LEBANON AS A SETTING OF NEGOTIATIONS: MALE SAME-SEX REPRESENTATIONS AND QUEER SUBJECTIVITIES IN POST-WAR CINEMA

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Résumé

Cet article aborde les représentations et autoreprésentations des relations non normatives masculines dans le cinéma libanais, en les situant dans un paysage médiatique plus large marqué par les stéréotypes, la censure et les discours de visibilité produits par les ONG.

Si le Liban est souvent décrit, dans les récits occidentaux, comme une exception libérale au sein du monde arabe, cette image masque les inégalités structurelles et les fractures discursives qui conditionnent la visibilité des sexualités marginalisées. En s'appuyant sur les approches interdisciplinaires des études queer, des théories des médias et des études féministes, l'article retrace l'évolution de ces représentations, des premières figures télévisuelles nationales, comme celle de *Coucou* à la fin des années 1970, jusqu'aux productions cinématographiques indépendantes les plus récentes. L'analyse met en lumière la manière dont les médias reproduisent des représentations codées et stéréotypées des relations masculines du même sexe, tandis que le cinéma indépendant propose des contre-discours fondés sur le refus, la fragmentation et l'opacité affective. L'implication des ONG dans la construction du discours LGBT est interrogée à travers une lecture critique des modèles d'identité occidentalisés (Massad) et de l'« orientalisme fractal » développé par Moussawi. Ces lectures croisées montrent que le cinéma queer libanais échappe aux récits homogénéisants de la politique identitaire, en articulant au contraire un ensemble de négociations entre cadres locaux et globaux. L'analyse porte sur quatre films : *Libertad Beirut* (Raad, 2018), *Mondial 2010* (Dib, 2014), *Eccomi Eccoti* (Rafei, 2017) et *Chronic* (Sabbah, 2017) où se négocient le désir, la visibilité et la résistance. En envisageant le cinéma comme un espace de lutte politique, l'article explore la manière dont le désir non normatif est construit, limité puis réimaginé, plaidant pour une approche intersectionnelle

et postcoloniale de l'analyse des médias, attentive à la fois aux représentations et à leurs zones d'ombre.

Mots-clés

Cinéma queer – Politiques identitaires – Intersectionnalité – Médias libanais – Représentations LGBT.

Abstract

This article examines how male same-sex desire is represented and self-represented in Lebanese cinema, situating these representations within a broader media landscape marked by stereotyping, censorship, and NGO visibility discourses. While Lebanon is often framed in Western narratives as a liberal exception in the Arab world, such portrayals obscure the structural inequalities and fractured discourses that shape non-normative visibility. Drawing on queer theory, media studies, and feminist critique, the article examines the evolution of male same-sex representation from early televisual figures, such as *Coucou* in the 1970s, to more recent cinematic productions.

It focuses on how media outlets circulate coded and stereotypical depictions of non-normativity, while independent films offer counter-discourses grounded in refusal, fragmentation, and affective opacity. NGO involvement in shaping LGBT discourse is examined critically, particularly through Massad's critique of Westernized identity models and Moussawi's notion of fractal orientalism. These layered readings demonstrate that Lebanese queer cinema resists coherent identity politics narratives, instead offering a set of negotiations between local and global queer frameworks.

The analysis focuses on four films, *Libertad Beirut* (Raad, 2018), *Mondial 2010* (Dib, 2014), *Eccomi Eccoti* (Rafei, 2017), and *Chronic* (Sabbah, 2017, which illustrate these negotiations of desire, visibility, and resistance.

By treating cinema as a site of political struggle, the article traces how non-normative desire is constructed, limited, and reimagined. It calls for an intersectional and postcolonial approach to media analysis, attentive to representation and its discontents.

Keywords

Queer cinema – LGBT representation – Lebanese media – Intersectionality – Identity politics.

Introduction

The Lebanese gay rights movement, which began in the early 2000s, marked a shift in how sexuality was negotiated in public discourse. Non-normative sexualities defying the normalcy set by patriarchal norms became increasingly involved with discourses of human rights, freedom, and visibility. The 2019 launch of *Cinema Al Fouad*, Lebanon's first queer film festival, was symbolic of this shift. However, behind this visibility lies a complex terrain of conflicting discourses, competing frameworks, and a fragmented political landscape that defies any singular or linear reading of male same-sex representations.

