

Bachelor End-Thesis

The Representation of Sexual Orientation

How to deconstruct sexual politics with queer films in contemporary mainstream media



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Abstract

Essentialism has been at the core of the discourse about sexuality for over two centuries. Because of this, sexual politics in society have evolved into a binary system justifying actions as moral or immoral. A system where some forms of sexual acts are blessed with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, while others are victimized, illegalized or deemed unnatural. To change our knowledge about sexuality, the representations that construct the discourse about sexuality take on an important position. In this research, I examine the representation of sexual orientation. By using Christopher Pullen his concept of *new storytelling*, in which he defines a way to positively narrate queer stories through reflexivity and the notion of becoming, *Call Me By Your Name* will be thoroughly examined. In contrast to most independent queer films, *Call Me Be Your Name* has been widely popular within the heteronormative society and carries, therefore, a significant responsibility in how they represent the queer subject. Through a close analysis of narrative and discourse connotations and the construction of sexual desire within the film will be questioned. This research follows a queer phenomenological approach, as I try to further the discussion within queer theory on what a good representation is and try to visualize how sexuality can be understood as a social construction in media. Sara Ahmed's ideas on sexuality as a constructed orientated space, which consists of objects of desire, will be central to look at how the main character adjusts to his sudden queer love. Conclusively, through *new storytelling*, *Call Me By Your Name* represents sexual orientation as a personal identity of sexual desire constructed by spatial orientation, instead of a gendered homogenous essentialist thought.

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1. Introduction

The recent moral consternation surrounding the translation of the Nashville pamphlet by the Reformat Protestant Church shows that acceptance and thought about diverse sexuality forms is still very heterogeneous. Whereas most people think all Dutch nationals think the same about the acceptance of homosexuality, this pamphlet showed, just as the destroyed homoerotic billboards of SuiteSupply in 2018, that homosexual acceptance is certainly not a universal norm within society. The discussion and debate surrounding the pamphlet centered two major aspects of sexuality. First, it sparked anger about the representation of this pamphlet for all young Christian homosexuals. Secondly, it centered this notion of what sexuality inherently is. This, because the pamphlet stated the basic principle of how the Reformat Protestant Church believes homosexuality has come into existence and should be performed by approval of God.

This essentialism rooted in belief systems has been at the core of discourse about sexuality for centuries in most western societies. Within this research, I will discuss the role of representation to change this discourse and examine the representation of sexuality. I argue for a social constructivist position regarding our current hegemonic societal understanding of what sexuality inherently is. To examine this, I question how sexuality is represented within the media. How do representations influence the establishment of western contemporary sexual politics?

To examine the representation of sexuality I will use Christopher Pullen's conceptualization of *new storytelling*. His theory focusses on a virtuous way of representing homosexuality in media and examines the many narratives in which gay identity has been represented. Additionally, I will follow Sara Ahmed her phenomenological approach to sexuality. Ahmed argues for an understanding of sexuality in terms of sexual orientation which helps to see how sexual desire is constructed through the construction of our surroundings by lines of direction and objects of desire. Before going further into these concepts, the first part of my theoretical framework aims to clarify the importance of my research. While I started out researching the representation of homosexuality within in film, a frequent subject within queer studies, I found out that to change and examine contemporary notions of homosexuality; I had to go back to the broader discourse of sexuality. In this first part of the theoretical framework, I, therefore, aim to contextualize my research and clarify my position regarding this broad discourse of sexuality.

A film that surrounds the subject of what sexual desire inherently is, is *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). Despite the film being an independent queer film, after its wide-release in 914 theatres and run on multiple film festivals, the film gained a massive audience within the heteronormative society in 2018. The film was mostly praised for its positive representation of homosexuality and won an Oscar for the best-adapted script and a GLAAD award for "outstanding film." The story of *Call Me By Your Name* (CMBYN further on) takes place in the summer of 1983, in a small village in Italy. A seventeen-year-old boy, Elio, falls in love with

Oliver, his father's assistant researcher, who visits his parents summer villa. In the beginning, Elio dislikes this twenty-four-year-old American, however as the summer progresses they fall in love. This coming-of-age, independent film with motives of philosophy, ancient statues, and the "endless" summer vacation is inscribed with sensual tension and sexual becoming. The story takes on mainly Elio's perspective, discovering his increasing desire for Oliver, his sexuality and how he handles the sexual tension between him and Oliver (Guadagnino 2017). CMBYN seems like a fitting case study, since not only the story itself shows how sexuality is defined, but also within the film's self-reflexivity the nature of sexual desire is presented. The light-hearted tone of the movie fits characteristics of *new storytelling*, and its popularity reflects upon the position of a queer film within the heterosexual orientated space.

My method, to encounter this subject of sexual representation with the case study of CMBYN, exists out of a close analysis of the narrative while also paying attention to discourse within the film and specific themes that signify sexual orientation. For my research the following question I adhere; How is sexual orientation represented through *new storytelling* in *Call Me By Your Name*? After the theoretical framework, three sections will help to unfold this inquiry of sexual orientation within CMBYN. The first section surrounds how self-reflexivity is present within the film. This self-reflexivity is a central instrument to *new storytelling*, and in this part, I will observe how this self-reflexivity is embedded in CMBYN. In the second section, I intend to see how "becoming" and the intimacy of the story constructs certain mobility for the spectator and queer identity. Pullen argues that becoming and a character's self-fulfillment are critical to the positively representing queer narratives. The last subject focuses on Ahmed's phenomenological approach, questioning how the heterosexual orientated space is present within CMBYN? Here I examine how sexual politics are present within the film, and therefore influence Elio his orientation, his becoming and also the possibility for a positive narrative of queer desire.

2. Theoretical Framework

As mentioned above, before a further clarification on the main concepts I would like to elaborate on the discourse of sexuality and the importance of sexual representation. I aim to deconstruct this discourse and to show how this discourse has influenced sexual politics. I will explain my position regarding sexual politics within this dissertation, presenting the specific perspective I adhere to tackle this discourse sexuality. Through this work, I hope to give a better understanding of the importance and specificity of my research question.

