demonstrated before the kiss, when Bram notes that he is Black and Jewish ("Blue"). And yet the film takes no interest in fleshing out the complexities of his experience of being a queer of colour, not does it offer any kind of characterization to Simon's friends, Abby and Nick, both of whom are Black. His romantic pairing with Bram brings to mind bell hooks' notion of "eating the other" where, when Otherness is commodified, "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the film's multiculturalism is purely ornamental.

*Love, Simon*'s concluding sequence mirrors the film's opening credits, in which a Steadicam shot again follows Simon throughout his home before he goes on his commute. He picks up Leah, then Nick. They pick up *five* iced coffees. They pick up Abby. And this time, they pick up Bram (for which Leah has to move to the back seat so he can sit next to Simon). The satisfying mechanics of this conclusion affirm that the film's temporality is governed by what Galt and Schoonover call "heterosynchrony" – a systemization of meaning dependent on

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014), 21.





Figure 2: Heterosynchronic poetics at work in *Love, Simon*'s opening and closing sequences

heterosexist logic which depicts “the pleasure of bringing together in harmony several disparate elements, in a coordination of visible opposing forces against all odds.”<sup>16</sup> The sequence “makes progress pleasurable and provides evidence of closure,”<sup>17</sup> ensuring every piece of the filmic world, including normative couplings, car seats and iced coffees, are accounted for (Figure 2).

Just as Simon is easily assimilated into the rhythms of heteronormative bourgeois life, the film's poetics adapt the heterosexual aesthetics of straight genres to tell a story that refuses to challenge the audience artistically or politically. While I cannot fault the film for helping any real queer children accept themselves, *Love, Simon* is predominantly designed for the comfort and pleasure of a straight and white spectator indulging in a fantasy of social progress. As Padva states, “the spectacular visualization of coming out as the ideal solution of gay youth's agony is a naïve illusion” as self acceptance is not closure to a lifetime in a homophobic world.<sup>18</sup> *Love, Simon*'s universalizing intentions are contradictory to Sciamma and Jenkin's approaches, but comparing them highlights how the films of interest to this thesis are deconstructing tired depictions of

<sup>16</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 268.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Padva, 369.

queer youth. I will return to these differences throughout my analysis of *Water Lilies*, *Tomboy*, and *Moonlight*.

#### A NEWER QUEER CINEMA

If the New Queer Coming of Age Film challenges dominant models of queer coming of age cinema, where should we situate these works within film culture beyond simply positioning them as anti-Hollywood? While *Love, Simon* is indebted to mainstream teen media such as the films of John Hughes and *Degrassi*, we can consider this wave to be building upon the legacy of the New Queer Cinema by deploying aesthetic trends of global arthouse cinema. More specifically, these films depart from the NQC through their quieter approaches to genre, their subversion of cinematic time, and their greater interest in queerness' intersections with race and gender.

Works from the initial wave of the NQC, such as the films of Greg Araki and Todd Haynes, were loud, flamboyant, and unapologetic interventions into dominant genre conventions. Contrastingly, Sciamma's and Jenkins' films thrive on silence in their impressionistic and sensual cinematic language, continuing the spirit of NQC while using different filmmaking strategies to reject heteronormative frameworks. These contemporary works demonstrate what Galt and Schoonover call *register*, which names the ways in which "cinema articulates these more elusive, but nonetheless felt, experiences of queerness in and through the cinematic sensorium."<sup>19</sup> Applying the idea of register prompts us to consider Sciamma's and Jenkins' haptic styles to be intrinsically political, as these films "both reflect experience and have the capacity to imagine radical forms of social being."<sup>20</sup> Register can also emancipate queer cinema

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<sup>19</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 212.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 214-215.

from genre conventions. Many NQC films were invested in queering established genres to create cinematic explorations of queer being, but register suggests that this practice may be reductive in contemporary cinema. As my analysis of *Love, Simon* has revealed, the genres of the coming of age film and the romantic comedy are themselves Western, heteropatriarchal institutions. Galt and Schoonover note that queer films' incorporation of the sensory refuses to respect generic distinctions and enacts a project of geopolitical intervention which "redistributes the sensory potentialities of the world."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the New Queer Coming of Age Film's engagement with the sensory expands upon the formal tactics of the NQC.

Works of this wave are also significant evolutions of the NQC in that their aesthetic sensibilities are aligned with trends in world arthouse cinema, particularly in their approach to cinematic time. While the original movement's output was largely American, Rich suggests that the next stage of queer cinema is a global one.<sup>22</sup> This prospect is exactly what *Queer Cinema in the World* equips us to contend with and – although my study is limited to Sciamma's exploration of French suburbia and Jenkin's depiction of Black America – the span of films which constitute the New Queer Coming of Age film is increasingly global. In contrast to the heterosynchronics exemplified by *Love, Simon*, the troubled temporalities of Sciamma and Jenkins' work demonstrates what Galt and Schoonover call *queer asynchrony*, which throws a wrench in the gears of heterosynchronics. Queer asynchrony embraces "delay, deferral, and incompleteness," resisting dominant forms of narrative pleasure by allowing queer feelings to simmer.<sup>23</sup> Galt and Schoonover argue that queer cinema's asynchronous tendencies situate queer films alongside Dudley Andrew's global phase of world cinema, which aesthetically embraces

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<sup>21</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 213.

<sup>22</sup> Rich, 282.

<sup>23</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 272.

experiences of postponement, non-synchrony, and dislocation.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Sciamma's and Jenkins' penchant for open-endedness and silence situates their aesthetic sensibilities more strongly with figures in world cinema than with pioneers of the NQC. A notable influence is Claire Denis, whose embrace of silence and sensuous camerawork in *Beau Travail* (1999) communicated queer ways of being without explicitly assigning gendered or sexual identities to its characters. Sciamma follows Denis' legacy of French women filmmakers and Jenkins has praised her as "the world's greatest working filmmaker" on multiple occasions.<sup>25</sup> Jenkins has also noted an influence from Wong Kar-wai, and the Hong Kong filmmaker's use of film language to communicate unspoken desires is comparable to Sciamma's cinematic style.<sup>26</sup> Galt and Schoonover cite Wong's *Happy Together* (1997) as a prime example of queer asynchrony, in which experiences of non-synchrony and dislocation form the emotional, experiential, and thematic core of the film.<sup>27</sup> Lynne Ramsay's use of haptic imagery and sound to immerse spectators into the world of a child is also worth noting, and is one of Annette Kuhn's main objects of study in applying her theory of cinema and transitional phenomena, which I will be discussing in the next chapter. Sciamma's and Jenkins' asynchronous poetics situate their work more strongly with global art cinema than the aesthetic sensibilities of the NQC.

Finally, these films develop upon the aspirations of the NQC in how they chart a course for a more intersectional queer cinema. Rich is critical of how the movement offered disproportionate attention to cis, gay, white men while films directed by lesbians and people of

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<sup>24</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 271.

<sup>25</sup> Christoph Straub, "In Conversation With... Claire Denis and Barry Jenkins," *Toronto International Film Festival*, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://tiff.net/events/in-conversation-with-claire-denis-and-barry-jenkins>.

<sup>26</sup> "What Wong Kar-wai Taught Barry Jenkins About Longing," *The Criterion Collection*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4328-what-wong-kar-wai-taught-barry-jenkins-about-longing>.

<sup>27</sup> Galt and Schoonover, 272

colour were regularly marginalized.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the NQC greatly repositioned sexuality in the popular imagination but rarely interrogated gender, which remained largely naturalized. As I will show in the chapters that follow, these films are much more attentive to the workings of hegemonic gender roles. Although *Tomboy* is the only film that deals with trans issues, the haptic aesthetics of each of the three films allow us to be more perceptive to the subtle ways in which expectations of gender are tied to normative growth. As I proceed to draw out my theoretical framework and analyze *Water Lilies*, *Tomboy*, and *Moonlight*, categories of gender, race, and class must all be accounted for in order to understand how the films' characters are spatially and temporally oriented within white supremacist heteropatriarchal settings.

## CHAPTER 2: A Framework of Queer Film Phenomenology

In having situated both the formal tropes and ideological confidences that this wave of haptic coming of age cinema resists, as well as the branches of filmmaking these works can be aligned with, a framework of queer film theory must be established to understand the inner workings of Céline Sciamma and Barry Jenkins' respective haptic styles. While Galt and Schoonover's concepts of register and queer asynchrony have been useful in identifying the cultural significance of such engagements with the sensory, this chapter will amass a broader theoretical toolbelt that will be utilized in my analysis, drawing from works of childhood studies, film phenomenology, and queer theory to grasp the spatiotemporal complexities of portraying queer children in cinema. In the first section, I will survey how the universalized figure of the child has served what Lee Edelman calls a politics of "reproductive futurity," which has oversimplified conceptions of human growth by casting childhood and queerness into entirely separate domains. Thus, Laura Marks' concept of *haptic visibility* illuminates how Sciamma's

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<sup>28</sup> Rich, 18.

and Jenkins' films are crucial in resisting such politics by reflecting the nuanced interiority of the *sideways growing* queer child. In the second section, I will theorize how the spatiality of queer youth is articulated on-screen, outlining concepts of *straight lines*, *straightening devices*, *orientation*, and *disorientation* from Sarah Ahmed's model of queer phenomenology. I will then put Ahmed's concepts in conversation with Annette Kuhn's filmic formulation of *transitional phenomena* and *friendly expanses*, which suggest that viewers' understanding of cinematic space invokes similar mental processes to that of young children. In the third and final section, I will argue that *queer moments* in *Water Lilies*, *Tomboy*, and *Moonlight* are essential to their depictions of queer coming of age as distinctly spatiotemporal encounters with heteropatriarchy.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

The figure of a discursively constructed child has held a contentious position in film and queer theory. In the introduction to *The Child in World Cinema: Children and Youth in Popular Culture*, Debbie Olson suggests that the type of child that is typically pictured in Western culture is a "white, blonde, blue eyed, plump, and angelic" figure structured around innocence, normativity, and non-complication.<sup>29</sup> Historicizations of childhood in the West have thus assumed that all children share the same space, ideology, and socioeconomic status, creating a framework which privileges white, suburban, middle-class notions of childhood.<sup>30</sup> This discursively constructed, universalizing figure of the child does not account for the experiences, needs, or agency of real-life children, but is rather invented retroactively by adults to serve various ideologies.<sup>31</sup> Popular Western media has been responsible for the global circulation of this reductive notion of childhood, a neocolonial project that operates similarly to the politics of

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<sup>29</sup> Debbie Olson, "Introduction: Childhood," in *The Child in World Cinema: Children and Youth in Popular Culture*, ed. Debbie Olson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), ix.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

homonormativity discussed in the previous chapter. With *Love, Simon*, we can observe normalizing politics working double-duty, as the reductive discourses of childhood make room for an equally limiting and homonormative portrayal of queer youth in which acceptance is possible so long as one assimilates to the rhythms of heteropatriarchal life.

For queers, Lee Edelman's *No Future* argues that the figure of the child is a linchpin of the universal, heteropatriarchal politics he calls "reproductive futurism."<sup>32</sup> Politicians' broad appeals to "fight for the children" harms the queer as it establishes a social order which preserves "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable [and] casting outside the political domain the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations."<sup>33</sup> Thus, when the future is transmitted in the form of society's "inner child," the willfully unproductive queer is placed on the side of those not "fighting for the children."<sup>34</sup> The politics of reproductive futurism destroys the possibility for queer children to exist as, according to Edelman, "queerness is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end." We can again see this proposal at work in *Love, Simon*'s use of the coming out as coming of age trope, as a public disclosure of queerness marks a rite of passage into adulthood.

Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* further problematizes what happens to queer children existing within the restraining confines of the innocent child. Stockton's book suggests that all children are in a sense queer and to think about them as such is to shine a light upon complications that are negated by this stifling understanding of childhood.<sup>35</sup> This model, she suggests, is controlled by a period of delay during

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<sup>32</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>35</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

which their innocence is protected before proceeding to grow up “vertically” towards normative roles of marriage, work, reproduction, and an overall loss of childishness once childhood is deemed complete.<sup>36</sup> Such a framework oversimplifies human growth in the service of heteropatriarchy and Stockton instead proposes a model of “growing sideways,” which suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas may pertain to any age “bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts.”<sup>37</sup> As my analysis of Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ films will discuss, the queer’s growth is not so simple. Children experience queer identity far earlier than they publicly assign a word to it and queerness can remain an unaddressed facet of one’s identity far into adulthood. The coming out as coming of age trope does not make room for such nuance. Assuming that children will be straight until they verbally articulate otherwise, the figure of the innocent child only allows us to see the queer child as someone constructed in retrospect as, by the time they come out, the classification of “child” is likely expired.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, queer children are “intensely unavailable to [themselves] in the present tense,” relegating our understanding of queer youth to fictional portrayals.<sup>39</sup> While Stockton’s book analyses a number of filmic texts within a literary studies framework, it never quite grasps how cinema’s unique formal qualities offer a particularly rich potential to transmit the lived spatiotemporal experience of the queer child. Thus, the subsequent theories I will develop in this chapter will help us understand how Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ visions of queer childhood firmly situate themselves within the present of their characters experience, using cinema to cast a light on previously unexplored temporalities.

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<sup>36</sup> Stockton, 4, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 6.



While the field of affect theory in film studies has been somewhat oversaturated in recent years, these theories are crucial in understanding the New Queer Coming of Age Film. Numerous film scholars who specialize in the depiction of children have previously argued that a haptic style is able to emulate the experience of childhood on screen. In her book *Childhood and Cinema*, Vicky Lebeau argues that small children's experiences are dependent on understanding the world through the senses rather than the limiting "world of words," and that cinema's privileged access to the perceptual is able to bring us closer to the child.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Emma Wilson proposes that cinema's potential to evoke touch molds the medium to children's perceptions, presenting the possibility of shocking the adult viewer by "[breaking] down the division between viewer and the children viewed."<sup>41</sup> For queer children, a cinematic style that is engaged with the sensory is essential in breaking down normalizing discourses or "the world of words" that harm both queers and children.

These descriptions prompt me to turn to Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality, which characterizes Sciamma's and Jenkins' particular mode of transmitting experience. Marks defines haptic visuality as:

The combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics. Because haptic visuality draws on other senses, the viewer's body is more obviously involved in the process of seeing than is the case with optical visuality.<sup>42</sup>

Marks continues to explain that haptic visuality does not precisely emphasize the viewer's inclination to perceive haptically, but requires a level of engagement from the spectator, creating

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<sup>40</sup> Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), loc 138.

<sup>41</sup> Emma Wilson, "Children, emotion and viewing in contemporary European film," *Screen* 46, no. 3 (2005): 332.

<sup>42</sup> Marks, 2-3.

“a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image.”<sup>43</sup> Both understated and deeply political, this visibility is instrumental in how the New Queer Coming of Age Film’s evades mainstream coming of age tropes and refutes confining constructions of normative childhood.

#### QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY AND TRANSITIONAL PHENOMENA

Haptic visibility is also crucial in depicting the specificities of how it *feels* to grow up in the body of a queer child in the French suburbs of *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy* and the Miami ghetto of *Moonlight*. Accordingly, this section will place Sarah Ahmed and Annette Kuhn’s work in conversation to better understand the spatiality of queer youth.

Ahmed’s book *Queer Phenomenology* analyses the spatiotemporal contours of queer experience by considering how the bodily, the spatial, and the social conspire to orient and disorient individuals in heteropatriarchal environments. Echoing Stockton’s description of queer children’s sideways growth, Ahmed associates heteronormative forces with straight lines and verticality. For Ahmed, to be oriented is to follow lines or remain “in line” with social agreements of how we measure time and space within straight and white environments.<sup>44</sup> Such normative lines are shaped by “the repetition of bodily and social actions over time”<sup>45</sup> and following them is a performative way of “becoming straight,” involving forms of social investment such as adhering to the pressure to live a certain life, or continuing a “family line.”<sup>46</sup> Ahmed also notes that lines can mark out the edges of disciplinary homes which “mark those who are out of line.”<sup>47</sup> Such vertical orientations are maintained by the “straightening device” of compulsory heterosexuality, which “rereads signs of queer desire as deviations from the straight

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<sup>43</sup> Marks, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ahmed, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 16-17,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 22.

line”<sup>48</sup> and “diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line” by shaping “which bodies one can legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot.”<sup>49</sup> Ahmed argues that whiteness is also a straightening device, as the white world places certain things such as resources and aspirations within reach for white bodies while these things are not as easily accessible from the orientation of a non-white body.<sup>50</sup> Heteronormative and white supremacist social mappings are regulated by the construction of spaces, and Ahmed brings particular attention to how furniture act as orientation devices which direct bodies in certain ways during social gatherings.<sup>51</sup> For instance, a dining room table is a kinship object which mediates the formation of the nuclear family just as, in a restaurant filled with heterosexual couples sitting at their respective tables, a queer couple would visibly appear to be “out of line.”<sup>52</sup> The straightening mechanisms of heteronormative culture have direct, oppressive consequences for queer bodies and subjectivities.

Accordingly, queerness is characterized by experiences of *disorientation*, in which queer bodies deviate from the lines of social and spatial relations laid out by the straight world. Ahmed describes disorientation as a typically unsettling bodily feeling which can “shatter one’s [...] belief that the ground on which we reside can support actions that make a life feel liveable,” catalyzing certain realizations that one must reorient themselves towards vertical forms of growth in order to survive under a violent heteropatriarchy.<sup>53</sup> However, disorientation can also be an incredibly liberating act of worldmaking in which deviating from heteronormative lines allows for mappings of new social relations that “rethink desire as a form of action that shapes

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<sup>48</sup> Ahmed, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 121, 126, 129.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 80-82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 157.

bodies and worlds.”<sup>54</sup> We can characterize these instances as queer moments, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section. Furthermore, disorientation can occur in concentrated, formative moments but can also be an ordinary matter of dealing with the everyday perception of others, where one inhabits a queer slant.<sup>55</sup> Disorientation comes in many forms in Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ films, and my analysis will identify what formal strategies each director uses in order to portray this phenomenon.

Although Ahmed is not a film theorist, her work is deeply insightful in making sense of Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ haptic styles. Ahmed uses the notion of straight lines in a number of figurative and literal contexts and my analysis will do the same. For example, I will examine how each film’s love interest follows the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, how bodies on-screen often follow the rhythms and structures of straight time, and how the films’ formal strategies tend to follow orderly, static, and predictable patterns during moments in which straightening devices are at work. My analysis will use language such as being “in-line” or “vertically oriented” to describe characters who follow heteronormative life paths and describe queerness as instances where, to echo Stockton, “sideways growing” characters deviate from lines or go “off-line.” The broader scope of my thesis will also refer to what kinds of lines are at work in contemporary queer filmmaking and how the films themselves deviate from or comply with such lines. For instance, I would argue that *Love, Simon* follows the lines of stylistic and narrative tropes of the coming of age genre.

My use of Ahmed’s theory of queer phenomenology will be further enriched when referenced alongside the work of Annette Kuhn, who uses child psychoanalyst Donald

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 107.

Winnicott's object-relations model of transitional phenomena to argue that certain cognitive processes of childhood development are re-evoked through the spectator's understanding of space on film. Transitional phenomena is a process initially invoked by transitional objects, an infant's first "not-me" possessions such as a favourite blanket or teddy. These objects serve the fantasy of the child's inner world while also having a physical existence in the outer world of material objects.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Winnicott suggests that this process operates within an "in-between" space between reality and imagination that is crucial to the human experience, stating "no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer realities" and that transitional objects help us manage this strain.<sup>57</sup> Transitional phenomena also occurs during a child's engagement with the play space, where the body manipulates external objects and spaces while investing them with "dream meaning and feeling."<sup>58</sup> This process is central to a child's separation/individuation process and in constructing their understanding of themselves in relation to objects, spaces and others, but does not stop when childhood ends, and is similarly evoked when adults engage with cultural objects and activities such as painting, poetry, music, and film.<sup>59</sup> Kuhn ultimately argues that the spectator's experience of mapping together the spatial and symbolic organization of cinematic spaces reflects transitional phenomena, effectively inviting adults to re-enter the perception of the child's world.<sup>60</sup>

My analysis is particularly interested in how the films depict settings that are typically involved in transitional phenomena. Within Kuhn's model, the home acts as the prime site of negotiation between inner and outer worlds, but the films complicate the stability of such a safe

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<sup>56</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Cinematic Experience, the Film Space, and the Child's World," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 83.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

space for queer children. Contrastingly, Kuhn brings attention to Michael Balint's concept of the child's zone of risk – the “friendly expanse” – which lies beyond the threshold of the home.<sup>61</sup> As children grow older, they push the boundaries of the “increasingly challenging open, non-home expanse” through the repeated back and forth experience of moving between home and open spaces.<sup>62</sup> In Sciamma's and Jenkins' films, friendly expanses play crucial roles in expanding the queer children's understanding of themselves, which I will observe when studying the cinematic and symbolic significance of the pool in *Water Lilies*, the forest in *Tomboy*, and the ocean in *Moonlight*. I propose that friendly expanses are particularly vital for activating the in-between spaces for queer children, for whom home may not always necessarily be a refuge. As my analysis of each film will uncover, friendly expanses act as key sites for queer self-discovery, placing the management of their protagonists' inner and outer worlds in an especially disorienting flux.

#### QUEER MOMENTS, QUEER UTOPIAS, AND CINEMATIC TIME

My analysis will also observe how friendly expanses serve as sites of *queer moments* – shifts in cinematic register which are activated by instances of queer relationality. The construction of queer moments is vital to the spatiotemporal experience of these films, bringing attention to time as something that is felt in conjunction with each films' haptic visuality. Ahmed suggests that queer desires create spaces “that come and go with the coming and going of the bodies that inhabit them” which is “as much a sign of how heterosexuality shapes the contours of the uninhabitable or liveable spaces as it is about the promise of being queer. It is a given that the straight world is already in place and that queer moments, where things come out of line, are

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<sup>61</sup>Kuhn, 86.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 87.

fleeting.”<sup>63</sup> Ahmed continues to state that queer moments are not about overcoming the disorientation they provoke but are rather about inhabiting its intensity.<sup>64</sup>

This concept of queer moments is enriched when we place Ahmed’s work in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz’s queer utopian project. In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz argues that the present, or the “here and now” is a prison house which must never be settled upon and that queerness should be conceptualized as a thing of the future.<sup>65</sup> The heterosynchronic temporality of *Love, Simon* is reflective of what Muñoz calls straight time, which “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life.”<sup>66</sup> Homonormative coming of age films are symptomatic of a “pragmatic gay agenda” which portray certain modes of living as rational and more doable in order to sell a “cheapened and degraded version of freedom,” withered by neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics.<sup>67</sup> *Love, Simon*’s uncritical, normalcy-desiring optimism reflects Muñoz’s argument that pragmatic gay politics attempt to present themselves as not being ideological, and yet they are extremely so.<sup>68</sup> Thus, “we cannot trust in the manifestations of what some people would call queerness in the present”<sup>69</sup> as such a position evokes a complacency that prevents queers from imagining new worlds and modes of being outside of the oppressive present.