This article examines how male same-sex desire is represented and self-represented in Lebanese cinema. Rather than assuming a straightforward narrative of progress or oppression, it argues that these representations emerge from an ongoing negotiation between multiple forces: local socio-political constraints shaped by religious apparatuses, laws, and societal norms; global identity politics; NGO involvement; and cinematic counter-discourses. These negotiations are not just thematic but structure the very grammar through which male same-sex subjectivities become visible and serve as spaces for an active practice of sexual self-fashioning.

Lebanon is often portrayed in Western media and academic frameworks as the most liberal country in the Arab world, a gay haven in a region marked by repression (Moussawi, 2013). While this narrative serves strategic purposes, it often masks the structural inequalities and representational violence that shape non-normative visibility. Scholars like Massad (2007) have critiqued the Gay International project, which imposes Western sexual identity categories on local sexualities. Others, like Moussawi (2020), offer more nuanced readings, proposing concepts such as fractal orientalism that describe how orientalist hierarchies between East and West replicate within local contexts, to define those hierarchies within Lebanon's sexual politics.

This article builds on these critiques and focuses on the discursive formations produced within media, specifically cinema.

Cinema did not emerge in a vacuum. Earlier forms of Lebanese media, particularly television, have long staged non-normative characters, often within frames of ridicule or control. The character of *Coucou*, from the 1976 Télé Liban series *El Denyeh Hek*, embodied gender non-conformity, yet was made legible within a comic and non-sexual register. Later, sensationalist talk shows of the 1990s and 2000s, featured guests whose gender or sexual expression fell outside accepted norms, framed as spectacle, while reinforcing stereotypical norms.

Media representations played a central role in constructing the cultural reality of male same-sex desire. Lebanese cinema, especially in the post-war era, became a site of conflicting narratives. Mainstream media, including local television, continues to circulate stereotypical, often caricatured portrayals of same-sex attracted individuals, aligning with dominant religious and patriarchal views. In contrast, independent and auteur-driven cinema offers counter-discourses shaped by radical queer politics, decolonial critique, and subjective explorations of desire, death, and isolation.

This article draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines queer theory, postcolonial critique, media studies, and feminist critique. Queer of Color theory (Muñoz, 2009), alongside Jasbir Puar's (2013) notion of intersectionality as assemblage, offer tools beyond essentialist or identity-based readings of sexuality. Assemblage stresses the dynamic and relational nature of social formations, unlike intersectionality, which maps fixed categories such as gender, sexuality, and class. It traces how bodies, affects, and structures come together differently across contexts, privileging relation and movement over stable identity, reading power as continuously rearranged within material and affective worlds. Applied to non-normative male sexualities in film, assemblage allows for an understanding of queerness as produced through constellations of cultural artefacts, spatial dynamics, social practices, and intersecting discourses.

The work of Halberstam (2011) and Edelman (2004) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the anti-social turn in queer cinema, while Foucault's concept of counter-discourse, particularly as developed through his conversations with Deleuze (1972), frames film as a site of resistance and negotiation.

While this article uses feminist and queer critique, it focuses on male same-sex desire, highlighting the under-theorization of masculinity and male self-representation within gender studies. The purpose is not to reaffirm the centrality of the male subject, but to expose the visual, discursive, and political mechanisms that have produced this visibility, and to trace the silences that sustain it (Puar, 2013, p. 336-339), specifically when Lebanese and Arab masculinities have been persistently constructed through Orientalist binaries of "barbaric" and "modern" (Massad, 2007).

Methodologically, this article draws from a transdisciplinary framework that combines Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) and the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller, 2006). This constructed approach resists the uncritical allocation of Western models to the Lebanese context and reads films as discursive sites where social and symbolic power intersect.

It also integrates Joseph Dean's (2007) categorization model from film studies to distinguish between *gay standpoint* and *queer* films, allowing for a critical mapping of how identity, visibility, and spectatorship are constructed through cinematic form. This approach also draws from queer theory as a method. Following scholars such as Muñoz (2009) and Puar (2007, 2013), it attends to affect, destruction, opacity, and refusal as political strategies. Queer cinema does not just depict queerness but shapes it through strategies of disruption, ambiguity, and resistance to classification or fixed identity. The analysis thus focuses on how Lebanese films produce and circulate meaning through visual codes, narrative structures, and assemblages of bodies, spaces, and affects. In this sense, Lebanese queer cinema is approached not as representation but as a field of negotiation between global discourses of sexuality and local formations of visibility and belonging.