2.1 The discourse, history and representation.

This inquiry of positive or negative LGBTQ representation has been around for already some time. Harry Benshoff writes in his article "Brokeback to the Mainstream" that since the 1980s LGBTQ visibility has risen within media and that since the 1990s a new film collective started to emerge: new queer cinema. Made by many of the era's LGBT filmmakers, these films openly challenged notions of ideology, taste, and form, as intersections of identity. While some applauded new queer cinema for making real issues regarding sexuality visible, as Hensworth notes, some LGBT audiences were concerned with the "negative" images. Many LGBT filmgoers found the films to be dry, unpleasant and theoretically pretentious. Nonetheless, on the contrary, the Hollywood style movies with happy endings where gay lovers would be inserted into precisely heterosexual roles got critiqued by critics as the end of politically challenging movies. However, according to Benshoff, some popular films as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), as well as queasy independent Hollywood films as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), seem to suggest that queer cinema continues to thrive (Benshoff 2009, 197-199).

Ten years after *Brokeback Mountain* we do see LGBTQ visibility rising more than ever before, even though GLAAD reports in their report 2018 Studio Responsibility Index that LGBTQ representation is down for the first time with -5,6% since GLAAD started counting in 2011 (GLAAD Media Institute 2018). This report concerns the seven major Hollywood Studios and therefore mainstream Hollywood releases. Nonetheless, the year 2017/2018 did still bring forward three major queer films that got picked up by the mainstream media; *Moonlight* (2017), *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) and *Love Simon* (2018). The importance of proper representation is especially now some queer films are being picked up by the mainstream, extremely important. Benshoff states for instance in his article that visibility, both on screen as real life, is a necessary component of the fight for equality and the passing of civil rights be (Benshoff 2009, 194). Also, quantitative researchers have shown how essential representation is for the LGBTQ community. Respectable and diverse representations would decrease destructive psychological behaviors in persons of LGBTQ, have a positive effect on societies acceptance of the LGBTQ, would help LGBTQ youth with self-identification, are associated with higher levels of selves team and emotional well-being and LGB depiction in the media could serve as a catalyst for understanding and labeling same-sex feelings (Bond 2014; Gomillion And Giuliano 2011; Evans 2007).

As Suzanna Walters describes the trajectory of gay visibility in "The kids are all right but the lesbians aren't: Queer kinship in US culture," she argues we are at a crucial moment in history regarding the way representation is developing. According to Walters, we are now the third phase of gay representation. A phase of banal inclusion, normalization, assimilation, everyday unremarkable queerness, but also continued abjection. A phase after the many firsts of the 1990s (first homosexual on television, first kiss, etc.). One that makes Walters question what will happen to gay representation and the imagination of gay identities and communities when the quest for simple visibility is no longer the reigning cultural impetus (Walters 2012, 918).

From stereotypes and the homogenous representation of queers to the lack of conventional queer narratives and queerbaiting, proper representation still struggles to find its way in mainstream media today. All these representations have a certain influence on what people think and know about homosexuality. As Stuart Hall describes in his book *Representation: politics of representation and signifying practices* Michel Foucault defined discourse closely related to knowledge and power. As discourse is made out of representations, these representations create a particular subject, and therefore the knowledge one has about this subject. Who controls which representation in this discourse are present/dominant, beholds power over the knowledge that is created and therefore how the subject is perceived (Hall 2013, 29-33). A film as *Call Me By Your Name* has consequently influence on how people perceive homosexuality. Especially since this film has gotten immensely popular outside queer cinema in the mainstream media, and thus heteronormative space, it is meaningful to examine how the film represents homosexuality. Particularly to an audience that probably has already less experience with queer identities, then the audience of queer films in general. Therefore, rather than to look at the representation of homosexuality, I think there is more urgency in the representation of the broad concept of sexuality itself. If we want to change the way we think about homosexuality, then this is a matter of changing how society thinks what sexuality is.

As Gayle Rubin argues in her article/chapter "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" sex and sexuality are very political (Rubin 1984). Through describing the history of repressive anti-sex policies and events, she describes sexuality as an organized system of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others. As with other aspects of human behavior, she states that the concrete institution of forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. Her article starts with an explanatory on how sex and homosexuality became criminalized because of moral paroxysms from the late nineteenth century mainly rooting from belief systems. Then from the 1940s, there was a significant shift in how the United States and Western society thought about erotica, sex, and sexuality. Especially homosexuality got repressed in law as well as with physical raids by police, civilians and even FBI pursuing this minority. This moral panic rested upon the coding of the homosexual for communist, sex offender, rapists and child

molesters. Especially, in the media and Hollywood, this stance towards sexuality has had its consequences. Adhering anything that was deemed immoral disappeared from public space. According to Rubin, sexual essentialism was very important in this negative, repressive thought. Since then many scholars have reasoned for a constructivist approach towards sexuality, showing sex and sexuality being historical, changeable and social. This negative essentialist discourse surrounding sexuality with the ideal notion of single ideal sexuality characterizes most systems of thought about sex. Idealizing the ideal sexuality/sexual expression as being married, heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive and in private. Rubin shows this by producing a model of this sexual hierarchy 'the charmed circle.'

These hierarchies of sexual value, Rubin notes, rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble. Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. Any sex that violates these rules of the inner circle is ruled as bad, abnormal, or unnatural. This naturality being related to the essentialist thought. As Rubin goes on, she argues that as a result of the sex conflicts in the late 20th century some behaviors from outside the scarily are inching to cross this line of abnormality. Examples would be of unmarried couples living together, masturbation and some forms of homosexuality. These forms being coupled monogamous homosexual relations, while promiscuous

homosexuality, transsexuality or cross-generational encounters were still viewed as unmodulated horrors (Rubin 1984, 143-153). As a queer man myself, I can argue that although more forms of homosexuality are tolerated, the essentialist thought still represses many forms of sexual identity today, even within LGBTQ communities themselves. This mainly due to the general conflict of gender expression with sexuality or the many taboos regarding certain forms and expression of sexual desire.

