

# Classrooms Without Closets: LGBTIQ+ Cinema in University Education

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**Abstract**

From September 2017 to June 2020 the University of the Balearic Islands organised a monthly film workshop called *Aules Sense Armaris: Cinema LGBTIQ+ a la UIB* focused on giving visibility to affective and sexual diversity through film analysis in a university context. Each film was introduced with an interview with a queer activist or cultural expert related to the particular topics the film addressed, and after the screening a cinematographic and critical discussion was held in which the students contributed either with their own reflections or asking questions to the guests. This article exposes the necessity of approaching and celebrating sexual diversity from the university classroom as a form of activism. It also describes the as well as describing the criteria that were followed when choosing the films, how the monthly workshops took place and the most interesting conclusions from the post-film debates between activists, university students and spectators.

**Keywords:** LGBTIQA+ Cinema; Films and Education; University Film Workshop; Sexual Diversity in Films; Film Analysis

### 1. Motive: *Why Aules Sense Armaris*

If there was a motive that prompted the film university workshop series *Aules Sense Armaris*, it was Sedwick's reference in her article "Queer and Now" to the large number of teen suicides within the LGBTIQ+ community: "Queer teenagers are two to three times likelier to attempt suicide, and to accomplish it, than others" (1993, 1). This means that up to 30 percent of teen suicides are likely to be LGBTIQ+ individuals. It is true that the hard and striking statistics that Sedwick provided referred to 1993, almost 30 years ago, and things have changed. However, hate crimes and street attacks on queer people in countries with LGBTIQ+ legislation and which are supposedly LGBTIQ+-friendly are today extremely frequent, to say nothing of what occurs in those—still so many—other countries in which being queer directly implies the possibility of being legally tortured, and receiving long prison sentences or the death penalty. Queer people are still at risk, and in the case of queer adolescents, this risk is even higher. Being sexually non-normative and assume one's sexual non-conformity at an early age is not an easy process, as Sedwick's statistics prove. In "Queer Feelings," Ahmed also approaches this worrying reality when she asserts that living a queer life inevitably implies a brave and constant "discomfort with the script of heteronormative existence" (2004, 151). Things may have changed since 1993, yet there still seems to be a lot of work to be done.

Queer survival involves a variety of manifestations and experiences, which, even though they may differ enormously in scale, are all related to the confrontation of the heteropatriarchal and LGBTIQ+-phobic system. In the best of scenarios, queer teenagers are forced to hide their doubts and lie to themselves when they do not want to see that they are not the girl or boy that their parents/teachers/classmates/friends expected them to be; they must keep silent about their feelings out of fear of being insulted or becoming the object of bullying in their class, or because they prefer not to notice their loved ones' disappointed faces. In the worst case, queer teenagers are directly stigmatised and suffer persistent threats and violence—physical, social, legal, symbolic—which may prove lethal. They are adolescents, and they do not usually have the emotional and intellectual tools that an adult has to confront endless harassment at school and conflicting situations at home. However, two thirds of queer teenagers survive, maybe unconsciously, but definitely courageously. That is why queer teaching and writing, and incorporating LGBTIQ+ activities into school and university curricula is so important: to raise awareness and make invisible feelings, desires, and LGBTIQ+ discourses visible as early as possible. As Butler remarks in "Critically Queer," "where there is an 'I', there is first a

discourse that precedes and enables that 'I'. Thus, there is no 'I' who stands behind discourse. On the contrary, the 'I' only comes into being through being interpellated. The discursive social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject" (1993, 18).

LGBTIQ+ journalist Rubén Serrano, in his Prologue "*Vidas que ya no se callan*" ("Lives That Do Not Keep Silent Anymore") to the anthology of new queer narratives *Asalto a Oz (Assault on Oz)*, states that queer teenagers need to find their feelings and doubts, and indeed themselves, represented in queer stories, characters and books which act as referents that remind them that they are not alone (2019, 11). Trans activist Roberta Marrero in *We Can Be Heroes: Una celebración de la cultura LGTBQ+ (A Celebration of LGBTIQ+ Culture)* refers to her appetite for queer cultural references when she was a teenager as being the strongest weapon she had to find herself, her place in the world, and to fight against intolerance (2018, 9). Indeed, finding non-normative referents in high- or popular culture is crucial as a prime resource for the emotional survival of queer teenagers. As arts professor Ricard Huerta underlines in *Transeducar: Arte, Docencia y Derechos LGTB (Transeducating: Arts, Teaching, and LGBT Rights)*, if when in class teachers or professors talk about Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Francis Bacon, Frida Kahlo, Andy Warhol, Oscar Wilde, and hide these artists' sexual orientation from their students, not only are they preventing their students' access to knowledge—since understanding these artists' work means being aware of their involvement in the historical fight for LGBTIQ+ rights and freedom—but they also become accomplices in the perpetuation of an archaic and LGBTIQ+-phobic pattern that diminishes these artists' fearless dissidence (2016, 13-14).