The films analyzed in this article are not treated just as texts, but as political interventions that challenge dominant ideologies. They reflect broader tensions in Lebanon: between visibility and censorship, liberal identity politics and queer refusal, NGO discourse and local subjectivities. Gauthier Raad's *Libertad Beirut* (2018) is aligned with the rights-based discourse advanced by international NGOs. Whereas Roy Dib (*Mondial 2010*, 2014), Mohamed Sabbah (*Chronic*, 2017), and Raed Rafei (*Eccomi Eccoti*, 2017) films reject sexual identity categories and explore queer becoming, the death drive, and anti-futurity, within the context of postwar Lebanon.

Central to this investigation are the following questions: How do these films navigate the contested terrain of non-normative visibility in Lebanon? Do they reinforce models of Western identity politics, or disrupt them? How do they respond to the colonial legacy rooted in discourses on sexuality, and how do they imagine futures beyond assimilation?

Rather than privileging one political framework over another, this article maps their intersections, tensions, and contradictions. It argues that the representation of male same-sex desire in Lebanese cinema is not about resolving tensions, but living within them. In this context, Lebanon shifts from a static site into a dynamic arena of negotiations: a fragmented territory where discourses of desire, politics, and identity are perpetually reconstructed.

In this article, the term *non-normative* is used to describe sexualities and desires that fall outside heteropatriarchal norms. It is favoured over *LGBT* or *gay* in analytical sections to avoid reinforcing identity categories and to account for lived experiences that may not align with Western terms. *LGBT* is used when referring to NGOs' discourse, and *queer* when tackling a critical and intersectional politics.

1. Contextualizing Non-Normative Representation in Lebanon

To understand how male same-sex representation is produced and challenged in Lebanese cinema, it is crucial to situate these representations within the country's post-war media landscape and broader political culture.

Non-normative sexualities in Lebanon remain subject to legal and religious contestation. Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalizes "any carnal union against the order of nature," a vague phrasing historically used to target same-sex relations with up to one year of imprisonment (Liban, 1943). Although several court rulings in recent years have challenged this article's broad interpretation, it continues to carry legal and symbolic weight (Mikdashi, 2022). In parallel, Lebanon's major religious institutions unanimously condemn homosexuality, shaping public discourse and reinforcing norms of heterosexuality (Barotta, 2024, p. 23).

This alignment between state law and religious doctrine creates a climate of moral policing, where public expression of same-sex desire is often associated with deviance or immorality (Rizk & Makarem, 2015).

As a result, media representations often reflect these moral frameworks, reinforcing heterosexuality as the norm and rendering queerness legible only if it appears in narratives of suffering and deviance. Despite Lebanon's reputation for media liberalism, its landscape is structured by deep-rooted systems of censorship, religious influence, sectarian interests, and overall socio-political conservatism (El-Richani, 2016). While some platforms promote pluralism and openness, this narrative often obscures how non-normative sexualities are still restricted in how they appear publicly.

1.1. Media Culture and the Legacy of Televisual Control

Following the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon's media industry grew significantly. Private TV channels and satellite broadcasting reshaped media habits (Kraidy, 2010). Despite these shifts, mainstream media largely remained resistant to non-normative visibility. Shows such as *Al-Shater Yehki* (LBC), and more recently *Enta Horr* (MTV), *Hawa el Horrieh* (LBCI), *Ahmar bel khat el 'Arid* (LBCI), *Sireh Winfatahet* (Future TV), and *Ana Hek* (New TV), occasionally featured non-normative guests often within sensationalist or pathologizing frames (Mourad, 2016). These figures are portrayed as comic relief or tragic deviants, reinforcing societal anxieties and normative expectations.

The most iconic example of non-normative characters in TV series was *Coucou*, played by Youssef Fakhri in the 1976 Télé Liban sketch series *El Denyeh Hek*. *Coucou* was portrayed as effeminate, emotional, and attached to his male friend

Alloush and his mother. While never explicitly named as gay, his performance of femininity and emotional intimacy offered what Doty (1993) later described as a queer reading, a way to interpret non-normative desire not through identity but through affect, gesture, and coded intimacy.

At the time, *Coucou* was perceived as comic, with no public association with sexuality. But as Tarek El Ariss (2006) later argued, he can be read as a closeted gay figure navigating the limits of representation within what Ruby Rich came to call "compulsory heterosexuality", where heterosexuality is not simply considered as a natural orientation but a political institution socially enforced through norms, expectations, and practices (Rich, 1980, p. 648). This concept reveals how women, and by extension all non-normative desires, are pressured into heterosexual roles to maintain patriarchal power. *Coucou* is thus a figure of legibility confined to humor and ambiguity.