For this reason, I want to position this research not within gay studies and examine the representation of the homosexual. Instead, I would argue that we need a new way of thinking about sexuality in general. The repression of sexuality is not only about same-sex attractions, but it also concerns all other desires outside the normative heterosexual charmed circle of Rubin. From commercial to non-monogamous. For this reason, I tend towards queer theory and position myself within queer politics. As Steven Seidman shows in his article "From Identity to Queer

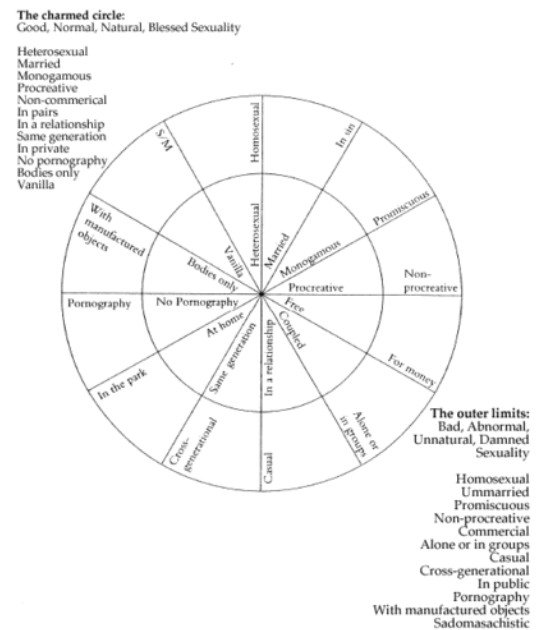


Figure 1. The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits

Figure 1. the charmed circle of Gayle Rubin from her article "Thinking sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality".

Politics: Shifts in Normative Heterosexuality and the Meaning of Citizenship," from the end of post-stonewall culture homosexuality has come in this system of normalization. According to Seidman, normalization points to the declining significance of the closet, the decentring of gay identity, the dispersal of gay collective life and the rise of queer politics. Normalization would not indicate the end of normative heterosexuality but reinforces a new organizing principle. Queer politics, on the other hand, do not tend to normalize gay identities, but rather free all sexualities from this normalizing regulation. Queer politics assumes a "communicative" sexual ethics in contrast to a normalizing ethic which holds that sex acts have inherent moral significance. Seidman pleads for a communicative ethic which maintains that sex acts are given moral meaning by their communicative context. Here, the focus of normative evaluation shifts from the sex act to the social exchange. Seidman argues for instead of determining whether a specific sex act is normal, a critical judgment would focus on the moral features of social exchange. An example of this would involve mutual consent (Seidman 2001, 321-322).

Conclusively, queer politics tries to deconstruct the charmed circle of Rubin. To do this, we need to change the way we think about sex as a moral essentialist idea constituted in a hierarchy of normality and abnormality. If we want to accept homosexuality as a "neutral" given in society that's not homogenous the same to individuals, gendered or an essential feature, the homosexual should be freed of normalizing representations. To examine the representation of sexuality the following theories I have found useful.

2.2 New Storytelling

In *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media* Christopher Pullen defines a new pathway of storytelling for gay and lesbian identity, where the iconic "self" identity of the writer and performer is placed within the frame (Pullen 2009). He conceptualizes in his book the idea of *new storytelling*, which is the balance between personal agency and public participation present within various media texts. His central point is that contemporary media and performativity offer new scope for gay, lesbian and queer identity. In this sense, that they do not follow a subjective identity, but work towards the potential of identity which might be fluid and various. Here he examines how *new storytelling* involves the representation and the reality of public space, which forms an axis of engagement and resonates with issues of political expression. Pullen relates the concept of *new storytelling* to the idea of discourse as "non-narrated stories." He refers to Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and power, which he argues help to consider the potential of storytelling concerning the progression of public debates. Important is thus that Pullen does not focus on traditional narrative theory, rather explores the production of a potentially 'cohesive' discourse enabled through foregrounding the power of life stories, which offer narratives of change. In his book, he aims to explore the discursive power of identity, which relates the potential of social construction in the formation of new ideas within sexual identity. *New*

storytelling can be seen as giving back social agency, establishing more realistic LGB identity within contemporary media through reflexivity and "placing oneself within the frame" as he calls it (Pullen, 1-9)

Christopher Pullen does not intend to impose a particular mode of gay identity within the *new storytelling*, instead show the diverse, coalescent and mobile nature of storytellers who through different forms of media offer scope to the diversity of identity. This mobility should not, however, involve a single subjectivity as evident in the re-framing of identity ideals, Pullen argues. It should move forward in a strategy of becoming. He notes to how subjects should not define the politics of desire here, instead come from the multiplicity of connections made by supporters of sexual diversity and who are involved in *new storytelling*. Shifting gay and lesbian identity shift away from "being" defined by a corporeal framework, towards a state of 'becoming' produced as constant mobility (Pullen 2009, 9-11).

In summary, Pullen says that the potential of *new storytelling* exists when the narrative drive extends from the self and is concerned with issues of personal identity fulfillment (Pullen 2009, 71). Therefore, I will focus mainly on these two notions of reflexivity and mobility through becoming/self-fulfillment. *New storytelling* seems a useful concept to examine how this representation from the queer self could change discourse. Centralizing the self-identity of queer authors creates more authentic stories and agency to challenge myths surrounding sexuality.

2.3 Queer Phenomenology

Instead of thinking with the term of sexuality, I prefer to think in terms of sexual orientation since this definition adheres to the same constructed nature of queer theory. In her article "Orientations; towards a queer phenomenology," Sara Ahmed writes that some critics have suggested that we replace the term sexual orientation with the term sexuality because the former is too centered on the relation between desire and object. Mostly regarding the fact that sexuality would imply fluidity rather than being oriented towards one sex. Nevertheless, Ahmed argues that being orientated in different ways does matter, precisely because of how spaces are already orientated. Ahmed here takes on a (queer) phenomenological approach to think about sexuality as being socially constructed through the way a subject is brought into a specific position and our relation regarding these objects we desire: an orientation. Objects here can stand for a wide range of sexual objects, as a body, but can also note to materials that connote to social benefits. The wedding photos praised on a family homes wall, for instance, can be seen as a representation of the heterosexual couple as given and a gift. They make visible the fantasy of a good life, not only recording and transiting life but also demand the witness of these objects to return it. Orientations, therefore, affect what bodies can do and that in desiring certain objects, other things follow, given how the social is arranged already. One's relation to all these objects Ahmed calls lines of direction between the subject and these objects that are there to

be desired. Therefore, the surrounding is shaped by things we are directed towards to desire (Ahmed 2006, 559-564).