The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ movies in university education responds to the world's current colossal appetite for TV series and films. Indeed, it could be said that they have become one of the average public's main sources of inspiration in their search to understand the world and themselves. Some people may consider this appetite for films and TV series simple entertainment, a way of escaping life instead of exploring it. However, if a film or TV series is good, it can make people empathise with other completely different approaches to life to the point that they can modify, enhance, and improve their own. As scriptwriter Robert McKee remarks, films are not an escape from reality, but rather the opposite, "a vehicle that guides us in our comprehension of reality, our best ally to make some sense and coherence out of the anarchy of existence" (1993, 5-6).

Teaching and projecting queer cinema during both academic years 2018-19 and 2019-20, firstly in the assembly hall of the University of the Balearic Islands, and then in Palma's Arthouse Cinema, meant providing cinematographic referents to students who might be afraid of expressing their sexual orientation or identity out of fear of being rejected just for being different. From September to

Juny, the first Friday of each month at 7pm, a film screening was held that was preceded by an interview with an LGBTIQ+ activist or expert with knowledge of the particular topic of each film, in order that students could also meet real and not only fictional referents, queer survivors who have bravely and successfully defied gender normativity. *Aules sense Armaris* became a university space of freedom, debate, and critical thinking, where students, LGBTIQ+ activists, and spectators interacted and celebrated diversity in all its forms.

## 2. The Selection of Films and Activist Guests: Organizing *Aules sense Armaris*

*Aules sense Armaris: Cinema LGBTIQA+ a la UIB* started in September 2018 as a modest project that would take place monthly during the academic year 2018-19 as part of the cultural activities organized by the Vice-chancellorship of Cultural Projection and the Cultural Activities Office of the University of the Balearic Islands. The film sessions did not take place on the main campus on the outskirts of Palma, but in the assembly hall of a university building located in the city centre in order to make it easier for people to attend on a Friday night. The film forum was advertised as a golden opportunity to watch good LGBTIQ+ cinema for free but also to emphasise the opportunity for reflection provided by post-screening discussion of the films and key aspects in the historical fight for LGBTIQ+ rights with the invited queer activists from the field of culture.

The selection of the films that were projected was not easy, as it was made following some basic but essential criteria. Firstly, the identity indicated by each and every letter and symbol in the acronym LGBTIQ+ had to be represented in at least one film during each year-long program. Secondly, the nationality of the films was important in order to avoid an exclusively Eurocentric or Western approach. *Aules sense Armaris* was guided by postcolonial concerns and tried to include films with different alternative perspectives and with directors from each continent. In this respect, the film workshop was theoretically framed within what Schoonover and Galt explain in detail in *Queer Cinema in the World*: queerness takes its place on a world stage, and non-Western LGBTIQ+ independent cinema is the perfect—sometimes the only—occasion to make non-Western queer desire visible on a global scale (2016, 1). In this way, *Aules sense Armaris* accepted the challenge of representing queerness crossculturally. Another key factor taken into account when selecting the films was that there should be significant representation of women directors in the program. According to the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, women only accounted for 4 percent of director's working on the top 100 grossing films in 2018 (Lauzen 2020, 1). *Aules sense Armaris* deliberately broke this celluloid glass ceiling, and the films directed by women that were projected and discussed in fact outnumbered

those directed by men. The films selected also had to pass the Vito Russo Test, which means that the film contains a character that is identifiably LGBTIQ+, who is not solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity, and who is involved in the plot to the extent that their removal would have a significant effect, meaning that the character has not simply added to provide colourful commentary in an act of pink washing or to reach a quota: the character must matter (“The Vito Russo Test” 2014). . And finally, another essential criterion was the cinematographic quality of the films chosen, which were required to have unquestionable aesthetic features.