This televisual logic still carries into the present, through popular talk shows that stage queer-coded guests as spectacle. These appearances reinforce binary norms and affirm the media's regulatory role.

The Lebanese media was also influenced by Egyptian cinema, where gender performance was central to comedy. Cross-dressing and effeminate male characters became recurring figures in Egyptian popular culture. These representations often coded gender non-normative characters through humour but avoided direct association with same-sex desire. According to Menicucci (1998), cross-dressing became one of the most persistent cinematic codes for homosexual metaphors, embedded in Egyptian cinema and echoed in Arab visual traditions.

1.2. NGO Discourse: The Tensions Between Identity Politics and Queer Subjectivities

The rise of local LGBT NGOs in the 2000s, notably HELEM (founded in 2004), introduced new discourses around visibility, rights, and legal protection (Gagné & Qubaia, 2013) and played a vital role in creating support structures, while adopting a language aligned with Western sexual identity categories rather than lived realities in Lebanon. Joseph Massad, in his critique of the Gay International, argues that this kind of framework risks simplifying complex and local sexual practices by squeezing them into the boxes of "gay" and "lesbian", flattening the complexity and fluidity of same-sex practices in Arab societies (Massad, 2007, p. 163-178).

Some NGO narratives have spread the figure of the modern gay man, typically urban, secular, and from the middle or upper class. And those who don't fit this mold, individuals from rural areas, poorer backgrounds, and who are gender

non-conforming, often get excluded. This reflects Jasbir Puar's concept of homonormativity (Puar, 2007), a concept that describes a kind of queer politics that privileges the bodies and identities most acceptable to neoliberal and nationalist frameworks (Barotta, 2024).

Moussawi's (2016) concept of fractal orientalism goes even further. Unlike classic Orientalism, which works through simple East/West oppositions, fractal Orientalism plays out from within a country itself. Beirut, in this logic, becomes modern and tolerant, and is positioned against other cities which are seen as backwards or conservative. This produces hegemonic understandings of LGBT identities, where people are expected to identify along binaries of closet and outness (Moussawi, 2016, p. 5).

This internal othering produces new exclusions, making non-normative individuals from rural or marginalized communities largely invisible in both NGO activism and cultural production.

In the Lebanese context, NGOs walk a delicate line between advocacy and complicity. Their dependence on international funding and legal frameworks often means they must align with discourses that are legible to donors. This does not erase their importance; it complicates it.

Within this terrain, queer subjectivity offers a different framework. Rather than centering identity, it foregrounds becoming, relationality, and contradiction. As Halberstam (2011) writes, queer subjectivity resists stable definitions and embraces failure, opacity, and unrecognizability as political strategies. It shifts from seeking visibility to challenging the terms of recognition itself.

These dynamics are reflected in the Lebanese cinema. Some filmmakers choose to set their stories in Beirut, in stylish apartments in Achrafieh or Hamra cafés, where these places act like shortcuts for modern queer life (Merabet, 2014). But in doing so, they often ignore the class inequalities and geographical exclusions (Moussawi, 2020, p. 139-140). Visibility, in this sense, becomes tied not only to identity but also to class, nationality and access to certain urban spaces.

Other filmmakers resist this dominant discourse and shift the lens to the peripheries and to more underprivileged queer bodies.

This tension between identity politics and queer subjectivities is central to the theoretical framework of this article. Identity-based approaches have helped in lobbying and legal reform, but often rely on fixed categories that exclude those whose lives fall outside dominant narratives (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 8-9). Queer theory, especially in its anti-identity strand, embraces the unstable, the incoherent, and the unfinished.

In Lebanon, shaped by war memory, sectarian fragmentation, and neoliberal urban development, these contradictions are sharpened. Non-normative visibility becomes a contested terrain: Who gets to be seen and who is left out? This questioning speaks to the material conditions of non-normative life under postcolonial pressure and global capital.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This article uses an interdisciplinary framework that bridges queer theory, postcolonial critique, media and film studies, and feminist epistemology. The purpose is not to apply theory to film texts, but to remain attentive to how these texts produce theoretical and political interventions within the Lebanese context.