Ahmed states that these lines of direction are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. She aligns it with the line parents set out for their kids, hoping that their children follow their footsteps. The author goes on to say that following such lines involves forms of social investment which might sustain the very will to keep going. She argues that considering the politics of straight lines helps to rethink the relationship between inheritance (the given lines that function as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line). An example Ahmed gives is that of how a boy appears in the vertical line by being seen as reproducing the father's image and is imagined to become a father himself in another yet to be formed line of direction. Such a narrative of becoming father means the boy's future is already envisioned to follow the fathers' direction: such direction requires again expectations of forming a horizontal line (marriage) from which future vertical lines will follow in offspring. The child is here positioned as the not yet adult but already aligned by sex (a male body) and gender (the masculine character) with sexual orientation (the heterosexual future). Heterosexuality is, therefore, a specific way of the arrangement of objects. An orientation towards a constructed space of objects that create a certain background, a proximity of what is close/what you see and objects that are kept in the distance (Ahmed 2006, 556-557).

A queer (deviant) orientation then disorients the body in the orientation that a subject is familiar too. Ahmed argues that to make something queer is to disturb the order of things. A deviant or as Ahmed refers to "oblique" line if not straightened creates a queer effect. The effects are uneven, given the world is already organized around specific forms of living, certain straight lines. Sexual disorientation changes therefore easily in social disorientation, disorientation from the familiar space. With heteronormativity being an instrument of straightening these oblique lines, queer objects or queer moments are seen as fleeing, slippery, as threatening to become out of reach (Ahmed 2006 563-565).

The representation of these queer objects is thus essential to reorientate, but also to have the possibility to experience a different orientation. I would argue it is like a story I recently read in the newspaper. A very religious male only realized in his forties that he was gay. Why? Since he did not even know what homosexuality was or had ever seen it. In his very religious environment, there was no representation of homosexuality. The representation of queer love I would argue is important to align oneself with these identities. Knowing one is queer, means one has to identify with queer, experience oblique lines and to know these objects are not inherently wrong. More and improved representations within public space will open up space for multiple orientations at the same time, give more possibility for next generations to go from the path their parents (society) suggest they follow and also creates a safer space to deviate from this line.

For the analysis, I will use Christopher Pullen, his notions for a better representation of queer narratives in media. His theory mostly adheres to the examination of the representation of sexual desire and sexual orientation within CMBYN. Sara Ahmed, I use thus partly to clarify my perspective on what sexuality inherently is, and more importantly her phenomenological approach helps to ground the contextualization of the first part of my framework within the form of a representation; to examine sexual desire as a constructed orientation that decides which social acts are near (moral) or are pushed away (immoral).

3. Reflexivity and *Call Me By Your Name*

As mentioned above, Christopher Pullen centralizes self-reflexivity within the concept of *new storytelling*. This due to the new storytellers who for gay identity present reflexive visions of themselves within both factual and fictional media forms. These authors use their agency to reform the social world. He argues that there is a complex relationship between personal social agency exhibiting self-identity and desire, and the potential to progress discourse within entertainment forms aimed at meeting dominant identity expectations. The context of *new storytelling* exists where individuals author new visions of themselves through personal narrative engagement and reinvention (Pullen 2009, 44-47).

Pullen recalls that queerness represents signs of difference, otherness, and deviancy, embroiled with the concept of 'the other' and methods of social control which distance the homosexual from the norm. Meanwhile, now with the homosexual as a producer of their own identity and exhibiting a social identity for audience reception, Pullen argues that queerness can also be a very productive identity, only by the performative potential of new stories of reflexive engagement by inventing new narratives (Pullen 2009, 53). If we look at CMBYN, in the first instance one could argue the film fits this definition of *new storytelling* since both directors as the screenwriter are homosexually orientated. An excellent example of reflexivity is that the director decided to shoot the film in his Italian hometown. Nevertheless, while both are important authors of the film, the original author of the story and the performers within the film are heterosexual orientated.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the reflexivity these authors perform within the story still helps to progress the discourse. After all, Pullen aimed to explore the discursive power of identity, which he relates to the potential of social constructions of the self within the formation of new ideas about sexual identity. Precisely because of this I think reflexivity by a heterosexual orientated author within a queer narrative that is still personal, can amplify the queerness and progress this discourse of constructed sexuality.

In an interview with The Advocate André Aciman answers a question on how a straight man then could write a modern gay classic with the following:

The real answer is what is it that gets the author excited? What gets you turned on? I never knew that I would be turned on by this, but I fell in love with these two characters. I felt that it was something so powerfully genuine in what they felt for each other that it was coming from me. But you don't have to be straight or gay, whatever, to capture that and I wanted them to not only feel the reluctance that you have at the beginning, but also the gratitude, the liberation that comes when you finally have spoken, and you finally are in bed together, and this is actually intimacy at its most raw. (How a Straight Man Wrote "Call Me by Your Name" | Advocate Film | The Advocate 2018).

Even though the story is about two homosexual man, Aciman shows that he could from a heterosexual orientation entry sexual desire from a universal standpoint of intimacy and hesitation. He wrote about sexual identity from the self and as a universal experience. More interestingly, Aciman, as heterosexual, challenged authority of the dominant heteronormative ideology, by writing, imagining and admiring a homosexual relationship. Therefore, queering the idea of compulsory heterosexuality by being a heterosexual man imaging homosexual activity. He created his own social identity instead of reproducing the archetypical subject. Besides, the story of CMBYN unfolds around exploring sexual identity and has no typical oppressive features, which is often the case for many queer films. The story surrounds two heterosexual men discovering their affection for one another. As Aciman argues the advocate's interview CMBYN is about hesitation and not knowing if your desire is reciprocated. The author does not use the homosexual as an object of entertainment, rather as a subject of understanding, which creates characters with intentions and goals, without the historical reproduced narratives of oppression and fear.