Instead, Muñoz argues for the utopian act of rejecting the “here and now” in favour of constantly envisioning queerness on the horizon or as a “there and then” which has not yet arrived, stating “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed

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<sup>63</sup> Ahmed, 106.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>65</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

something is missing.”<sup>70</sup> Muñoz’s model of futurity is an antidote of sorts to Edelman’s description of the social order of the present, in which reproductive futurity annihilates the queer through the figure of the child.<sup>71</sup> For queerness to have any value at all, it must radically invest in futurity and hope, proposing that “we gain a greater conceptual and theoretical leverage if we see queerness as something that is not yet here.”<sup>72</sup> Moments of queer relationality that exist in the present moment thus offer us brief glimpses of the promised future.<sup>73</sup> Connecting Muñoz to Kuhn’s work, we could say that such a project would involve doubling down on the imaginative power of our inner worlds in spite of the material reality of the present in order to grasp fleeting queer moments which transcend the “everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism,”<sup>74</sup> While Muñoz’s book is not a work of film theory, cinema is crucial in attaining glimpses of queer futurity’s time and place as, through mapping future social relations, he argues that queer aesthetics contain “blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.”<sup>75</sup>

Placing Muñoz’s theory alongside film theory is mutually illuminating, Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ shifts between registers of confining straight presents to liberatory queer moments are indicative of what Lee Carruthers would call a film’s “timeliness.”<sup>76</sup> Carruthers’ book *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema* proposes that every film has a characteristic way of conditioning temporal experience for viewers, suggesting that “pauses, gaps, repetitions, and stretches of time illuminate a living field that extends from our viewing

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<sup>70</sup> Muñoz, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>76</sup> Lee Carruthers, *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 2.



activity.”<sup>77</sup> Consistent with the notion of haptic visuality, Carruthers argues that the experience of engaging with a film’s manner of “doing time” also has a sensuous impact.<sup>78</sup> Timeliness does not simply exist in a filmic text, but rather emerges through the complex dynamic of engagement between film and spectator.<sup>79</sup> As a result, Carruthers suggests that “films know about time, and can teach us something about it.”<sup>80</sup> In what follows, my analysis is deeply concerned with characterizing each films’ way of doing time and curious about what their timeliness can teach us.

Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ approaches to doing time are deeply political in how they teach us about historically ignored subjectivities of queer childhood. My analysis will prove that the timeliness of the films’ queer moments – which I argue are their most crucial – are characterized by potentiality and ecstasy, registers which are essential to Muñoz’s model of queer utopia. Potentiality is “a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense,” and is the feeling which fuels a register of hope in the films’ queer moments. Muñoz notes that utopian feelings such as hope and potentiality can and will be regularly disappointed, but “disappointment needs to be risked in certain impasses are to be resisted.”<sup>81</sup> Muñoz furthermore suggests that in moments of queer relational bliss, ecstasy enables us to “stand out of time” and “rewrite a larger map” of everyday life.<sup>82</sup> Returning to Ahmed’s language, ecstasy suggests an escape from the lines that structure white supremacist heteropatriarchy. These moments do not seek to carve out new lines, as that would seek to

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<sup>77</sup> Carruthers, 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Muñoz, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 188.

rebuild oppressive structures in the vein of homonormativity but rather allow us to understand queerness as something that is “still forming, or in many crucial ways formless.”<sup>83</sup>

As I proceed into my analysis, I propose that cinema is crucial in deepening our understanding the rich, challenging, and abstract conceptions of queerness outlined in this chapter. A haptic approach to queer coming of age cinema allows us to experience the complex management of inner and outer worlds – transitional phenomena – at work through the queer child’s engagement with their heteropatriarchal environments which seek to orient them towards normative growth through various forms of straightening devices. Friendly expanses, however, lead the films characters to queer moments – fleeting and formative instances of relationality characterized by potentiality, ecstasy and, inevitably, disappointment. Variably traumatic and liberating, Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ work consistently understands queer youth as a period characterized by various intensities of disorientation which is represented through an array of cinematic techniques.

### CHAPTER 3: Céline Sciamma’s French Suburbs

Céline Sciamma’s first two features *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*, early examples of the New Queer Coming of Age Cinema, offer an excellent opportunity to work with the established framework of queer film phenomenology. While Sciamma’s French suburbs are an ocean away from *Love, Simon*’s Atlanta setting, her films work as a foil to the latter’s homonormative fantasy, instead depicting queerness as fundamentally incompatible with predominantly white and middle-class spaces. Sciamma’s protagonists find their queerness squandered by their communities’ limiting norms of white femininity, and this chapter will argue that her haptic style

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<sup>83</sup> Muñoz, 29.

subverts the conventions of the queer coming of age film by depicting the experience of growing up queer in the suburbs as a deeply disorienting and embodied experience marked by formative queer moments. In my section on *Water Lilies*, I will examine the significance of the friendly expanse of the pool through an analysis of the films' synchronized swimming sequences, which paradoxically spark Marie (Pauline Acquart)'s queer desires while enforcing normative femininity upon the community's girls. I will then analyze how Marie's uneasy romance with team-captain Floriane (Adèle Haenel) offers glimpses of queer moments which are regularly disappointed by Floriane's investment in compulsory heterosexuality. In my analysis of *Tomboy*, I will investigate how Laure (Zoé Héran) forms the male identity of Mickaël through acts of play which allow them to adapt to the gender norms of their new neighbourhood. In the film's final act, this notion of play is coopted with discourses of normative childhood and used to trivialize the protagonists' gender expression. Through analyzing both films, this chapter as a whole will reflect upon how Sciamma's style aestheticizes Muñoz's framework of queer utopia, depicting the "here and now" of French suburbia as a confining environment for queer bodies. However, Sciamma concludes each film on a note of potentiality that suggests that friendships are an ideal mode of relationality in which utopian feelings can be glimpsed by queer children.

#### DOUBLE-EDGED DESIRES IN *WATER LILIES*

Sciamma's debut feature, *Water Lilies*, tells the story of awkward 15-year-old Marie who becomes infatuated with a cold and idealistically feminine synchronized swimmer named Floriane after watching her perform at a community recital. In a shameless proposal of queer interest, Marie asks Floriane if she can watch her practice, to which she obliges under the condition that Marie accompany her on walks to meet with her boyfriend to presumably have sex. While we initially see that Marie's strangeness is affirmed by her best friend, Anne, who

similarly struggles to align with the community's standards of femininity, she grows distant from this relationship throughout the film in order to pursue her frustrated and mostly one-sided queer desire. Floriane initially seems to embody the community's preferred mode of "emphasized femininity," defined by R.W. Connell as "the pattern of femininity which is given the most cultural and ideological support" through markers of sociability, compliance, and sexual receptivity to men.<sup>84</sup> To Marie's surprise, this image is complicated when Floriane begins to return her queer affections while remaining highly invested in her normative image. Thus, my analysis is interested in examining how the film articulates Marie's queer desire as a feeling that is simultaneously indebted to and frustrated by Floriane's image of normative femininity, resulting in moments of disorientation for both characters.

*Water Lilies* is set in the French suburb of Cergy-Pontoise, where Sciamma herself grew up as a queer child. The community is one of nine "New Towns" built in the outskirts of Paris during the 1970s, constructed as an attempt to engineer social diversity through creating spaces that would allow for communities of different ages, occupations, and social class to mix with a particular focus on the middle class.<sup>85</sup> M. Catherine Jonet's reading credits the film's stunted depiction of queer desire to the ultimate failure of this social mixing, suggesting that "This fabricated locus of middle-class values does not enable queer desire to flourish. Even though parents and other adults are largely absent from the film, heterocentric, patriarchal ideologies persist as internalized values governing characters' choices."<sup>86</sup> Unlike the built-in liberal acceptance illustrated in the similarly bourgeois setting of *Love, Simon*, Jonet's argument suggests that queer desires are fundamentally incompatible with the values of Cergy-Pontoise

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<sup>84</sup> R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 24.

<sup>85</sup> M. Catherine Jonet, "Desire and Queer Adolescence: Céline Sciamma's *Naissance des Pieuvres*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 5 (2017): 1130.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1130.

and Sciamma's style is deeply interested in depicting what it feels like to be in a queer body in such a constraining environment.

*The Pool and Synchronized Swimming*

More specifically, the setting of the pool serves as a primary space for the tension between Marie's queer desire and the community's heteropatriarchal structures to play out. Sophie Belot's analysis proposes that "The swimming pool is connected to the affective experience of the female body, and is thus the place where structure and movement interrelate and where the figurative and the abstract connect."<sup>87</sup> For Marie, we can characterize the pool as a friendly expanse – a "zone of risk" which invokes transitional phenomena when her interest in Floriane opens up an inner world of queer desire that she must negotiate with the heteropatriarchal outer world. At the pool, the sport of synchronized swimming illustrates the spatiotemporality of heteropatriarchy actively at work, keeping the community's girls "in line" with normative femininity by directing their bodies within calculated and repetitive movements. While this performance of restrictive, emphasized femininity is constructed for the male gaze, it catches Marie's instead. Thus, the pool is a paradoxical space of growth and becoming for Marie in which she explores the depths of her queer desires while encountering the heteronormative gender norms enforced by the community.

This tension plays out in the three synchronized swimming sequences which occur across the film's first act. With Sciamma's haptic style attaching us to Marie's perspective, these performances draw us into the affective allure of the sport only to break them down as a cold and shallow spectacle. The first sequence ignites Marie's initial desire for Floriane, the routine

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<sup>87</sup> Sophie Belot, "Céline Sciamma's *La Naissance des pieuvres* (2007): Seduction and be-coming," *Studies in French Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2012): 177.



Figure 3: *Water Lilies*' first synchronized swimming sequence

beginning as the disinterested Marie starts to walk away but is stopped by the sound of dramatic opera music. As her interest grows, pedestrian extreme long shots cut to medium close-ups of the swimmers which capture the textural details of the splashing water and graceful, muscular movements (Figure 3). Sciamma's elegant camera work and rhythmic editing perfectly match the calibrated rhythms of the dance. The sequence concludes with a grandiose medium shot of Floriane, who pridefully emerges from and sinks back into the water as the camera dollies backwards, creating a vertigo effect that reflects Marie's newfound obsession.

The second sequence offers a view of a similar routine from underwater, as Floriane invites Marie to come into the pool for a better view. Opera music is replaced with ambient whooshing and Sciamma's rapid cutting is traded for lingering long shots where we observe the bizarre imagery of the swimmers' legs moving in egg-beater rotations (Figure 4). When the team flips upside-down for their handstands, their awkward strokes make them appear almost as if they are moving backwards in time. This



Figure 4: Labour beneath the surface, *Water Lilies*

otherworldly sequence reveals the painful labour that is hidden beneath the surface in order to deliver a performance of feminine elegance and desirability.



Figure 5: Graphic shot compositions during inspection, *Water Lilies*

Consequently, the third routine returns to the surface with a dance which is entirely drained of its spectacle, registering as particularly unsettling due to the scene which precedes it wherein a female coach examines each swimmer's armpits to ensure they are adequately shaved.

Framed in medium shot, the camera dollies across the row of girls, resembling a military line as they hold their arms up in unison and display

expressions ranging from boredom to fear. Upon

reaching the end of the line, the film cuts to a medium shot of the coach and the final girl, who has failed the inspection. She is punished with public humiliation, lamenting that she did not have the time when the coach asks "Is that what you'll tell your husband? You didn't have time?" Thus, the social environment of synchronized swimming actively works to keep the girls vertically oriented towards normative gender roles as they grow into adulthood. Here, Sciamma shows the straightening device of compulsory heterosexuality at work which is further reflected by her graphic shot composition which shows us that heterosexuality is a spatial affair (Figure 5). By placing the girls' bodies physically in-line, the coach identifies which bodies are off-line (66). The subsequent synchronized swimming sequence is framed much more closely than the previous routines, remaining within straight-on medium close-ups of the swimmers which allow us to observe their uncannily artificial smiles (Figure 6). While the swimmers remain on-tempo,

there is no music in this routine, the soundscape instead only capturing the sounds of splashing and the occasional counting from the team. Having revealed what occurs beneath the surface and



Figure 6: A disillusioned final routine, *Water Lilies*

behind the scenes, Sciamma deconstructs the allure of sensuous excess towards this final sequence of cold alienation.