Queer theory, with its critical and anti-identitarian strands, is central to this analysis. The works of José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Jasbir Puar (2007; 2013), and Jack Halberstam (2011) guide this article's understanding of queerness as a set of practices, affects, and refusals. Muñoz's notion of queer utopia is particularly significant, as it helps frame queer media not as representations of what "is", but as anticipations of what "could be": "Queerness is not in the being, but rather in the becoming (…). It is the future of queerness rather than its finitude… Yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

In Halberstam's (2011) theory of failure, refusal becomes a queer strategy that rejects the pressure to succeed within heteronormative and capitalist narratives of progress. Failure opens up alternative modes of being that embrace unbecoming, unknowing, and unmaking as forms of queer life (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88-96).

In parallel, Edelman's (2004) notion of the death drive refuses the political investment in reproductive futurism, where all politics must serve a hopeful future. Instead, he locates queerness in rupture, negation, and anti-sociality (Edelman, 2004, p. 2-4).

These theoretical frameworks allow this article to engage with films that do not aim to affirm or convert, but to dwell in ambiguity, loss and fragmentation, especially when those conditions mirror the unresolved grief of Lebanon's post-war setting. They also allow a close understanding of queer subjectivity as the experience and expression of selfhood that resists fixed identities, embraces contradiction, and is shaped by ongoing processes of becoming**.**

Puar's contribution to the theoretical framework is twofold. First, her critique of homonationalism and homonormativity offers a way to interrogate how

certain queer subjectivities, privileged and Western-aligned, are merged into dominant narratives, while others are excluded (Puar, 2007, p. xii-xxiv). Second, her notion of assemblage provides an alternative to intersectionality, theorized by Crenshaw (1991) to describe how systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism intersect to produce compounded forms of marginalization, particularly for Black women.

While intersectionality focuses on the overlap of identity categories, assemblage resists fixed identities altogether, emphasizing the fluid, dependent, and spatial relations between bodies, power, and structures (Puar, 2013). Assemblage allows this article to consider how sexuality, class, geography, memory, and war cohere within Lebanese cinematic queer representation.

Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, developed within cultural studies and media analysis, provides the basis for reading media as a site where meaning is not only transmitted but actively constructed (Hall, 1997, p. 15-25). This aligns with Foucault's notion of discourse, where knowledge about sexuality is always produced through power relations, and resistance takes discursive forms (Foucault, 1980, p. 78-92). Foucault and Deleuze's conversations on counter-discourse (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972) help position non-normative films as a site of refusal, not in the sense of negating all meanings, but as a refusal to participate in hegemonic logics of recognition and fixed identities.

From a methodological stance, this article adopts a transdisciplinary framework that bridges Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) and the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller, 2006), both reframed through queer, feminist, and postcolonial lenses. Discourse is not limited to language but is understood as a broader system of meaning-making, a structure shaping what can be said, seen, or imagined. Film, in this sense, is not a passive text but a discursive event: a space where ideologies are written and rewritten, where power circulates, and where silence is as revealing as speech (Keller, 2013, p. 55-58; Hall, 1997, p. 15-25).

Representation, then, is treated as a productive process, not a mirror of reality. It is through representation that identities, norms, and social relations are made thinkable. In post-war Lebanon, where visibility is entangled with censorship, geopolitics, and NGO narratives, reading media as discourse allows one to trace how queerness is shaped both by what appears on screen and by what is withheld from it.

This framework also draws on Joseph Dean's (2007) categorization of *gay standpoint* and *queer* films, which helps map the shifting relations between identity, visibility, and spectatorship. Gauthier Raad's *Libertad Beirut* (2018) aligns

with liberal discourses of tolerance and recognition, while Roy Dib's *Mondial 2010* (2014), Raed Rafei's *Eccomi Eccoti* (2017), and Mohamed Sabbah's *Chronic* (2017), embrace displacement, fragmentation, and refusal. Together, these works reveal the competing economies of visibility in Lebanon's cinema.

This article also treats queer theory as a method that is attentive to affect, destruction, opacity, and refusal as political strategies (Muñoz, 2009; Puar, 2007; Halberstam, 2011).

Queer Lebanese cinema doesn't just represent queerness; it reconfigures it through interruption, ambiguity, and the refusal of closure. Reading these films *queerly* means staying with their fractures, their gaps, their deliberate unclarity.

Finally, this methodology builds on feminist and Queer of Color approaches which insist on proximity rather than distance. It favours close readings that are attentive to what is unsaid as much as to what is declared aligning with Glissant's (1997, p. 189-190) notion of opacity: an ethics of interpretation that resists full disclosure, and that values what remains ungraspable as a form of resistance in itself.