A perfect example of reflexivity by Aciman is the thematic of faith within the narrative. Just as Aciman, the family as Oliver are Jewish and consequentially faith is used as a motive within the film. While Oliver proudly wears a David star on his neck, Elio notes he does not wear it anymore since his mom told him "We are Jews in discretion." The David star is often shown accentuated on the skin in explicit shots, by an open collar or vividly present in close up shots. After Oliver and Elio declared their interest in each other, Elio starts wearing the star too. For a story that happens just 20 years after World War II, I think the European family has good reasons to be "Jews of discretion" as Elio's mother says. Aciman, his intimate self comes into play, since his family was also Jewish yet very secular and did not show much of their belief. Being born in Egypt in 1951, his family had for instance to overcome the 1956-1957 exodus of Jews in Egypt where Jews were exiled out of the country. A different example of reflexivity is how Aciman has a cameo within the film as part of the homosexual couple that visits the family, literarily placing himself within the frame and a queer orientation.



Picture 1. An example of the david star being vividly present in the shot.

What also creates an exciting intersection for reflexivity within the film to its queerness, are the heterosexual orientated performers Timothée Chalamet (Elio) and Arnie Hammer (Oliver). With both queer characters being played by heterosexual men, critique has been that the film presents again this tradition of straight actors playing gay characters. Instead, since I argue this film is about a queer sexual becoming and desire, and not about homosexuality or social questions regarding homosexual identity, this intersection gives the story a certain layeredness. In the film nor Elio or Oliver concludes that they are gay or love explicit men. Both characters have a girlfriend with whom they have sex in the beginning and whom they seem to like. The film also ends with Oliver telling Elio he is getting married to a woman. That both actors are heterosexual orientated men makes this idea of two men discovering a new sexual orientation more explicit and queer. For instance, in the press, there was much attention for the actors behind the scenes stories about their first kiss and how they as heterosexual orientated actors, who are also cross-generational, got comfortable with each other. Which, in turn, creates visibility for abnormal sexual expressions and the fluidity of sexual orientation.

This instance of layeredness of sexual orientations and what they represent on screen reflects on the idea of CMBYN changing this idea of sexuality as a fixed essence, as a fixed identity or determination. In the context of *new storytelling*, CMBYN seems reflexive since the film is authored by two self-identifying homosexuals and even more by the layered intersection of the sexual orientation of the performers and original author. Since the film is about the nature of desire and the sexual becoming of a queer orientation, the latter shows the constructiveness of sexual orientation and amplifies the queer orientation within the film. Although Pullen his writings on reflexivity mostly marks authorial aspects, I would argue it is also important to look at the reflexivity of the queer desire. Because how does a story or visual reflect upon the sexual orientation of the author? From my observations, I argue that the film seems to be reflexive on sexual desire in especially three motives; classical culture and art, nature and how they address the homosexual subject.

3.1 The three reflexive motives of queer desire.

The first motive of classical culture and art finds its way through the father who is a professor in archeology art history and Oliver who is a graduate student in classics. Besides, with the film's opening montage of photographs of old Hellenistic and Roman sculptures, this classical theme is set to be further explored within the film. The statues seem to align or even connote to Elio and Oliver. The strong muscular bodies of the sculptures resembling Oliver and their young expressive faces with curly hair seem in line with Elio. In one scene particular the father explains the epitome of what the bodies seem to signify within the film. Looking at slides of classical sculptures he exclaims "There is not a straight body in these statues. They're all curved. Sometimes impossibly curved, and so nonchalant. Hence their ageless ambiguity. As if they're daring you to desire them." The remarks seem to signify Elio and Oliver as both bodies are queer nonchalant waiting for the summer to be over. More significant both characters want

to be desired and dare the other to act upon this. Elio is within the film conflicted by Oliver his nonchalance and insecure about whether Oliver likes him or not. For instance, Oliver ends each conversation with a simple "Later." Because of these insecurities, Elio often distanced himself from Oliver, which Oliver exclaims at the end of the film made him too insecure about if Elio then again did reciprocate the same feelings.

The literal juxtaposition with the sculptures further amplifies the alignment of the story of Elio and Oliver and the sculptures. A first example is that during the film Elio and Oliver show in many instances their smooth nude torsos mirroring the pictures of the sculptures. Alternatively, A different example is the two making truce after they distanced themselves from each other, through the arm of a sculpture they find at the site of an archaeological recovery. At the site of the recovery of a statue, the alignment can also be found between how Oliver touches the recovered sculpture from the lake and how her further on touches Elio for the first time, right before they for the first-time kiss. At the site, the father also tells Elio and Oliver that emperor Hadrian also had a set of this statue, and according to a blog post by Benjamin Eldon Stevens, dr. in Classics and film, Hadrian himself had a homosexual relationship (Stevens 2018).



Pictures 2-5 starting above from left to right. Pic. 2 the opening scene, setting this motive of classical sculptures. Pic. 3 the two make truce, the start of the developing relationship. Pic. 4 and 5 present the resemblance of how Oliver touches the sculpture and how he touches Elio for the first time.

3.2 Nature

Nature also seems to have a significant role. The filmmakers use the natural world often as a background to which the characters relate. From still shots of trees, mountains, lakes and the garden surrounding the house to the many open windows creating painting-like pictures hanging on the wall within the scenes. Also, when Oliver and Elio finally decide to make love, the camera guides the audience to the outside, through the window into the trees. A different example of this use of nature is how the couple often escapes in nature or specific scenes in which the couple disappears in the openness of the landscape. For instance, when the camera stays still and the two of them bike further into the fields, or when the two are together on a trip and yell as a result of their freedom in the immense openness of the Alps.

Nature seems not only to connote a natural element to the queer desire but also as being carefree. The natural background and use as space in which the queer love develops, seem to signify the neutrality of desire and creates a safe and careless space in which Elio can discover his sexual orientation. This nature seems to construct the positivity of the film. By placing this queer desire in nature, the couple is free from society, where social relations make up for the patriarchal system and sexual politics, which in the case with their queer desire, would probably create a confrontation. The weather in the film seems complementary to my argument. The sunny, breezy weather accompanied with the constant sound of birds and crickets, in which the characters spend their days at the poolside gazing at each other, seems to align with this light-hearted carefree space in which their love blossoms. At the end of the film, when its December and Oliver is gone back to America, the weather and the setting is replaced with a cold, snowing and icy surrounding — explicitly shown with scenes from how the earlier shown landscapes have changed.