Starting with lesbian representations, the selected films were: *Carol* (2015), which narrates the hidden love story between a well-off older married woman and a young women working temporarily in a department store in 1950s America; *Rafiki* (2018), which depicts the romance between two young women in Kenya amidst family and social pressures; and *The Hours* (2002), which shows three different women in the 1920s, 1950s and 2000s, whose lives are interconnected by Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Sometimes the films included characters that cannot easily be categorized (as relating to one single letter in the acronym, fortunately). That is the case of *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), which shows a longtime lesbian marriage that falls into crisis when one of the women has an affair with a man, and which, along with lesbian identity, allowed the introduction of bisexuality and bisexual concerns into the film series. The couple in this film are also raising two teenagers, which left space to consider and celebrate same-sex parents and diverse families. Other examples of multiple letters being addressed by a film were *OPride* (2014), which depicts how a group of lesbian and gay activists supported miners during the 1981 miners’ strike in UK, and *Milk* (2008), a biopic of the US gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk, showing how he was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in the US with the help of his team formed by gay men and a young lesbian woman. Both films allowed the introduction of the notion of what LGBTIQ+ activism really is and how it can be carried out in order to make changes in society.

Regarding gay representations, they were always linked to other points of focus, which differed depending on the film: through *Happy Together* (1997), a turbulent love story between two Chinese immigrants in Argentina, we provided an opportunity for the discussion of migration and homosexuality and queer love-hate relationships; with *Moonlight* (2016), which depicts the difficulties of an African American boy from a drug slam in the US to accept his sexual orientation, we explored coming out of the closet in hostile environments and racism intersecting with homosexuality; through *Before Night Falls* (2000), a biopic of Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas who went into exile in the US, we explored and analysed the concept of “sexile”, that is, going into exile because

of your sexual orientation or identity, and the difficulties it involves. Reinaldo Arenas died of AIDS, so we also addressed the topics of HIV and AIDS during the debates, as we also did with *And the Band Played On* (1993), which shows the doctors and social workers involved in dealing with the first cases of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s in the US; with *Gods and Monsters* (1998), which depicts a retired gay film director who falls in love with his young pool man, we analysed aging in the gay community; and finally, with *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), a film that portrays the love story between a teenager and a young man in the 1980s in Italy, we explored coming-of-age romances and their intricacies when they belong to the LGBTIQ+ community.

In order to explore and comment on trans men representations, we projected *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), a biopic of Brandon Teena, a young trans man from Nebraska who attempted to find himself but became the victim of a brutal hate crime; and *Tomboy* (2011), the story of 10-year-old Laure whose family moves to a new neighbourhood where Laure says that his name is Michael, and spends his summer enjoying his new male identity until the school year starts and the problems begin. Regarding trans women representations, we watched and analysed: *Transamerica* (2005), the story of a trans woman who is refused genital reassignment surgery unless she confronts her past ties and goes on a road trip with her long-lost teenage gay escort son; and *Tangerine* (2015), a dark comedy about two African American trans women in LA on Christmas Day. We addressed trans children and their families with the film *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), which tells the story of a child who is seen by family and community as a boy, but is vocally insistent that she is a girl. Finally, we approached and gave visibility to the most unknown letter of the acronym, that is, the I of Intersexuality, through two films: *XXY* (2007), the story of a 15-year-old intersex girl who has to cope with her circumstances and define her own identity in a society that is not prepared for her individuality; and *El último verano de la boyita* (2009), which narrates how a teenage intersex boy hides his difference in rural Argentina.

The generosity and warmth of the LGBTIQ+ activists that came to the cinema seminars to discuss the films with the students and spectators and share their life experiences was overwhelming. They were responsible for creating an inspiring atmosphere in each session and for interacting so well with the public, generating critical thinking, and serving as examples of queer survivors to the audience. Tatiana Casado, who is the current President of *Benamics*, the LGBTIQ+ Association of the Balearic Islands, came with her wife and queer writer Teresa Gispert to talk about their family—they have a daughter—and the different ways of practicing activism, a topic that was also approached in depth by the former President of *Benamics*, Jan Gómez at another screening. Child psychologist Jaume Pascual and his husband, History teacher Enrique