Rather than relying on a formal coding grid, this approach privileges interpretive transparency and reflexivity. The analysis proceeds through close readings of visual and narrative structures, guided by the theoretical frameworks of discourse and power and by queer theory's attention to affect, refusal, and relationality.

3. Analysis: Gay Standpoint, Queer Subjectivity and Negotiations

This section examines how male same-sex desire is constructed, negotiated, and challenged across Lebanese films. Rather than assuming a binary of visibility and opacity, the analysis highlights the range of representational strategies, from *gay standpoint* narratives that rely on identity politics to *queer* counter-cinemas that embrace opacity, ambiguity, and subjectivity. These readings are guided by the theoretical and methodological framework outlined earlier, emphasizing on discourse, affect, and resistance.

3.1. Gay Standpoint Films: Visibility, NGO Narratives, and Identity Politics

James Joseph Dean (2007) categorized films that centre same-sex desire through frameworks rooted in liberal identity politics and visibility discourse as *gay standpoint* films. These narratives prioritize self-identification and the coming out, producing characters whose sexual orientation functions as the "prism that organizes their lives" (Dean, 2007, p. 371). This model, while enabling certain forms of visibility, risks reinforcing essentialist logics, a term used in queer theory to describe the tendency to reduce complex subjectivities to fixed

identities. Essentialism positions sexuality as an unchanging truth, rather than a social and historical construct (Penn, 1995).

In media representations, this results in characters who appear determined by their gay attribute, leaving out other layers of their identity.

In *Libertad Beirut* (Raad, 2018), the narrative follows two openly gay men living in Beirut or its neighbouring suburbs. One is Munir Abdallah, a well-known photographer recognized for his erotic depictions of the male body. The second is a younger visual artist who shares a more melancholic and critical view of non-normative life in the capital, talks openly about his coming out, his family's rejection, and his disillusionment with the Beirut queer scene, which he finds overly sexualized. Through these testimonies, the film offers a dual portrait of desire and the difficulty of belonging. Both characters represent different affective responses to non-normative life in Lebanon, one turning to visual pleasure and bodily celebration, the other to introspection and loss.

The film constructs a well-off gay subject: urban, mobile, artistic, and emotionally articulate. The visual framing seen through shots of rooftop scenes, dimly lit interiors, and candid monologues reflects familiar aesthetics of Western gay cinema (Aaron, 2004). The language used by the protagonists is deeply shaped by identity politics, employing terms like gay, freedom, and rejection, in a way that mirrors NGO human rights discourse (Mikdashi, 2022). These frameworks are significant because they shape how gay lives are represented and influence which stories are worthy of telling.

While these narratives are powerful, they also carry limitations. The protagonists are portrayed through an essentialist lens: their experiences revolve entirely around sexual identity. This mode of storytelling flattens other crossing aspects, such as class and social background. This form of gay visibility echoes the critiques of Massad (2007), who warns against the Gay International's promotion of fixed sexual identities as a universal mode of liberation, and of Puar (2007), who frames such narratives as aligned with homonormative and neoliberal inclusion.

Moreover, the protagonists' placement within Beirut or neighbouring suburbs invokes what Moussawi (2016) refers to as fractal orientalism: a dynamic in which Beirut is positioned as modern and tolerant, while queerness in other regions is rendered invisible or less evolved. This is not an explicit theme in the film, but it is apparent through the symbolic weight of the setting and characters.

While *Libertad Beirut* offers a rare and emotionally compelling window into gay life in Lebanon, it also aligns with the politics of legibility that privileges

coherence and recognition. The result is a form of gay representation that can be easily consumed by NGO discourses but leaves little room for ambiguity, refusal, or intersectionality. As Puar (2007) argues, incorporation into dominant narratives often comes at the price of depoliticization, something queer theory and politics have persistently interrogated.

3.2. Queer Anti-Social and Utopian Subjectivities

In contrast to films that affirm gay identity through visibility and NGO discourses, some Lebanese filmmakers embrace political refusal. They center opacity, spatial dislocation, and unresolved loss as modes of queer resistance. Rather than showing queer life, they enact it through rupture, embodying what Muñoz (2009) terms as queer utopia, a gesture towards a future not yet here, but that has glimpses seen through feeling, absence, or contradiction. This echoes Butler's (2004, p. 15) view that gender and sexuality are never fully attained, but are always in the process of becoming, performed, disrupted, and undone.