Pictures 6. *The two men run freely into the openness of the alps.*



Pictures 7 and 8. *The difference in weather/setting from when Oliver and Elio were together and after Oliver left.*

3.3 Homosexuality

Even though there is in no instance verbally referred to Elio or Oliver as a homosexual within the film, there is a sequence in which the film reflects upon the homosexual subject. In this sequence, a homosexual orientated couple arrives for dinner at the house. Both men are depicted as very eccentric, wealthy and as the father remarks "ridiculous." Dressed in colorful suits, this representation of the homosexual subject seems to be heteronormative and stereotyping - especially in contrast to the scene just before they arrive in which Elio has sex with Marzia. While the guests are downstairs, Elio and his father have a thought-provoking conversation in Elio's bedroom. The father wants Elio to put on a shirt that the couple had given him, while Elio opposes his father says:

No misbehaving tonight. No...No laughing. When I tell you to play, you'll play. You're too old not to accept people for who they are. What's wrong with them? What's wrong with them? You call them Sonny and Cher behind their backs.... Then you accept gifts from them. The only person that reflects badly on is you. Is it because they're gay or because they're ridiculous? If you know as much about economics at Mounir's age, you'll be a very wise man, indeed. And a credit to me. (Guadagnino 2017, 1:18:01)

After the conversation, Elio appears showing off his shirt to the company. As Oliver is not present the night, he later returns while Elio entertains the four grownups with his music. Elio makes up an excuse to quit playing so he can see Oliver. An excuse that leads up to a meeting where they for the first time decide to sleep together. As the camera turns to the window, the audience is not assured if they had intercourse that night.

This specific scene about the homosexual subject is very conflicted between its representation and its reflexivity. Even though the homosexual men seem to be close to being objectified and the father comically calls them ridiculous. This representation is countered by the father saying, "what is wrong with them?" and him deconstructing their sexuality from their gender expression by asking if it is because they are gay or they are ridiculous. Also, he makes a personal reference to Mounir. Admiring his intellect gives Mounir a personality rather than just an objectified identity

regarding his social relation to heterosexual orientation; something Pullen has argued is important within *new storytelling*.

Furthermore, this scene reflects on Elio his sexual orientation and his opinion on deviant sexual orientations. His interaction with Marzia in contrast to the arrival of two homosexual men amplifies Elio's "original" heterosexual orientation and maybe suggests some behavior of compensation. After the scene with the couple Elio explores for the first time a bodily experience with a man (Oliver). This scene and the remarks of Elio's father seem to reflect on what the homosexual object seems to be (the couple), yet at the same time tries to show the sexual fluidity of Elio and the nature of desire, which can thus be different from the now stereotypical image of homosexual men to be "extravagant". It creates this tension of the popular image of the homosexual subject (the couple) and the non-essential or determined nature of desire and sexual orientation.



Picture 9. *Elio kisses Marzia goodbye as the homosexual couple just arrived.*

4. Reshaping the understanding of sexual orientation through self-fulfillment and becoming.

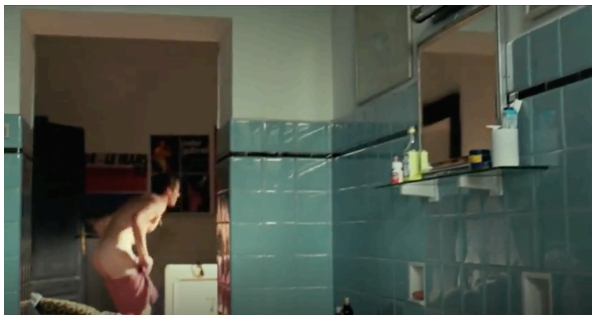
Besides reflexivity, Pullen argues that the potential of *new storytelling* also exists when the narrative is concerned with issues of personal identity fulfillment. According to him, queer films have this history of negative narratives inhibited by stories of shame, stigma or oppression. However, through mobility, constituted by placing the intimate self within the frame, a relay of new stories is provided which are focused on the personal self of the queer subject. These stories instead reveal everyday democratic ideals unencumbered by historical oppression. According to Pullen, *new storytelling* challenges myths, offering audiences insight into realistic queer life. He goes on that such progression and mobility in these stories should not involve a single subjectivity as evident in the re-framing of identity ideals, rather it should move forward in the strategy of becoming (Pullen 2009, 11-22). This shift is necessary, as Pullen writes since the homosexual identity comes from a history of being represented as dangerous, engaging, seductive, illegal and entertaining, used for rejecting it as the norm. While at the same time being eagerly consumed by audiences. Using Stuart Hall, he states the homosexual is thereby displaced, occurring as an object of consumption, rather than a subject of understanding (Pullen 2009, 47).

The stories, therefore, should involve self-fulfillment and the becoming of a character. While CMBYN is known for its positive representation of homosexuality, how are self-fulfillment and becoming then present within the story reshaping our understanding of sexual orientation? The story of CMBYN presents an in-depth understanding of each character as both main characters seem to grow as the summer progresses. Elio his becoming/self-fulfillment surrounds this theme of maturity and confidence in two ways. The first being mature in a bodily or gendered sense, in what he envisions himself to be when he is older. A perfect example is how Elio annoyingly looks at his young face after shaving. While Elio is already quite mature on some levels as he can transcribe musical masterpieces and seems to understand some older philosophy, Elio seems from the beginning interested in a maturity he finds in Oliver. Motives of this admiration of Oliver become vivid in the beginning where he, for instance, follows Oliver to a café, where he eagerly watches Oliver nonchalant joining a game of cards.

Nevertheless, this same nonchalant, independent attitude seems to annoy Elio at the same time as he exclaims at dinner of how he disapproves Oliver's nonchalant goodbyes. However, after Oliver tries to show interest in Elio, he rethinks his opinion of Oliver writing in his diary "I was too harsh." From here their friendship progresses, and Elio his gaze towards Oliver is established. A gaze that seems shows the thin line between admiration and desiring something or someone.