Sánchez also talked about their two adopted sons, and what is involved in the adoption process. Introducing the students to these two examples of same-sex marriages with children was essential to the discussion of the topic of diverse families. Venezuelan illustrator Ricardo Useche described what it meant to be a gay immigrant in our country, and Saharan activist Nafi Brahim Salem shared what being non-binary is like within their religious circle. Joan Lluís Lull, who is the President of ALAS, the AIDS Association of the Balearic Islands, came with current Head of Internal Medicine in Son Espases Hospital, Dr. Sión Riera, to explain to us how different combating AIDS and HIV was in the 1980s from living with HIV today. Valentín Elorza and Leo Albuquerque shared their life experiences and activism as trans men, and Angela Ponce, the first trans woman to be elected to participate in the Miss Universe beauty pageant, also explained to us that for her, the best part of the fame that the pageant brought with it was allowing her to become an advocate for LGBTIQ+ rights. Africa Pastor, Founder and President of *Fundación Daniaela*, an association that gives support to trans children's families, described all the work that her organization carries out. And finally, activist Mari Carmen Díaz and her intersex daughter introduced us to the intersex community's fight, concerns and worries.

The project was a local success—it made the TV news and was reported on in local newspapers and on the radio—and also in terms of the numbers of people who attended each film seminar. This great reception led to *Aules sense Armaris* being extended to the academic year 2019-20, along with significant improvements. Due to the large number of spectators, the film sessions were relocated to a very special cinema in the city centre of Palma, that of the *Centre Cultural Sa Nostra*, where most important film forums have traditionally been held. In addition, *Aules sense Armaris* became part of the academic R&D regional project “Poetics of Activism: Cultural and Literary Intersectionalities in English Language in the Contemporary World” (GV/2019/134), which brings together scholars from the University of Alicante, the University of the Balearic Islands and the University of Santander who have similar interests in practicing activism as part of the academic courses they teach on. Another achievement was that the students that participated in *Aules Sense Armaris* 2019-20 received credit points that were equivalent to any other of their university courses, and, finally, the positive evaluation of the 2018-19 edition by the *Conselleria d'Educació*, which programs official workshops for teachers, meant that the 2019-20 edition of *Aules Sense Armaris* involved not only students but also primary, secondary and high school teachers, who received 30 hours of training for attending the workshop and participating in the debates with the LGBTIQ+ activists and the rest of the audience. These teachers' final task for the workshop was to include in their own classes a teaching unit based on the projection and discussion of an LGBTIQ+

film of their choice—but not one of those from the workshop—with their own students. The ultimate goal of both editions of *Aules Sense Armaris* was to carry out LGBTIQ+ activism from the university context, by making hidden social realities in the classroom visible. By projecting and discussing LGBTIQ+ films we have tried to drive our university students' artistic and ethic development so that they can experience their own sexual individuality and that of their classmates with respect, awareness, and joy.

### 3. Conclusions: Results from Interaction in *Aules Sense Armaris*

In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault exposed his genealogical method that aimed “to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework” (1988, 117). Literary theorist Bertens also approached the construction of identities under historiographical concerns, and underlined that “literature does not simply reflect relations of power, but actively participates in the consolidation and/or construction of discourses and ideologies, just as functions as an instrument in the construction of identities, not only at the individual level—that of the subject—but also on the level of the group or even that of the national state. Literature is not simply a product of history; it also actively makes history” (2008, 140).

Similarly, LGBTIQ+ films do not simply make visible realities that exist in the street, real life experiences that are mostly unknown by cis heteronormative people; queer cinema actively contributes to creating a more diverse society by giving voice and cultural presence to minorities who have been, and are often still, silenced and subjugated. As Marzábal and Arocena remark in *Películas para la educación (Films for Education)*, in our current plural and open society, cinema offers itself as the ideal territory to re-build our reality. They underline that the best way of learning is by interaction, by contrasting ideas and discourses, and that cinema forums encourage this kind of debate (2016, 15). The interaction that took place among university students, LGBTIQ+ activists, teachers and spectators in *Aules sense Armaris* was extremely fruitful.