### *Floriane's Depths*

*Water Lilies* details a similar tension between alluring surface and alienating depth when Floriane's own constructed image of emphasized femininity is similarly dismantled, revealing her as a complex figure flush with sideways-oriented desires who is nonetheless deeply invested in remaining in-line with her environment's gender norms. As she grows closer to Marie, she reveals that, contrary to her outward facing "bad girl" image, she is still a virgin. However, she thrives on the social power she receives as an object for the male gaze. She maintains a flirty and predatory dynamic with her coach because he "can't say no to her." Furthermore, her female peers demonstrate a shared disdain for her due to her coldness and perceived promiscuity, yet she allows her teammates to spread rumors that she is sleeping with the coach because she likes to "wind up the bitches." Floriane's central dilemma is that if she has sex with her boyfriend, Francois, he will learn that she is a virgin and ruin her image of normative femininity. Frustrating her queer desire, Marie is cajoled into helping her crush find a discrete way to lose her virginity.

As she pursues this milestone of heteronormative growth, Floriane's identity is further complicated when she seems to reciprocate Marie's desire during several queer



moments in which Sciamma's haptic style immerses us in the affective details of unspoken intimacy. Contrary to her initial coldness, Floriane demonstrates unprecedented sweetness and vulnerability when, after their first evening spending time together as genuine friends,



Figure 7: Reframing pulls us out of a queer moment, *Water Lilies*

the girls lie in bed as she slowly begins to stroke Marie's hand. Another sequence of near seduction occurs when the girls go to a club together in order to find a stranger to take Floriane's virginity. Framed in an intimate close-up on the dancefloor, Floriane begins to sensually approach Marie, almost kissing her as the music becomes increasingly intense only for Floriane to suddenly exit the frame after the bass drop. Marie opens her eyes and, in a wryly comic contrast, the film cuts to a medium long shot revealing that Floriane is now emphatically dancing with a man (Figure 7). Such scenes of queer affection followed by Floriane's immediate withdrawal to heterosexual relationality begin to characterize the girls' dynamic. Emma Wilson observes that this power dynamic is reflected by the film's formal

decisions, suggesting "The film's aesthetic strategy is so acute that it charts minutely the intermittence of Floriane's attention. There are moments when the film itself seems lost in Marie's love and seems equally enchanted with Floriane's erotic possibility."<sup>88</sup> The irony of

<sup>88</sup> Emma Wilson, "Scenes of Hurt and Rapture: Céline Sciamma's *Girlhood*," *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 12.

this dynamic being that while Marie is initially lured in by Floriane due to her feminine spectacle, she herself is now part of her scheme to draw men in.

Nonetheless, these queer moments are essential to Marie's self-discovery. True to both Ahmed's and Muñoz's models, fleeting instances of queer desire allow Marie to step out of the "here and now" of her suburban environment and glimpse the utopian potentiality of queerness. The inevitable disappointments that bring the end to these moments of potentiality are signalled by Floriane's abrupt regressions to compulsory heterosexuality, which snap Marie back into the confining heterosexual present. As Ahmed suggests, these moments where queers "switch dimensions" can be incredibly disorienting, which is formalized by Sciamma during the switch from sensuous close-up to awkward medium long shot in the club scene.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, Marie's love for Floriane is a passion characterized by absence, which we can observe during her interactions with material objects marked by Floriane. In one sequence, Marie steals a bag of garbage from Floriane's house, unpacking it in her room while feeling and smelling items such as a crinkled note and old tissues. A particularly gross close-up shows Marie biting into a mostly eaten apple



Figure 8: Apple as transitional object, *Water Lilies*

core, with Sciamma's haptic visuality beckoning the spectator to imagine the taste as she endures the bite (Figure 8). We can make sense of this moment by considering Floriane's

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<sup>89</sup> Ahmed, 158.

trash as transitional objects, bridging the material world with the internal reality of Marie's desires.<sup>90</sup> While the real Floriane is much more complicated than Marie bargained for, an engagement with these objects allow her to indulge in her passion for Floriane without dealing with the frustrating complications evoked by her perplexing advances. Floriane catalyzes a strain between Marie's inner and outer worlds that invokes the in-between space of transitional phenomena and characterizes a disorienting and lonely experience of queer longing.

A particular stress is placed upon this strain when Floriane begs for Marie to take her virginity so that Francois can have sex with her without ruining her bad girl reputation, to which Marie reluctantly agrees. Jonet notes that Floriane's request is characteristically unclear, initially stating "It should be you. I would like you to be the first" in a manner that suggests a reciprocation of Marie's romantic desires. However, when she goes on to state "You get rid of it – remove it for me" the request resembles something closer to an amputation.<sup>91</sup> The "sex scene" is framed in a detached medium shot as Floriane lies limp and uninvolved under her bedsheet while Marie penetrates her with her hand (Figure 9). In a film filled with alluring and sensuous imagery, the moment in which Marie is quite literally feeling the inside of Floriane feels cold and clinical. Here, Sciamma's haptic visuality goes beyond clichés of embodied intimacy and instead makes us experience a failed queer moment. Rather than evoking utopian registers of potentiality or euphoria, the sequence elicits stagnant



Figure 9: Framing a failed queer moment, *Water Lilies*

<sup>90</sup> Kuhn, 84.

<sup>91</sup> Jonet, 1137.

disappointment throughout. Marie's first queer sexual experience, done entirely in the service of Floriane's pursuit of heteronormativity, is trapped within the present of straight time and is brought to an abrupt end when Francois arrives at the door, forcing Marie to leave.

In the film's conclusion, Marie shares a frustrated but passionate kiss with Floriane in the locker room at a community pool party. Unlike in *Love, Simon* however, this kiss serves as the end of the girls' connection rather than the beginning of a conventional romantic coupling. Following the kiss, Floriane dismissively remarks "So you see, it wasn't so bad" before making her intentions known that she will be returning to the party to flirt with a boy, stating "If he's a jerk, come and save me." Solidifying her pattern of affection and dismissal, this scene demonstrates that while Floriane is filled with contradictions, her decisions are decidedly calculated, denoting her investment in the mirage of vertical growth and heteronormative femininity. Ahmed suggests that "following lines involves forms of social investment" and that "such investments 'promise' return [...] which might sustain the very will to keep going."<sup>92</sup> As Sciamma's haptic style is attuned to Marie's senses and, in turn, the pain that Floriane causes her, it would be easy to dismiss Floriane as a villain due to her investment in heteronormativity. However, such a reading would undermine her own complexity, as well as her own right to explore her own sexuality without being bound to the kind of normative coupling that Marie likely desires. Despite her interest in being viewed as a stereotypical object of heteronormative desire, Floriane's resistance to confine herself with traditional monogamy is indicative of her own way of deviating from straight lines. Consequently, Floriane motivates the film's subversion of coming of age and romcom

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<sup>92</sup> Ahmed, 17.

tropes where a traditional coupling – which exclusively binds love and sex to one another – incredulously solves the queer youth’s problems.

Having built her inner and outer world around Floriane throughout the film, Marie’s realization that such a normative coupling is impossible prompts a concentrated and shattering instance of disorientation. Marie’s physicality after being kissed and ditched by Floriane reflects Ahmed’s description of disorientation as a “bodily experience,” her body shaking almost as if in a state of shock and her face marked by Floriane’s smeared lipstick.<sup>93</sup> And yet, Ahmed suggests that “disorientation can teach us something,” and Marie’s experience of losing ground is a vital part of her coming into her selfhood. Disorientation perhaps teaches her how much she too is bound to heteronormative affects through her desire for a normative romance. The failure of Marie and Floriane’s coupling does not remove the valuable glimpses of queer potentiality envisioned earlier in the film, as Muñoz suggests that the relationality can bring queer moments to life “is not about simple positivity or affirmation. It is filled with all sorts of bad feelings, moments of silence and brittleness.”<sup>94</sup> *Water Lilies*’ haptic style invests us in Marie’s passion for Floriane, and yet her longing for a traditional romance paradoxically allows her to explore her queer desires while also indulging her own investment towards normative structures of relationality. Thus, Marie’s disorientation teaches her that her love for Floriane may actually be holding her back and keeping her in-line. As Belot argues, Floriane inflicts a transformative inner shift upon Marie, who will “therefore experience her identity as constantly shifting.”<sup>95</sup> Reflecting Galt and Schoonover’s notion of the “incompleteness” of queer asynchrony, the film’s

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<sup>93</sup> Ahmed, 157.

<sup>94</sup> Muñoz, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Belot, 179.

conclusion resists traditional closure by refusing to paint its protagonists as fixed entities or limit them within heteronormative structures of love and sex.

Instead, *Water Lilies*' conclusion proposes that friendships offer a more reliable source of support for a queer child. After being rejected by Floriane, Marie returns to the friendly expanse of the swimming pool, uses its water to wipe the lipstick from her face, and submerges herself in a moment which suggests a kind of rebirth. She returns to the surface

to find her best friend, Anne, at the ledge,

who jumps into the pool with her. While

Sciamma depicts queer romance as a

disorienting and painful experience for Marie,

the film's final shot, in which Marie and Anne

float in the pool together (Figure 10), suggests

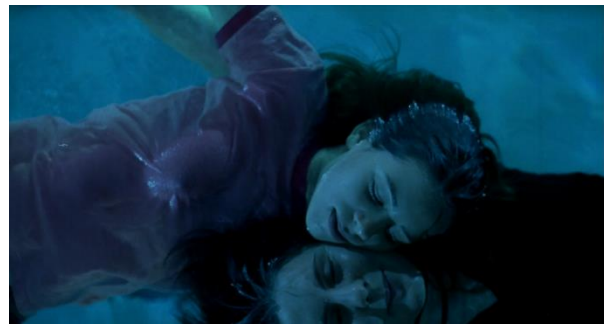


Figure 10: Friendships support queer moments in *Water Lilies*' final shot

that the mutually affirming intimacy of friendship permits a rare space for moments of queer potentiality and growth to continue to flourish in an otherwise heteropatriarchal world.

#### "PLAYING THE BOY" IN *TOMBOY*

Sciamma's second film, *Tomboy*, takes us to an earlier stage of childhood, following 10-year-old Laure who experiments with a masculine gender identity after her family moves to a similar suburb in Seine-et-Marne. While *Water Lilies*' queer deviation is sparked by Marie looking at Floriane, *Tomboy*'s is triggered when Laure is perceived by their new neighbour, Lisa (Jeanne Disson), as male, prompting them to take on the name Mickaël and reformulate their physicality to integrate themselves within the masculine codes of their new community. Mickaël's love story with Lisa serves as an additional motivator for him to pass as male, but the film's queerness largely hinges on the protagonist's enriched connection

with himself, as embodying the identity of Mickaël allows him to become comfortable in his own skin and consequently relate with the community of children with greater intuition and ease. Laure's embodiment of Mickaël largely occurs through the process of play which, as discussed in Kuhn's use of Winnicott in the previous chapter, invokes transitional phenomena through the body's engagement with external phenomena which are invested with "dream meaning and feeling."<sup>96</sup> Playing the boy for Laure involves a process of management between internal and external worlds, in which the imagined reality of Mickaël becomes increasingly closer to a real expression of inner truth. However, Laure's status as a child trivializes their gender expression, in which their boyish comportment is only permitted as "play" which is dependent on binary gender constructions and an expectation that they will eventually grow to inhabit normatively feminine roles.

Before proceeding, I should clarify my use of pronouns while referring to Mickaël/Laure. While *Tomboy* never explicitly states that the protagonist is a trans boy, I will predominantly read the film as one about trans masculinity. Alternate readings have understood the film to be about lesbianism and nonbinarism, but I would suggest the film makes it quite clear that Mickaël/Laure does not want to identify as a woman. Thus, when the protagonist is presenting as Mickaël, I will be using the pronouns he/him/his and when they are presenting as Laure, I will be using the pronouns they/them/their.