In *Mondial 2010* (Dib, 2014), a same-sex Lebanese couple takes an imagined road trip to Ramallah. The film is shot entirely with a hand camera, and mainly from inside a moving car, never directly naming the protagonists' relationship. And yet, intimacy leaks through via a joke or an argument about hotel beds. The impossibility of their journey is part of the film's radical politics: Lebanese law prohibits travel to Palestine under Israeli control. The trip to Ramallah is not just spatial, but symbolic, which comes as a transgression of geopolitical, sexual, and narrative borders (Puar, 2007).

Dib's turn to Palestine rejects Beirut's overused role as the gay haven of the Arab world and reframes queerness through Palestinian resistance. The film challenges the logic of homonationalism, in which Western-aligned queer subjects are made legible at the expense of others (Puar, 2007, p. xxiv-xxv). In this imagined trip, queerness becomes a way of inhabiting interdicted space, moving through zones marked by occupation, surveillance, and loss. It also aligns with Sedgwick's (1990) notion of the epistemology of the closet, where what remains unspoken structures meaning more than what is declared.

Dib's refusal of direct naming, closure, or destination resonates with Halberstam's (2011, p. 88-96) understanding of queer failure, not as defeat, but as a conscious withdrawal from dominant logics of coherence, success, and visibility.

Raed Rafei's *Eccomi Eccoti* (2017) begins in the noisy streets of Tripoli and contrasts them with shots from Florence, where his Italian lover lives. The film is structured as a long-distance relationship memoir, interlacing travel notes, static scenes, and interior monologues. Rafei uses Tripoli as his queer geography, a city marked by religious conservatism and economic marginality. Tripoli is portrayed

with affection and scrutiny: loud markets, public gardens, Quranic recitations, and men passively gazing.

Against how Tripoli is portrayed, Florence becomes a space where intimacy seems possible but is never fully attained. The love story between Raed and Sandro unfolds across time zones and cities, but it ends unresolved, resembling an echo of queer disorientation and the limits of belonging. This fluidity and ambivalence resonate with Warner's (1993) theory of anti-normativity, where queer desire works precisely by escaping the structures that aim to contain it. The anti-normativity concept is articulated in his critique of normalizing discourses and his call for a politics rooted in resistance and deviance (Warner, 1993, p. 6-7). *Eccomi Eccoti* questions not only heteronormativity but identity, refusing fixed definitions and binaries, representing what Butler calls precarious life (2004, p. 19-23), the condition of being exposed to violence and mourning. This instability is not just structural but emotional, a vision of queer failure as a way of living outside the logics of success (Halberstam, 2011).

Mohamed Sabbah's *Chronic* (2017) follows Omar, a photographer mourning the death of his lover Wassim in a suicide bombing. Through a series of castings, he invites three strangers into his studio, each marked by trauma, each offering their story of loss. The film unfolds in three chapters, blurring fiction and performance. Through Omar's interactions with his models, *Chronic* explores identification, violence, and grief, not as therapeutic recovery, but as unhealed wounds (Bersani, 1987).

Omar's mourning is not linear but fragmented and violent. His grief becomes entangled with desire, cruelty, and the impossible need to feel someone else's pain. The film is haunted by WhatsApp messages from his dead lover, clips of him smiling, and the growing anticipation of a new explosion in Beirut. Sabbah presents mourning not as letting go, but as holding on to impressions and flickers of the beloved. The film's refusal of therapeutic closure or redemptive futurity aligns closely with Edelman's (2004, p. 2-4) theory of the death drive, where queerness confronts loss and negation without attempting to convert them into meanings.

The narrative offered a set of affectivities: "rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, over-investment, incivility, brutal honesty…" (Halberstam, 2008, p. 152). In *Chronic*, Omar is unintelligible. He opposes the good white middle-class non-normative man, a crucial component of modernity (Sedgwick, 1990).

3.3. Discussion: Fractured Visibility and Postcolonial Queer Tensions

What emerges from the films is not a unified image of a queer life in Lebanon but a field of fractured visibility. These fractures are not aesthetic, but speak to the broader tensions surrounding queer subjectivity in postwar Lebanon: recognition and refusal, visibility and opacity, Western gay identity and intersectional queerness.

The contrast between *Libertad Beirut* and *Chronic* or *Eccomi Eccoti* does not reflect a linear evolution of queer cinema but the coexistence of representational forms. *Libertad Beirut* uses confession and essentialist sexuality as identity markers. The protagonists speak the language of international human rights, but within a visual and affective economy that makes their stories both consumable and politically worthy telling. In contrast, *Chronic*, *Mondial 2010*, and *Eccomi Eccoti* operate through refusal, by resisting the essentializing of sexual identity, and offering instead a queer aesthetic grounded in fragmentation, spatial disorientation, and emotional opacity.