This gaze is carefully captured in a shot at the beginning where Elio walks naked into the bathroom and looks into the room of Oliver. Here the camera moves from Elio his nude body to the object of his vision: Oliver who is also seen nude, changing into his swimwear. Then as Oliver

greet him and walks out of the room, Elio walks over to the mirror and looks at himself. A stare of reflection like the one he gave himself after shaving.



Pictures 10-14 starting above from left to right. Pic. 10 shows Elio looking annoyingly at himself after shaving. Pic. 11 to 14 show Elio walking into the bathroom gazing at Oliver, and afterwards looking at himself in the mirror.

The second way of maturity is this pursuing of sexual experience and exploration. Elio seems eager to discover his sexual becoming with the Parisian girl Marzia, proudly stating to Oliver and his father at breakfast "we almost had sex last night." With Marzia, Elio shares his first-time intercourse. It is clear Elio is conflicted by Marzia, with Marzia also stating she is afraid he will hurt her. Marzia seems to be Elio's subject for discovering sexual pleasure, his scapegoat for whenever he does not know if Oliver likes him back. Besides she is also by societal norms his obvious choice to be sexually orientated too. With Marzia, Elio is dominant, confident and

an initiator, while around Oliver he appears as shy and weighing, while also playful and daring to get some reassurance from Oliver who tries to contain his desire towards him.

Becoming/self-fulfillment seems to be about Elio experiencing his disorientation, not knowing how to act upon his feelings towards this desirable queer object (Oliver). Now, this does seem to go against Pullen's argument of *new storytelling*, as it reproduces the mythical narrative of queer characters struggling with their orientation and as only existing in their social relations towards the heterosexual orientated space. However, in CMBYN there is no narrative of oppression present, nor is it about Elio his insecurity regarding this sexual orientation. Instead, the story unfolds around his insecurities of expressing his desire to Oliver. A perfect metaphor in the film for this is the story of the knight.

The story of the knight is a 16th-century French romance that Elio's mother reads to him. The story is about a knight who is in love with a princess but does not want to risk the friendship that blossoms between them. The princess is also in love with the knight, but the knight seems not to be entirely aware of it. The knight is speechless and very humbled because of his love that he is entirely unable to bring up the subject of his love. One day the knight asks the princess, "Is it better to speak or to die?". Elio then shares he would never have the courage to ask such a question. The next day at the pool he tells Oliver about the reading and Oliver questions how it ends. "Better to speak," Elio tells him, yet he recalls the princess is on her guard and senses a trap. Shown with an intimate close up, Oliver asks again "So, does he speak?", on which Elio answers that the knight fudges.

This story of the knight seems to be a metaphor for Elio and Oliver. Elio resembles the knight, the one who probes Oliver his intentions and seems to think about every move he makes; afraid of ruining their friendship. Oliver, on the other hand, can be acknowledged as the princess, the one who has the same feelings yet keeps his distance, remarked by his first "distant" nonchalant attitude towards Elio and his silent answers on explicit moves of Elio. For example, after Elio indirectly hints he likes Oliver as they walk over the square, Oliver tries to neglect the subject answering "we can't talk about those kinds of things. Okay?". Alternatively, after they have intercourse for the first time, Oliver from facial expression seems worried he has gone too far. He asks, "Are you gonna hold what happened last night against me?" Showing he was afraid there was a trap, a downfall to showing his affection to his professor's much younger son.

Becoming and self-fulfillment we see thus by Elio his quest for maturity in a performative way as well as a sexual experience. Oliver seems to be the object of admiration which Elio discovers is closely connected to feelings of desire. A fine evolving line is set forth from wanting to be Oliver to loving Oliver. Elio experiences grow in learning how to act on his romantic feelings, subjected to discovering his youthful love and a relationship without motives of oppression. Just as André Aciman commends in section one, it is about "The reluctance that you have in the beginning, but also the gratitude, the liberation that comes when you finally

have spoken." Elio's becoming is close to his personal self and his re-orientation of his sexual orientation without being defined by a specific norm of sexuality.

5. Signifying queer orientation within the heterosexual orientated space in *Call Me By Your Name*.

To examine if a narrative does not revolve around oppression it is necessary to see how the charmed circle then is present within the film. This section follows the previous one since a queer character cannot be set in a frame of positivity and an intimate becoming, outside the sexual context that is concerned with social relations, while the moral binary regarding sexual politics heavily influences the surrounding of that character. Therefore, in this last section, I will look at how the heterosexual orientation is vivid within the space of CMBYN and how this compulsory orientation influences Elio.

As I have mentioned in my theoretical framework, Sara Ahmed argues that sexual orientation is about objects and the lines of directions to these objects. Heterosexuality is the composition of all these (heterosexual) objects surrounding a subject, longing the subject to aspire towards this orientation. The heterosexual orientation is compulsory by the vertical axis of parental expectation, the way of how they organize space, and in how queer objects are perceived as deviant and therefore pushed to the background or eliminated from space. This, in the end, makes up for how the charmed circle of moral sexuality is constructed, by nearing those things that are deemed moral and adhere to the things that are deemed immoral. To see how CMBYN then presents these oppressive sexual politics, I will examine the signification of the queer orientation within the heterosexual orientated space in which the story takes place.

Ahmed often uses in her paper the resemblance of her family dinner table. She describes how the seatings at/around the table shape orientation and directs her to take up a particular role regarding this orientation. Resembling certain positions that the family upholds and the expectations of her in this specific role. The dinner table functions as a place where the family is centered celebrating the family's vertical axis of offspring. Coincidentally, within CMBYN scenes often involve the family seated around a table. First of all, it seems just like the author's metaphor, that the family in the film also has some dispositioning at the table. In all scenes, the father and mother are seated next to each other. A line of direction that closes the vertical bond of generations and offspring, as does it reassemble the heterosexual bond and social good of being together (Ahmed 2006). The first time when the family sits at the table, Oliver accidentally takes her place. Literarily, taking up this role of the mother, a by Freudian means very desirable role for young boy's erotic attention. Oliver places himself here as a new object within Elio his orientation. Besides, the first dinner where Elio contemplates his disapproval of (the absent) Oliver, the two each time take place alongside each other at the dinner table — resembling the spaces of the parents as the celebrated couple seated next to each other and mirrors this progress of coupling.