### *Performing the True Self*

*Tomboy*'s first two chart Laure's process of playing Mickaël as facilitated by the playing of actual games with the other children, including capture the flag, soccer, and king

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<sup>96</sup> Kuhn, 84.

of the hill. These activities largely occur in the play space of a nearby forest which the children's social activity revolves around. Like the pool in *Water Lilies*, we can characterize the forest as a “friendly expanse” – an open, non-home space which permits the exploration of both space and gender for the protagonist.<sup>97</sup> Sciamma's style aligns itself with this exploratory process of play during a sequence in which Mickaël studies the markers of masculine performance displayed by the other boys during a soccer game as he and Lisa – who is not allowed to play because she is a girl – stand on the sidelines. Attentive medium close-ups of the boys playing, spitting on the ground, shaking hands, and taking off their shirts alternate with close-ups of Mickaël which suggest that he is taking note (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Mickaël studies masculinity, *Tomboy*

He later mimics these gestures at home, looking in the mirror, spitting in the sink, and taking off his shirt to ensure that his prepubescent body will pass as male. This process intimately implicates the spectator, as Katharina Lindner suggests, a transition from a



Figure 12: Practicing gender, *Tomboy*

medium shot to a medium close-up in the sequence marks a shift from looking at Mickaël look at himself in the mirror to *being* Mickaël looking at himself in the mirror (Figure 12).<sup>98</sup>

Kuhn's model suggests that the home is the

<sup>97</sup> Kuhn, 84.

<sup>98</sup> Katharina Lindner, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 15.



primary site of negotiation between inner and outer worlds, and Sciamma's haptic style during the film's mirror sequences offer a privileged view into Mickaël's use of the home to formulate his gender.

Having tested out his masculine performance, Mickaël initiates himself into the social world of the boys the next day by joining in on the game, successfully performing his newly learned physical expressions. Darren Waldron notes that these performative stylizations are not entirely necessary, as there is little discernable change between the protagonist's physicality before and after he is recognized as male by Lisa but are required for him to comply with the hegemonic masculinity displayed by the boys of the community.<sup>99</sup> Sequences such as this where Mickaël successfully passes as male complicate our understanding of queer moments, as he is deviating from the line of his assigned sex by aligning himself to the community's markers of normative masculinity. Nonetheless, these moments are characterized by potentiality and fleetingness. When the soccer game ends, the other boys all take a pee break and, as Mickaël is unable to urinate standing up, he runs to the trees and is nearly caught by another boy. Thus, the friendly expanse of the forest contains a particular degree of danger for the trans child, offering a space for Mickaël to explore himself while also presenting additional opportunities to be outed. Mickaël mobilizes play to combat such a risk later in the film, when he uses his actual play toys to further embody his identity, crafting an artificial penis out of playdoh after Lisa invites him to come swimming. The clay penis can be understood as a transitional object, bridging the internal and external realities of Mickaël's identity and taking on great symbolic meaning.

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<sup>99</sup> Darren Waldron, "Embodying Gender Nonconformity in 'Girls': Céline Sciamma's *Tomboy*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 68.

As Laure's embodiment of Mickaël becomes increasingly intuitive, his inner reality begins to bleed into his outer one, particularly as he develops a romance with Lisa, earns the respect of the other boys, and is found out and eventually accepted by his little sister, Jeanne. Lisa Farley and R.M. Kennedy's reading of *Tomboy* compliments my use of Kuhn's theory through their application of another concept from Donald Winnicott: the "true self." They argue that:

For Winnicott [...] truth is not a matter of certainty but an issue of representing a sense of self that contributes to the feeling of being alive in relationship to others. The 'true self' denotes the creative capacity to live in transition, to accept reality as an always-shifting 'compromise formation, never absolute, always in question.' [...] The 'true self' [bears on] the filmic representation of Mickaël who invites us to witness the enigmatic labour of making gender matter – and come precariously alive – through symbolization.<sup>100</sup>

Sciamma formalizes Mickaël's embodiment of his true self during sequences of play when, in contrast to the focused, analytical exchange of shots that occurs earlier in the film, the camera emphatically follows Mickaël's movements, accompanied by choppy editing patterns which bring the spectator into his embodied space. This loose formal structure evokes Mickaël's ease in socially incorporating himself into the community of children within his masculine identity.

Sciamma's editing patterns are also vital to *Tomboy*'s method of "doing time," inviting us to experience time from the perspective of a child.<sup>101</sup> Waldron proposes that the film's editing patterns implicate the spectator within the film as an "unseen extra child" and that the film's erratic cuts "replicate a child's oscillation between hyperactivity and rest."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Lisa Farley and R.M. Kennedy, "A sex of one's own: Childhood and the embodiment of (trans)gender," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 21, no. 2 (2015): 171.

<sup>101</sup> Carruthers, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Waldron, 65.

The free-flowing nature of these scenes evokes the way in which time seems to carelessly melt away during a child's summer as the start of the school year looms in the neglected future. A reminder of this approaching date underscores the liminality of Mickaël's liberated existence when Lisa remarks that she did not see his name on the class list. The summer, during which Mickaël is able to live as his "true self" is an extended queer moment where he is able to stand outside of the confines of straight time and space before its inevitable end as he enters into a state system which has fixed his gender as female. As the inner truth of Mickaël's reality begins to manifest within the outer world, the pressure of the here and now increasingly threatens to bring his time as Mickaël to an end.

*The False Self and Violence as a Straightening Device*

This end occurs prematurely when, after an exaggerated act of masculinity in which he fights another boy in defense of his sister, the boy's mother shows up at Laure's apartment and asks if Mickaël is home, effectively revealing their secret. Laure's gender deviation is immediately met with violence from their mother, who slaps them in the face. The next day, she forces Laure to wear a dress and takes them to the other children's homes to explain the situation to their parents. When they resist, their mother states "I don't mind you playing the boy. It doesn't even make me sad. But this can't go on." This moment underscores Robbie Duschinsky's analysis of the film, who argues that "the protagonist's status as a child meant that a masculine performance was taken merely as play rather than an expression of inner truth of the subject's sexual and gender identity."<sup>103</sup> While playing with the other children facilitated Mickaël's gender play in a manner that ultimately resulted

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<sup>103</sup> Robbie Duschinsky, "Schizoid Femininities and Interstitial Spaces: Childhood and Gender in Céline Sciamma's *Tomboy* and P.J. Hogan's *Peter Pan*," *Diogenes* 62, no. 1 (2018): 135.

in a truthful expression of self, the notion of play is conversely used to trivialize the protagonist's gender expression as merely child's play. Thus, Mickael's mother's seemingly sympathetic response is symptomatic of discourses of the innocent child in which queerness and childhood cannot coexist.

The subsequent sequences in which Laure is forced to stand in their peers' homes as the mother undoes their gendered labour marks a shattering instance of disorientation in which they are straightened out while also being revoked of their ability to express their true self. Farley and Kennedy suggest that this act of the film depicts a forced reversion to what Winnicott calls a "false self" – a "hardened shell" of a mental state characterized by futility and hopelessness that is 'without a sense of self as a reliable resource with which to adapt inevitable changes in life, to be adventurous, and to contribute to the lives of others.'<sup>104</sup> They also state that "under the condition of the 'false self,' there can be no creative compromises, only compliance."<sup>105</sup> Directly contrasting the freedom evoked by the active camera movement and choppy editing patterns at work earlier in the film, Sciamma formalizes Laure's regression to their false self by deploying static



Figure 13: Shot compositions accentuate lines of heteronormative structures, *Tomboy*

<sup>104</sup> Farley and Kennedy, 172.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

framings that reflect Laure's lack of agency and longer takes that force us to inhabit the oppressive and humiliating duration of straight time and space. These shots mark another instance in which Sciamma's compositions accentuate the straight lines that mark the internal, oppressive structures of the residential homes (Figure 13). Edges of doorframes and walls dominate and restrict Laure within the frame, reflecting Ahmed's observation that the lines which mark out the edges of disciplinary homes also mark those who are out of line.<sup>106</sup> This is exemplified in a shot where Laure stands in Lisa's kitchen as their mother explains the situation to Lisa's mother. Laure paces back and forth across the static medium shot, then hides nervously against the wall as Lisa enters the front door and is told off-screen by her mother "Mickaël is not actually Mickaël but a girl, not a boy." Appearing betrayed, Lisa enters the kitchen and stares at Laure, who shrinks, silent and motionless with Hérán's performance illustrating Laure's complete withdrawal from themselves and their social world.

Like in the conclusion of *Water Lilies*, this gutting rejection prompts the protagonist to return to the friendly expanse which brought their queer deviations to life as Mickaël flees to the forest. A curious shot then marks a shift to a more tranquil register of cinematic time which depicts Mickaël taking off his dress and looking up towards the trees. The camera follows his gaze, tilting upwards, leisurely observing the branches of the trees, and meditating upon the sound of birds and gusting wind before returning to the ground to reveal the dress is now hanging on a log as Mickaël walks away, out of focus (Figure 14). Away from the heteropatriarchal spaces which seek to fix the protagonist's gender, this camera movement liberates Mickaël from the confining framings of the previous sequences,

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<sup>106</sup> Ahmed, 22.

resulting in a quiet moment of hopeful relief that suggest that Mickaël's true self stands a chance at surviving in moments of solitude.



Figure 14: A return to the forest liberates Mickaël and the camera, *Tomboy*

Unfortunately, Mickaël learns that his peers are not so open-minded when he then encounters them in the forest. A group of boys chase him down, eventually tackling and cornering him with the intention of inspecting his genitalia. While Lisa initially intervenes to ask them to stop, the children persuade her into inspecting Mickaël by implicating her with his queerness, with one boy stating “If she’s a girl, then you kissed her. It’s disgusting.” Lisa is thus pressured to agree to not be perceived as queer herself. Ahmed suggests that violence is a straightening device that can occur as a consequence of the perception of queerness congealing into social forms.<sup>107</sup> The disorienting, straightening force of violence is felt across the film’s third act, from Laure’s mother’s initial slap to this instance of public humiliation. The community’s transphobia is amplified by the children,

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<sup>107</sup> Ahmed, 107.

rendering Mickaël's friendly expanse into a space in which the threat of violence is ever-present.

Despite this bleak climax, the film's final moments suggest hope for the survival of some version of Laure's true, fluid self when they find Lisa waiting outside their apartment. Though still exuding a sense of betrayal, Lisa presents a desire to resume their friendship, asking "What is your name?" to which they respond, "My name is Laure," flashing a glimpse of a smile before the credits roll (Figure 15). Rather than a confirmation of the protagonist's feminine identity, this final smile suggests that, through a continued friendship with Lisa, Laure's difference and sideways-oriented growth can be affirmed. The smile ends the film on a note of potentiality, suggesting glimpses of queer utopian space-time can continue to be found within the grounds of a queer friendship. After all, Lisa's own desires appeared to be sideways-oriented prior to learning Laure's secret. Farley and Kennedy observe that earlier in the film, Lisa expresses her attraction to Mickaël by remarking "You're not like the others," indicating her "complex capacity to hold in mind two positions that the binary logic of the group shuts out."<sup>108</sup> Thus, while *Tomboy* shows us that queer identities are fundamentally incompatible with the rigid structures of suburban environments, the film's final beat resembles *Water Lilies*' conclusion by suggesting that queer moments can continue to be brought to life through the affirmation of difference in the context of friendships.



Figure 15: A hopeful smile, *Tomboy*

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<sup>108</sup> Farley and Kennedy, 178.