This split reflects what Puar (2007) identifies as the tension between homonormativity and queer refusal, between incorporation into neoliberal visibility regimes and the unsettling practices that challenge dominant narratives. It also points to the reliance on tropes of coming out, rejection, and resilience that risk producing a singular and unified image of the modern gay man. This figure is both politically useful and structurally exclusionary (Massad, 2007; Gagné & Qubaia, 2013).

Geography plays a central role in these tensions. *Libertad Beirut* centers lives already embedded in Beirut's cosmopolitan codes. By contrast, *Eccomi Eccoti* anchors queerness in Tripoli, *Mondial 2010* crosses the politically charged border with Palestine, and *Chronic* awaits an always-burning Beirut. These gestures re-map queer life away from Beirut's exceptionalism, engaging with the internal hierarchization of Lebanese queer spaces.

Representation here becomes a terrain of negotiation rather than assertion. Visibility does not guarantee resistance, and opacity does not mean invisibility. As Halberstam (2011) argues, failure and fragmentation are powerful tools in queer cultural production. And as Muñoz (2009) claims, queer utopia does not arrive fully formed but points elsewhere.

Postcolonial tensions exist throughout all these works. Whether through *Mondial 2010*'s imagined crossing into Palestine, *Chronic*'s anxious watch over a burning Beirut, or *Eccomi Eccoti's* impossible binary East/West relationship, the queer subject is always navigating layers of loss, war residue, and a fragile national imaginary. These films do not just represent queer lives, but construct queer

positions within a damaged and damaging political landscape (Puar, 2013). The protagonists in those films are solitary individuals, queer subjects that navigate the turbulent complexity of Lebanon, moving away from an international gay figure.

Nevertheless, all these movies that seemingly adopt opposite political standpoints share the strategy of negotiation, with the demands of visibility, the imperatives of trauma, and the weight of geography. The films do not offer answers but contradictions, and that, perhaps, is where their politics lie.

Conclusion

This article examined how male same-sex desire is represented and self-represented in Media, with an in-depth analysis of self-representation in films, tracing a split terrain shaped by NGO discourses, local systems of regulation and queer subjectivities.

From the identity politics narratives of *Libertad Beirut* to the fragmented and affective experiments of *Chronic*, *Mondial 2010*, and *Eccomi Eccoti*, these films do not offer a singular image of queerness, but multiple positions: emotional, spatial, and political, that negotiate with visibility and silence, recognition and refusal.

These cinematic negotiations cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the representational legacies inherited from Lebanese television and mainstream media. From the comic characters like *Coucou* to the sensationalist portrayals of non-normative guests on talk shows, a discourse of ridicule and marginalization has long structured this visibility. These precedents shaped not only how queerness was seen, but what kinds of queer lives should be seen. The films analyzed in this article do not exist outside this media system, but they respond to it, challenge it, or refract it through resistant forms.

Rather than asking what queer cinema in Lebanon is or should be, this article has asked what it does: assimilations, contradictions, and refusals. The emphasis on disorientation, fragmentation, and opacity does not mark a lack of politics but signals a refusal to be reduced to a fixed identity or narrative resolution. These films insist that queerness is not a stable object to be represented, but a process to be disrupted and reimagined.

The theoretical and methodological framework guiding this reading draws from queer theory, postcolonial critique, and feminist epistemology. But it is also shaped by a commitment to what Miriam Cooke (2001) calls multiple critique: a practice that resists choosing between global and local, between refusal

and assimilation. This approach enables a situated critique of both Western frameworks of representation and local structures of heteronormativity, without collapsing into either/or binaries. It is not a position of neutrality, but of tension, a space from which to speak back to the systems that produce disciplined forms of queer life.

These films show that the queer subject in Lebanon is not seeking to speak or be seen, but is resisting frameworks that demand confession, redemption, or political clarity. They shift the gaze from the need to explain to the power of self-fashioning, even when fractured.

Queer cinema in Lebanon is not outside politics, nor is it reducible to identity. It is a site of negotiation with history, space, and aesthetic form. In that negotiation, it continues to unsettle. These films do not represent a ready-made subject but participate in the making of a queer life, not by rendering it coherent, but by insisting that it need not be. This is the very nature of queer subjectivity: processual, positioned, and irreducible to normative legibility.

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