Pictures 15-17 from left to right. Pic. 15 shows Oliver taking up the mother's seat at the table. While pic 16 and 17 show further instances of the fixed positions of the mother and father next to each other.

Descriptive moments of the oppressive heterosexual patriarchy are present within the film mostly in discourse. After Elio and Oliver spend the night together for the first time, a note to deviant sexual behavior as being not normal appears in dialogue.

Oliver "Are you going to hold what happened against me?...I Hope I didn't mess you up, I won't either of us to regret it".

Elio "Its not like I'm gonna tell anyone, or that you will get in trouble".

Oliver "that's not what I meant".

Elio here seems to know that their night together is not conventional and finds its place within secrecy. Nonetheless, Oliver shows that it is not what he meant. Noting that he hoped it is Elio who know is not doubting himself or has negative feelings regarding this supposition of him maybe being not-heterosexual. Oliver tells Elio at a later point in the film that if his parents knew, they would have carted him off to a correctional facility. This same reference of deviant orientation being psychically wrong we hear after Elio used an apricot to pleasure himself. He asks Oliver "I am sick, aren't I?" implying his sexual activity with the fruit is immoral or abnormal. However, Oliver revisions this abnormality by answering "I wish everybody was as sick as you." and attempts to eat it with Elio obstructing him to do so.

The parents also play a vital role in the acceptance of the queer orientation of Elio. Which occurs most remarkable in a concluding scene where his dad mentions his admiration for what was "maybe more than a friendship." In the father's monologue, it becomes clear that he is happy the two found each other and thinks both were a right fit for each other. The dad mentions "In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away. Pray their sons land on their feet, but I am not such a parent." In this scene, it becomes clear his dad is appreciative of Elio's feelings, while with conventional parents and societal norms this homosocial bond would not have been treasured.

Conclusively, within CMBYN there are certainly references to heterosexual orientation being dominant and the accepted social norm. While queer orientation, as we have seen from

conversations, is being experienced as immoral/abnormal — the same counts for other sexual deviancies as Elio his experience with the apricot. The film shows heterosexual orientation through certain compulsory lines, as the fixed seatings at the table or the natural implication of Elio and Oliver their heterosexual orientation. However, even though there is a presence of compulsory heterosexual orientation, Elio's parents, the mirroring seated position at the table as well as Oliver show that within the family Elio his desire sexual deviancy is not seen as wrong.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have contextualized CMBYN as new narrative following principles of Christopher Pullen's *new storytelling* and examined a possible positive way to represent sexual orientation within a film. The examination of authorial reflexivity from my first section showed that specific layered-ness of heterosexual and queer authors supports the idea of sexual orientation being a structured principle. André Aciman as heterosexual nearing homosexual objects of desire for himself and others by writing the story reassumes the idea that sexual desire is constructed within an orientated space. The reflexivity to sexual desire showed connotations to this queer desire being natural, historical and free from identity politics. A literal depiction of the stereotypical homosexual subject reflected strongly on Elio his initiate sexual orientation and deconstructed the contemporary dominant alignment of cultural identity with sexual orientation.

The second section examined becoming and self-fulfillment in CMBYN. CMBYN clearly showed that the story typifies becoming, rather than sexual orientation being defined by a corporeal framework as Pullen mentioned. This most notable in how Elio becomes aware of his sensual and sexual self and deals with his emotions regarding his disorientation by his sudden desire towards Oliver. Through his pursuit of maturity, the story of Elio perfectly shows how by admiring he nears the queer object which he slowly starts to desire. Also because of his interaction with this object from which his desire comes forth, it shows sexuality to be a communicative sexual ethic, in contrast to a normalizing ethic which holds his desire to an inherent moral significance, which was for Steven Seidman, an essence to queer theory.

The last section showed that the film certainly does not eliminate the conventional sexual politics of that time, yet does free the queer subject from an oppressive narrative. Even though there are social implications and repressions on the queer desire, Elio his re-orientation does not seem to bother his parents, nor does it seem Elio is obligated to follow the compulsory heterosexual orientation. This showed that sexual politics heavily influence sexual orientation, yet at the same time are very changeable whenever the subject has a choice to orientate themselves.

Conclusively, *Call Me By Your Name* represents sexual orientation through *new storytelling* as historically, culturally shaped and an intimate desire influenced by the objects surrounding the subject. Through *new storytelling*, the film re-establishes the gendered homogenous essentialist thought about sexuality to a personal identity of sexual desire constructed by spatial orientation. *New storytelling*, as Pullen has shown, creates the opportunity for a more diverse representation for queer stories, and also offers a sense of mobility by intimate stories that support a non-oppressive development of these stories. The representation in CMBYN deconstructs the hierarchy of the charmed circle by centering the intimate desire within the story and shows how sexual orientation works disjointed from sexual politics.

As for Suzanna Walters her inquiry about what will happen in this third phase of gay visibility after the many firsts of the 1990s, I would contemplate that Christopher Pullen's *new*

storytelling can help diversify the landscape of sexual representations. Through theories as *new storytelling*, we can create more diverse and more accurate representations about deviant sexual desires that fall outside the charmed circle (queers) and deconstruct this sexual hierarchy. His theory works perfectly with queer theory, where the diverse intimate stories can create a range of meanings regarding sexual expressions, rather than normalizing one.

Within my approach, I mainly focused on narrative and discourse analysis, while further analysis should also incorporate cinematographic analysis. Similarly, an intersectional approach should be more incorporated, since Elio and Oliver are white, cis-gender, upper-class and educated persona's which also influence these circumstances of how their sexual orientation unfolds. A total deconstruction of the charmed circle and acceptance of sexual deviance can only be done when intersections as class, ethnicity, and gender are also involved. Further research on this topic could also incorporate spectatorial experiences too examine how this representation challenges spectators their notions of sexual orientation.

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