## CHAPTER 4: *Moonlight*'s Critical Ambivalence

Arguably the most culturally, commercially, and critically recognized example of the New Queer Coming of Age Film, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* has achieved a rare level of mainstream success for an independent, Black, and queer production. Thus, the film offers a compelling opportunity to examine its haptic style within the context of its cultural significance, returning to key issues raised in Chapter 1. While Sciamma's work offered a chance to work with the framework of theories outlined in Chapter 2, this chapter will take on a more critical approach by problematizing how the film's haptic visuality was received (and misconceived) within white, straight spaces following its release. Consisting of two major sections which respectively analyse the film's discourse and formal techniques, this chapter will argue that *Moonlight* calls for a viewing strategy which La Marr Jurelle Bruce calls "critical ambivalence."<sup>109</sup> In the first section, I will examine how the critical discourse around *Moonlight* was concerned with framing the film as a universal story, even though its formal specificity is intimately concerned with depicting an experience of queer Black masculinity. In this section, I will argue that the film's success within white institutions can be accredited to its deployment of arthouse aesthetics, its engagement with Black stereotypes, and its oblique representation of Liberty City. The second section will place my theoretical framework in conversation with Black, queer scholars' readings of the film in order to highlight the cultural specificity of Jenkins' haptic style, which has been effaced by mainstream readings. My analysis will investigate Chiron's relationship to his environment through examining his tendency to loiter in space, which complicates his connection to a traditional home. I will also argue that the friendly expanse of the ocean presents sequences of ecstatic queer moments in which Chiron glimpses the

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<sup>109</sup> La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Shore, Unsure: Loitering as a Way of Life," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 2 (2019): 357.



vast potentiality of his queerness *and* his Blackness. Jenkins formalizes Chiron's experiences of social disorientation with an affective method of framing exchanges of close-ups in which characters look directly into the camera. Finally, I will examine how the film's third act, where an adult Chiron has aligned himself with his environment's dominant form of masculinity, subverts expectations of the queer coming of age film by showing the protagonist confront his queerness as an adult.

#### FRAMING UNIVERSALISM, ERASING BLACKNESS

Although *Moonlight* was an independent film, made on a humble budget of 1.5 million dollars, the film's cultural impact was massive. Released during the wake of the Obama presidency, the film earned major buzz from festivals, universal critical praise, and ultimately won the Oscar for Best Picture in what was seen as a watershed moment for Hollywood. However, I want to be critical of the film's success in white heterosexual spaces. Ironically, much of the film's critical discourse in popular outlets obscured its queerness and Blackness in favour of framing the story as universal. An example of this discourse is evident in *The New York Times*' A.O. Scott's description of the film, who suggests that although it would be "accurate enough" to describe *Moonlight* as a "movie about growing up poor black and gay", this characterization would be "misleading" as it would be "truer" to "say that it's about teaching a child to swim, about cooking a meal for an old friend, about the feeling of sand on skin and the sound of waves on a darkened beach, about first kisses and lingering regrets."<sup>110</sup> Scott's response to the film clearly resonates with emotions that emerge from the film's haptic visuality but ironically misses the point that Jenkins' immersive style is entirely driven by transmitting an

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<sup>110</sup> A.O. Scott, "'Moonlight': Is This the Year's Best Movie?" *The New York Times*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/movies/moonlight-review.html>.

embodied experience of growing up “poor, black, and gay.” Janine Jones suggests that such a framing subtracts Blackness in order to bring the film’s humanity to light, stating that “When white people focus on their journey of being human, they do not have to subtract whiteness.”<sup>111</sup> Although Jenkins provided Black viewers with rare and exceptional representation by depicting the nuances of growing up in a Black, queer body under an anti-Black heteropatriarchy, there is a curious rift between the film’s aesthetics and its critical discourse which brings to light the potential pitfalls of the New Queer Coming of Age Film’s affective style. How did this minute articulation of queer Black experience get misinterpreted as a film that channels *Love, Simon*’s universalizing “I’m just like you” rhetoric in its success? My thesis thus far has somewhat idealistically framed contemporary filmmakers’ use of haptic visuality as a means of breaking with heteropatriarchal modes of filmmaking by manifesting the phenomenological pressures of being a queer body in straight spaces, but the curious case of *Moonlight*’s success challenges whether such a style can truly have a significant cultural impact when it becomes popular in straight, white spaces. Before proceeding to my analysis of the film, I will argue that the film’s emulation of arthouse aesthetics, its flirtation with Black stereotypes, and its ambiguous articulation of Liberty City’s historical context were primary reasons that the film was made successful and misinterpreted by white publics.

Jenkins’ mantra behind developing *Moonlight*’s cinematic style was “to bring the arthouse to the hood”<sup>112</sup> in order to attach viewers to Chiron’s emotional experience, yet this association with the arthouse brings into question what kinds of Black images white viewers are

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<sup>111</sup> Janine Jones, “*Moonlight* Riff: Examining Rifts between Presentations of Black, Gay, Male humanity and Representations of Black, Gay, Male Non-Humanity in *Moonlight*,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 3-4 (2019): 95.

<sup>112</sup> Joanna Di Mattia, “The Aesthetic of the Ecstatic: Reimagining Black Masculinity in *Moonlight*,” *Screen Education* 93 (2019): 11.

willing to engage with. Critics' praise of *Moonlight*'s "beautiful" cinematography, lighting, and framing techniques is loaded with racial politics, as Raquel Gates notes that the film's aesthetics are beautiful in ways which have been regularly inclined to "beautify and humanize whiteness," its technical flourish connoting a level of quality and prestige that Black images have rarely been granted.<sup>113</sup> In Chapter 1, I noted that Jenkins' influence from global arthouse auteurs such as Claire Denis, Wong Kar-wai and Lynne Ramsay were crucial in how *Moonlight* deploys certain formal innovations to push the boundaries of queer coming of age films. These filmmakers' works have been celebrated and circulated thanks to the white institutions of film festivals and film criticism, the same institutions who celebrated *Moonlight*. By following a kind of aesthetic respectability politics, *Moonlight* earned the attention of a large demographic of white, middle-class viewers that is rarely offered to Black media. For instance, Gates suggests that aesthetic comparisons between *Moonlight* and *Belly* (1998) – a cult film made popular through the word-of-mouth of Black audiences – would downgrade *Moonlight* from "a film that happens to be Black" to a "Black" film, while connections to arthouse auteurs elevates the film's respectability in white spaces.<sup>114</sup> I would also argue that the film builds upon the promise of Black films which emerged from the New Queer Cinema such as Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989) and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and yet Rinaldo Walcott aptly suggests that the film's reception induced a kind of "cinematic amnesia" towards previous explorations of the intersection between queerness and Blackness.<sup>115</sup> I have argued that contemporary queer cinema has continued the cultural work of the New Queer Cinema by emulating contemporary arthouse

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<sup>113</sup> Raquel Gates, "The Last Shall Be First: Aesthetics and Politics in Black Film and Media," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 40.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, "*Moonlight*'s Necessary Company," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 2 (2019): 338.

aesthetics, but at what cost? While I will conclude that the film's aesthetics are deeply impactful in my analysis, I am also cognizant of how, to borrow Ahmed's language, whiteness is an institutional line in which success for non-white bodies involves "approximating its style,"<sup>116</sup> and *Moonlight*'s allure to white critics can be partially attributed towards how the film's aesthetics follow lines that have been embraced by white institutions.

While *Moonlight* rejects the various tropes of the queer coming of age films discussed in Chapter 1, we can next attribute the film's misguided praise to its engagement with certain Black stereotypes. Menaka Kannan, Rhys Hall, and Matthew W. Hughey note that "*Moonlight* trades on many of the tried and true narratives of the supposed natural and cultural disfunction of the African American 'experience' – what has been referred to as a 'Negro hyperbole.'"<sup>117</sup> Chiron's father is absent from the film and never referred to, reflecting the stereotype of absent Black fathers. While the film offers a nuanced meditation on Black masculinity, the film's conception of Black womanhood is incredibly binarized, with Chiron's crack-addicted mother, Paula (Naomi Harris) acting as his primary source of suffering and his emphatically nurturing surrogate mother, Theresa (Janelle Monae), offering endless love with little depth to her character. Mahershala Ali's benevolent and gentle drug dealer Juan subverts viewers' expectations of the kind of masculinity typically displayed by Black criminals in film and yet his taking in of Chiron structurally resembles a white saviour storyline minus the whiteness. The absence of white bodies on screen ironically makes *Moonlight* a more comfortable viewing experience for white viewers, allowing them to engage with the film's "human" melodramas

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<sup>116</sup> Ahmed, 137-138.

<sup>117</sup> Menaka Kannan, Rhys Hall, and Matthew W. Hughey, "Watching *Moonlight* in the Twilight of Obama," *Humanity & Society* 41, no. 3 (2017): 289.

without confronting the fact that the characters' misfortunes are a result of systemic racism which white viewers are intrinsically a part of.

Accordingly, a final reason we can attribute to the critical misunderstanding of *Moonlight*'s cultural specificity – and the most pertinent to the spatiotemporal concerns of my thesis – is the film's use of the setting of Liberty City, a Miami “hyperghetto” that had been ravaged by community displacement, police brutality, lack of Federal funding, and Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs.<sup>118</sup> Similarly to Sciamma's use of New Towns, none of this history is elaborated within the film, which is instead primarily concerned with how it *feels* to be a queer body in this space. Jones argues that Jenkins' decision to embrace affect rather than explicitly represent how the film's spaces are governed by white supremacy is precisely why the film “encourages such divergent experiential gaps between different types of viewers.”<sup>119</sup> Thus, the film's arthouse aesthetics threaten its antiracist ambitions, with Jones stating “when interest in a world given by experience that reveals how the world feels to (some) Black people is dissociated from what the world is [...], we may have on our hands a veiled exercise in the blissful enjoyment of ignorance regarding anti-black racist worlds.”<sup>120</sup> This characterization of Jenkins' film draws surprising parallels between *Moonlight* and *Love, Simon*, but this parallel only really comes to fruition when examining the film's reception rather than the content itself. I deeply respect Jones' stance, but my analysis tends to agree with Asilia Franklin-Phipps and Laura Smithers' assessment that “Violence is ever present in *Moonlight*—social violence from poverty, late racialized capitalism, and homophobia, all under the specter of whiteness.”<sup>121</sup> The film does

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<sup>118</sup> Jones, 99-100

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>121</sup> Asilia Franklin-Phipps and Laura Smithers, “Queer Black adolescence, the impasse, and the pedagogy of cinema,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2020): 8.

not succeed in providing historical context for its setting, but Jenkin's style allows the spectator to inhabit its time and place in a manner that is particularly rewarding for viewers with a general understanding of Liberty City's history.

#### FORMALIZING BLACK QUEER MASCULINITY

While my decision to place a critical lens upon *Moonlight*'s aesthetics before analyzing the political value of those very aesthetics may seem counterintuitive, highlighting the ways in which the film has been misread in white spaces energizes me to articulate how Jenkins' haptic visuality indeed makes the cultural specificity of growing up queer, Black, and poor tangible through specific formal techniques. On the other hand, I enter my analysis wary of the particular kind of ignorance that emerges when white liberals uncritically lionize the film, instead suggesting that watching *Moonlight* through a lens of critical ambivalence allows us to revel in its tensions and contradictions and, in turn, learn the most from it. Bruce suggests that "through lingering in ambivalence, we can access multiple, even dissonant, vantages at once, before pivoting."<sup>122</sup> Bruce's ambivalence does not refer to an apolitical stance, but rather one that "harnesses the energetic motion and friction and tension of ambivalent feeling" and "might propel progressive and radical movement."<sup>123</sup> A viewing strategy that asks us to take on multiple vantages acknowledges *Moonlight*'s imperfect depiction of queer, Black, masculinity and compliments many facets of my theoretical framework, including the in-betweenness of inner and outer worlds, the liberating and devastating possibilities of disorientation, and the fleeting, utopian quality of queer moments.

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<sup>122</sup> La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Shore, Unsure: Loitering as a Way of Life," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 2 (2019): 357.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

*Loitering, The Home, and The Ocean*

This ambivalence, Bruce argues, comes to life through Chiron's tendency to "loiter" in space and the film's tendency to loiter alongside him.<sup>124</sup> The film's first two acts "Little", showing Chiron's childhood, and "Chiron", which follows his adolescence, depict Chiron's tendency to loiter due to his lack of a stable home. Kuhn's model of a "back and forth" of transitional phenomena suggests that the leaving and returning home reflects psychical processes that play out in real space.<sup>125</sup> This model is more readily situated for the analysis of Sciamma's white, middle class suburbs, where characters have a mostly stable home to return to in which they can manage their inner and outer worlds. When Chiron returns home, there is no certainty of whether his mother will be high, with a man, or even present to provide for him. In effect, rather than a clean "back and forth," Chiron's engagement with transitional phenomena is characterized by a constant state of inbetweenness, both spatially and psychically, which we can connect to Bruce's suggestion that both Chiron and the film itself depict a "praxis of loitering." He associates this praxis with the way anti-Blackness is felt in the film's spaces, as loitering reflects "a willful, ethical, critical, radical inertia when the antiblack officer barks 'keep it moving'; or the gentrifying sign reads 'no loitering'; or the right-wing cable news pundit insists that you just 'get over' and 'move past' the still-unfurling devastation of chattel slavery and Jim Crow."<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, the film loiters in ambiguity through an alternative structuring of cinematic time that resists a hasty progression towards a traditionally heteronormative "happily ever after," showing queer asynchrony in action.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Bruce, 357.

<sup>125</sup> Kuhn, 84.

<sup>126</sup> Bruce, 352-353.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 357.

The film's first major narrative development shows Chiron finding fleeting stability from his chronic loitering when a kindly drug dealer, Juan, finds him alone in a "dope hole" and takes him into his home to have dinner with him and his girlfriend, Theresa. The three characters sitting around a dining room table resemble a traditionally



Figure 16: Chiron, Juan, and Theresa resembling a family unit, *Moonlight*

heteronormative family unit, an image which has received conflicted readings from scholars, prompting a critically ambivalent approach (Figure 16). Bruce suggests that through a kindly straight couple taking in a queer child, *Moonlight* "does not altogether abandon the project of benevolent heterosexuality."<sup>128</sup> Contrastingly, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman argues that the kinship arrangement "reflects alternative filial structures of both Black and queer families," particularly in how Juan opens avenues of self-love and self-acceptance for Chiron.<sup>129</sup> After all, it is at Juan's table that Chiron, in the conclusion of the film's first act, initially learns that it is okay to be gay.

Ahmed's discussion of tables as orientation devices is useful in understanding these conflicting, equally persuasive readings of this image. Ahmed argues that tables are kinship objects which allow us to relate to other relatives through the mediation of furniture.<sup>130</sup> While dinner tables are most commonly complicit in orienting bodies towards heteronormative family structures, Ahmed suggests that the table becomes queered when it challenges these lines of

<sup>128</sup> Bruce, 354.

<sup>129</sup> Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2018): 349.

<sup>130</sup> Ahmed, 81.



heteronormativity by instead facilitating moments in which “queers find support for their actions” and see that they are not alone in deviating from traditionally heteronormative trajectories.<sup>131</sup> Thus, Juan and Theresa’s table facilitates the film’s first queer moments, during which Chiron finds love and affirmation for his difference that he does not receive from his own blood. The semblance of a heteronormative family in these moments is illusory and fleeting, as Chiron must always return to his unstable home.

An essential site of Chiron’s loitering in which two of the film’s most significant queer moments are conjured is the friendly expanse of the ocean. While Kuhn suggests that “expanses are ‘friendly’ only to the extent that the ‘home’ can be relied upon as a refuge,” she expands that when they are not, “the object world and spaces may be marked by discontinuity and dislocation.”<sup>132</sup> Thus, Chiron’s encounters with the ocean are vital to the issues that characterize the queer child’s disorienting engagement with time and space. At the ocean, Chiron’s Blackness and queerness are affirmed in transformative ways in two separate sequences. In act 1, Juan takes Chiron to the beach and teaches him how to swim. Scored to intense classical music, the deeply



Figure 17: Juan teaches young Chiron how to swim, *Moonlight*

immersive sequence shows the waves lapping over the camera and floating alongside the characters as Juan holds Chiron on his back (Figure 17). “You feel that? You’re in the middle of the world”, he

tells him. After the lesson, he tells Chiron that “There are Black people everywhere.” Rather than allowing him to be convinced that his Blackness is something that restricts him under the

<sup>131</sup> Ahmed, 170.

<sup>132</sup> Kuhn, 86-87.

oppressive, white supremacist time and place which he exists, Juan inspires Chiron to envision his Blackness as a force that is as expansive as the ocean. In act 2, Chiron encounters Kevin on the beach and has his first sexual experience when the two kiss and Kevin gives Chiron a hand job (Figure 18). The sound of the waves, the wind, and the boys' breath create an immersive and sensual soundscape which invokes a shift into a different mode of cinematic time-space in which queerness is possible. Relating these queer moments to Muñoz's notion of futurity, these non-normative mappings of relationality unlock "a kind of potentiality that is open [and] indeterminate, like the



Figure 18: A queer moment on the beach, *Moonlight*

affective contours of hope itself.”<sup>133</sup> The ocean mediates an expansive understanding of queerness and Blackness that marks an escape from the oppressive present and is conjured by immersive, haptic visuality.

Articulating the racial specificity of these queer spatiotemporalities, Abdur-Rahman uses Muñoz's work to suggest that these moments channel a cinematic register she calls “the Black ecstatic,” defined as

An aesthetic performance of embrace, the sanctuary of the unuttered and the unutterable, and a mode of pleasurable reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary Black lives under the strain of perpetual chaos and continued diminishment. A post-civil rights expressive practice, the Black ecstatic eschews the heroism of Black pasts and the promise of liberated Black futures in order to register and revere rapturous joy in the broken down present.<sup>134</sup>

Although Juan and Kevin both play prominent roles in affirming Chiron's queerness and Blackness, Abdur-Rahman argues that they act as sources of harm as well as healing, which

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<sup>133</sup> Ahmed, 7.

<sup>134</sup> Abdur-Rahman, 345.

“bespeaks the dual, elemental structure of ecstasy.”<sup>135</sup> Each act’s transformative moments of Black ecstasy are followed by gutting betrayals. At the end of act 1, Chiron discovers that Juan is his mother’s drug dealer, paradoxically acting as the source of sanctuary and disarray for Chiron’s home life. The film’s first two acts show us that Kevin has a remarkably nuanced understanding of masculinity in comparison to the other boys, accepting Chiron’s strangeness, and yet he is just as easily weaves back into the community’s social structures of normative masculinity.

### *Facing Disorientation*

Kevin’s investment in hegemonic masculinity nearly destroys Chiron in the climax of the film’s second act when, after their moment of queer intimacy, Kevin is persuaded by the school bully, Terrel, to brutally beat Chiron as part of a game called “knock down, stay down.” This moment of violence essentially undoes the work of self-love and acceptance enacted by the film’s queer moments. Here, we are reminded of Ahmed’s understanding of violence as a straightening device which shapes disorientation and shatters “one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel liveable.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, Kevin’s beating of Chiron is an act of violence which radically reorients Chiron towards vertical growth and normative masculinity as a mode of survival.

The sequence is noteworthy in its use of a significant formal technique deployed by Jenkins throughout the film, in which a shot-reverse-shot alternation consists of deeply affective

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<sup>135</sup> Abdur-Rahman, 349-350.

<sup>136</sup> Ahmed, 158.

close-ups where characters are framed on the 180-degree line as they look directly at the camera. During the scene of the beating, Jenkins uses this pair of close-ups to frame Kevin and Chiron's faces in lighting which accentuates the minute details and emotional expressions of each boy's features



Figure 19: Jenkins' 'facing' technique, *Moonlight*

(Figure 19). After each punch, Chiron continues to persist and get up, looking at the camera (and Kevin) again as Kevin pleads for him to "stay down." Kevin's facial expression indicates a masked desire to stop the violence but an inability to face the consequences of straying from the script of violent masculinity. The affective intensity of Jenkins' straight-on close-ups accentuate the textured emotions on both faces, with the film's haptic visual language communicating more pain than either boy is able to depict with words. Ahmed suggests that moments of disorientation require "an act of facing" where, if taken to mean a literal face, involves facing another, during which "the significance of the face is not simply 'in' or 'on' the face, but a question about how we face the face, or how we are faced."<sup>137</sup> Jenkins' "facing" technique is vital to the film's affective language, which is used many times prior to this moment to make us experience Chiron's otherness through "how he is faced." Several instances in act 1 show the camera panning across groups of boys looking directly at the camera. The technique is also used in various instances where he is faced by his mother as she speaks abusively to him. Jenkins' "facing" technique marks formative and

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<sup>137</sup> Ahmed, 171.

traumatic moments for Chiron, invoking the social experience of being looked at as both other and lesser.

Accordingly, after Chiron's beating, we witness Chiron facing *himself*, submerging his bloodied face in a sink of ice and looking in the mirror, captured in a close-up in which he looks at the camera almost as if he does not recognize himself. Chiron's reorientation towards his environment's dominant form of violent masculinity is exemplified immediately after, when the second act concludes with Chiron returning to school and bashing Terrel over the head with a chair, resulting in Chiron's arrest. When the film then jumps many years ahead to Chiron's adulthood in act 3, "Black," Jenkins repeats the shot progression of the protagonist dipping his face into a sink of ice and looking into the camera (Figure 20). The repetition creates a disorienting effect for the spectator, as this facing allows us to witness how jarringly different Chiron has become.

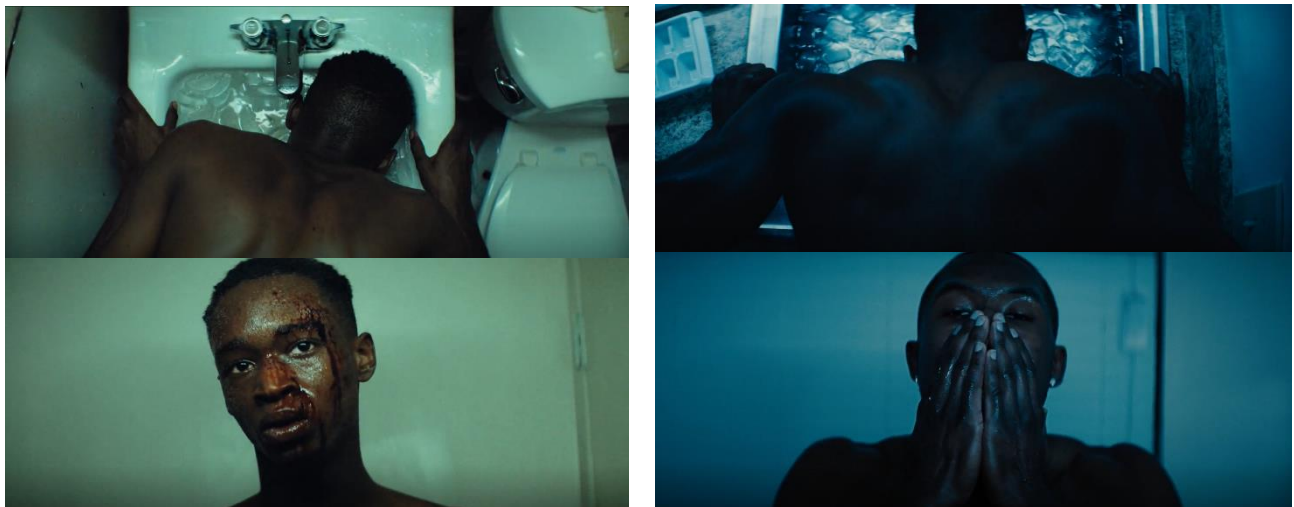


Figure 20: Chiron faces himself, disorients us, *Moonlight*

### *Hello Stranger*

Working as a drug dealer in Atlanta, Chiron's queerness has now been concealed by a shield of muscle and hyperbolized Black masculinity. *Moonlight*'s jump to act 3 is essential in

challenging the coming of age film's ideas of childhood, queerness, and growth. Rather than a coming out narrative in which he learns to embrace his difference, Chiron's emergence to adulthood is marked by an instance of violence which teaches him what kind of man he must become to survive in an anti-Black heteropatriarchy. The idea that growth is complete once adolescence ends is challenged when an adult Kevin suddenly calls Chiron, telling him that he was reminded of Chiron by a song someone played at the diner he now works at in Liberty City and invites him to come visit.

When Chiron and Kevin first see each other as adults, the film depicts a different kind of facing – one which invites the possibility of a queer spacetime. Kevin fails to recognize the transformed Chiron when he first enters the restaurant but when he approaches him to take his order, Jenkins deploys a head-on alternation of close-ups captured in slow motion that reveals Kevin's shock at seeing Chiron's transformation (Figure 21). Image and sound fall out of sync on Kevin's close-up, as his voice asks "Chiron?" but his lips do not move. Unlike the traumatic disorientations in the film that are marked by Chiron's queerness, this "facing" offers "potential for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to



Figure 21: Kevin and Chiron reunite, *Moonlight*

read.”<sup>138</sup> The use of slow-motion and the dissonance between image and sound indicates that

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<sup>138</sup> Ahmed, 170.

Kevin and Chiron's reunion invokes a form of queer relationality that neither man quite understands how to navigate.

The subsequent sequence offers yet another instance of a table eventually becoming "queered." Kevin and Chiron drink and catch up in an exchange which reveals what kinds of normative lines each of their lives has followed. Kevin reveals that he now has a child with a woman who he is no longer in a relationship with. All the while, he is visibly disoriented by Chiron's hypermasculinity and expresses disappointment when he reveals that he is selling drugs. As the restaurant eventually empties out, social space clears for a queer moment to come to life. A curious dolly shot towards the door of the restaurant, reflecting Chiron's perspective from the table, evokes a shift into a different mode of cinematic space-time as the soft noise of the ocean creeps into the soundscape, beckoning back to the queer moments of the first two acts. For the remainder of the runtime, the film itself then seems to loiter, as neither man is able to quite explain his reason for arriving at this particular place and time. Chiron cannot respond to "Why did you come here?" and Kevin cannot respond to "Why did you call me?" When Chiron asks this question, Kevin evades a clear answer, but mumbles "I told you... this dude came in... he played this song, man." Rather than elaborating, he proceeds to play Barbara Lewis' "Hello Stranger" on the jukebox, which expresses feelings that neither Chiron nor Kevin seem capable of explicitly expressing. "I'm so glad you stopped by to say hello to me / Remember that's the way it used to be / Ooh, it seems like a mighty long time," she sings, as if addressing an old lover, as the two men lock eyes and share a deeply intimate moment. Reflecting the in-between state which Kuhn suggests occurs during adults' experience of transitional phenomena when they engage with cultural objects, Lewis' soulful musings makes tangible the tension between both men's unspoken inner truths, regrets, and desires and the outer reality of their current lives,

which heteropatriarchal forces have led them towards. The film abruptly pulls us out of this queer moment when it cuts to the sound of the restaurant door opening as the men leave. When they enter Chiron's car, they almost compulsively return to their normatively masculine scripts with Jidenna's "Classic Man" clashing violently with the tenderness of Lewis' song. The dissonance between these two affective tenors characterizes the third act's particular mode of timeliness as a loitering which reflects both men's struggle to deviate from their gendered scripts and vocalize their desires.

The lingering silence is finally broken when, in the film's final moments, Chiron confesses to Kevin that he is the only man who he has ever touched. *Moonlight*'s somewhat abrupt and chaste conclusion, which proceeds to show Kevin holding Chiron's head in his shoulder, further prompts a critically ambivalent reading when parsing scholars' critiques of the film's lack of a credible sex scene. Bruce's analysis expresses his craving for a more traditionally romantic conclusion, resulting in the two men fucking and loving each other, in which he reflects "Maybe these yearnings contain the trappings of hegemonic happily ever after, but they also conjure queer Afrofutures that sprawl beyond picket fences."<sup>139</sup> Walcott, however, is not so generous at the lack of sex, arguing that the film "seems to stall at the possibility of being able to represent Black queer men having sex beyond the stereotype. Indeed, actual Black queer men fuck every day beyond the stereotype; art that cannot produce or represent that moment fails in a certain way."<sup>140</sup> Conflicting responses from Black, queer scholars continues to show us that *Moonlight* is an imperfect representation of Black queer masculinity that requires an approach of critical ambivalence rather than blind praise. And yet, *Moonlight*'s ending is politically effective

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<sup>139</sup> Bruce, 356.

<sup>140</sup> Walcott, 340.



in that it leaves audiences wanting and imagining for worlds in which other models of queer loving and living can thrive beyond heteronormative and white supremacist mappings. Resisting the urge to render the audience complacent by satisfying them with a happy ending, Bruce suggests that Jenkins refuses “affective resolution, cognitive closure, or ideological certitude,”<sup>141</sup> again demonstrating Galt and Schoonover’s notion of queer asynchrony. In Muñoz’s terms, *Moonlight* does not provide a simplistic escape from the prison house of the here and now. However, the final shot, in which young Chiron gazes out towards the friendly expanse of the



Figure 22: *Moonlight*’s final shot sees queerness on the horizon

ocean before looking back to face us (Figure 22), beckons us to feel queerness as a “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” and take such utopian feelings with us after the credits roll.<sup>142</sup>

## Conclusion

By studying the cinematic styles of two significant filmmakers whose works exemplify what I have called the New Queer Coming of Age Film, this thesis has revealed that cinema is essential in advancing our understanding of queerness and childhood - fluid concepts which, like time itself, tend to slip out of our grasp but can be made tangible through cinematic experience. Céline Sciamma’s and Barry Jenkins’ attention to the sensual, social, and spatiotemporal details of growing up queer charts new subjectivities which have been (and continue to be) ignored by tired repetitions of the coming out narrative. These films’ haptic visualities allow us to understand queer youth beyond the limiting world of words, visualizing queerness as constantly

<sup>141</sup> Bruce, 357.

<sup>142</sup> Muñoz, 1.

emerging from experience rather than something which can be confined within a tidy descriptor. If, as Carruthers' suggests, cinema can teach us something about time, then this project has revealed that cinema can teach us something about queerness.<sup>143</sup> I would like to conclude this study by offering three main takeaways from my research and suggesting potential avenues for where it could go next.

First, the New Queer Coming of Age Film turn out attention to queerness as a spatial experience which clashes with the ubiquitous influence of heteropatriarchy. Sciamma's and Jenkins' haptic styles depict how the protagonists' communities tend to physically direct youth along lines of traditionally heteronormative lives, which is formalized by Sciamma's graphic compositions and Jenkins' affective, straight-on close-ups. Contrastingly, each film's unique friendly expanse – the pool in *Water Lilies*, the forest in *Tomboy*, and the ocean in *Moonlight* – serve as deeply invested spaces which provide shifts in cinematic time which I have called queer moments. Thus, queer youth is characterized by a tension between the imprisoning here and now of the heteronormative present and the flashes of futurity glimpsed by queer moments.

Second, this approach to queer youth offers a challenging understanding of politics, which we can see through how the films' characters internalize the values of their heteropatriarchal settings. Each film has an ambivalent queer love interest whose investment to heteronormative lines ultimately hurts the protagonist, and yet Floriane, Lisa, and Kevin are not your conventional homophobic bullies. Their decisions to comply with straightening devices such as compulsory heterosexuality and violence are indicative of survival tactics rather than intentionally political stances. As Ahmed suggests, "lines might be followed because of a lack

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<sup>143</sup> Carruthers, 2.

of resources to support a life of deviation, because of commitments they have already made, or because the experience of disorientation is simply too shattering to injure.”<sup>144</sup> Similarly, the films’ protagonists are not paragons of queer radicalism and the allure to invest in heteropatriarchy is palpably felt through Marie’s attachment to traditional coupling and both Mickael and Chiron’s adoption of hegemonic masculinity. Queer rights are often reduced to pragmatic and cosmetic solutions, such as the right to marry, just as *Love, Simon*’s fantasy happy ending politically sedates us with the warm feeling that white, cis, middle-class gay men can find their way in the world. The New Queer Coming of Age Film understands that our problems run deeper than this and that heteropatriarchy is inescapable, institutionalized, and internalized by all who live under it. While there is hope at the end of Sciamma’s and Jenkins’ films, their narrative irresolution is also ideological, leaving us questioning in critical ambivalence about where we go from here long after the credits roll.

Thirdly and finally, when we look beyond the screen and at the effects of the New Queer Coming of Age Film in the real world, this cinematic approach is far from an infallible form of queer media activism. These films are deeply political and may leave viewers pondering political questions, but my discourse analysis of *Moonlight*’s misconstrued success in white spaces suggests that the approach is not perfect. Regardless, the critical approach I took to *Moonlight* does not take away from the film’s cultural value to queer Black communities who are represented in the film. For queer audiences, the New Queer Coming of Age Film’s precise images of childhood are deeply impactful in helping us understand what kinds of heteropatriarchal ideas we have soaked up during our upbringings and how our own lives have been pressured to abide by straight lines. As a

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<sup>144</sup> Ahmed, 176.

queer white man, moments of watching Sciamma's cinema resonate viscerally with my early experiences of queer self discovery in a middle-class environment (while *Love, Simon's* approach to a similar setting only elicits a visceral reaction of cringe). Although the New Queer Coming of Age Film is not a perfect model, it has the potential to teach a lot to queer viewers.

As the scope of this project has only covered two filmmakers, applying my framework of queer film phenomenology to additional works of this wave would undoubtedly teach us even more. Dee Rees' *Pariah* (2011), is another early example of the New Queer Coming of Age Film, following a 17-year-old Black lesbian – an identity that this thesis has not addressed – exploring her sexuality against the behest of her conservative family. Wanuri Kahiu's more recent lesbian romance *Rafiki* (2018) was banned in Kenya leading up to its release but found global success premiering at Cannes, offering an opportunity to consider queer cinema and its circulation beyond the relatively Western limitations of this thesis. Depicting the sumptuous romance of two affluent, bisexual white men, Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) is one of the most widely popular New Coming of Age Films and would also be a curious object of study in how it fuses the wave's affinity for sensuous, European arthouse-inspired aesthetics with an uncritical embrace of its white, upper-class environment. And Eliza Hittman's *Beach Rats* (2017) offers a compelling depiction of queerness at odds with a white Brooklyn man's extremely normative gender performance, which prompts him to hook up with men he meets on the internet. The internet's role as an outlet for queer youth to pursue their desires merits greater attention in both queer filmmaking and scholarship.

Beyond cinema, elements of the New Queer Coming of Age Film are rampant in recent television. HBO drama *Euphoria* (2019-present) has offered a remarkably honest depiction of trans teenaged girlhood captured through a hypersensory music video aesthetic resembling something akin to *Degrassi* by way of Gaspar Noé. *We Are Who We Are* (2020), another recent HBO miniseries also directed by Luca Guadagnino, aired as I was writing this project and depicts a pair of queer teenagers experimenting with their gender and sexuality. Set on an American military base in Italy during the lead-up to Donald Trump's 2016 election, it would be fascinating to use my theoretical framework to read into the significance of this setting.

Despite my enthusiasm about the potential of haptic aesthetics in queer coming of age film, I do not seek to argue that engaging with the sensory is the only or best way to depict the subjectivity of queer youth. To claim as much would be to, in Ahmed's terms, create new stylistic lines which limit filmmakers' methods of representing queer lives. Even this mode of filmmaking runs the risk of losing its value and forming its own tropes with overuse. In order to honour the fluidity of queerness itself, queer cinema is and should be ever-changing and constantly reaching for new methods of aesthetic, narrative, and political innovations. Mirroring Muñoz's project of queer utopia, queer cinema has the power to show us glimpses of future mappings of relationality that transcend the prison of the here and now.<sup>145</sup> In this regard, cinema may just be the queer's most powerful weapon.

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<sup>145</sup> Muñoz, 1.

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