One of the lessons that all participants in *Aules Sense Armaris* realized during the two year-long workshops is that each letter in the acronym LGBTIQ+ not only has its own external fight, but also has its own internal battles. In the case of the L, being a woman and a lesbian implies a double burden to fight against within the current heteropatriarchal system. Lesbians' principal concern proved to be the constant need to combat the pervasive male gaze that sees a lesbian couple as another (doubly) female object to be consumed. As Mulvey underlines in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the entire history of cinema has mostly been developed by guiding the spectators through this male gaze that

has promoted the objectification of women (1975, 6-18). Within the gay men's terrain, combating homonormativity, pink capitalism, and sissyphobia seemed the most necessary issues to tackle. Society still prefers manly gays, because their sexual dissidence remains invisible, and that prejudice and discrimination is also very present within the gay community itself. As flirting apps demonstrate with the omnipresent "masc x masc", a lot of gays seek a masculine guy as a partner, whether for casual sex or a relationship. As Halperin suggests in *How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality*: "Men liked other men to be rough and tough. They may have liked their women and boys to be soft and smooth, but they did not respect these qualities in a mature man." Halperin adds/also notes that there is a "hierarchical world of the sexual penetration of subordinate males by superordinate males," and denounces the still existing bottomphobia referring to how being anally penetrated has historically been "one of the most flagrant violations of the protocols of manhood" (2002, 112-22). Combatting these stereotypes and encouraging alternative masculinities that oppose the hegemonic, toxic one currently portrayed was one aim of *Aules sense Armaris*.

Concerning bisexual people, the main conclusion reached in the post-film discussion was that not only were they usually not understood outside the LGBTIQ+ community, because heteronormative people often considered them perverts, neither were they within the LGBTIQ+ community, where bisexuals were usually seen as passing through a temporary stage or not brave enough to assume their gay or lesbian orientation. As Angelides remarks in "A History of Bisexuality," bisexuality has historically functioned as the *other* to more traditional notions of sexual identity, thus undermining the binary categories of hetero- and homosexuality. Indeed, Angelides extolls the concept of "queer" arguing that queer studies have provided a new discursive space where the category of bisexuality has for the first time found a welcoming space for the articulation of its identity (2001, 199).

Regarding trans people, a frequent topic that appeared during the post-film discussions was how trans men often have to confront cis men's discrimination against them for not being "truly men" or for being in the process of sexual reassignment. As Halberstam mentions in *Female Masculinity*, female-to-male transsexual discourses, when elaborated from queer perspectives, can purposely defy hegemonic forms of masculinity to embrace the category of transgender as a progressive one that promises dialogue and cohabitation in gender-queer worlds (1998, 13). In the film forum discussion trans women guests and spectators identified that their main fights were their complete integration into the entire spectrum of the labour market, and their battle with intolerant and narrow-minded TERFs (Trans Excluding Radical Feminists) who exclude trans women from feminist acts or demonstrations. In this respect, Stone's "Empire Strikes

Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” which is considered the founding text of transfeminism, was very present in various film discussions, as on a number of occasions excerpts were read out and commented on: for example, Stone’s argument that “we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body” (1988, 13). Finally, the film workshop revealed that Intersex people’s fights and concerns are mostly unknown, both within and without the LGBTIQ+ community. According to Morland in “What Can Queer Theory do for Intersex,” the fact that the nerves in intersex people’s genitalia have usually been damaged by surgery several times during their childhood and without their consent accounts for the problematic effects of intersex surgery (2009, 285). The audience of *Aules sense Armaris* agreed with intersex children’s parents who spoke at the film forum that genital surgery immediately after birth should these days be forbidden until the intersex child as a teenager is capable of deciding whether to undergo surgery or not.

One last topic that gave rise to hot and interesting discussion during many of the film sessions was the concept of “queer.” Some people within the LGBTIQ+ community rejected the term “queer” assuring that it was an umbrella that encompassed too many identities, and they preferred to stick to—or make use of—only their specific letter in the acronym and fight exclusively for that letter’s rights. Some other LGBTIQ+ people, on the contrary, accepted the term “queer” as another non-binary option of understanding sexual orientation and gender identity, while there were also those who endorsed the letter Q as a new paradigm of thinking about sexuality because of its quintessential intersectional nature. As Hall and Jagose remark in the Introduction of *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, which they edited, queerness addresses the ways in which various categories of difference such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and nationality inflect and transform each other. They highlight that queer learning studies and teaching approaches the formation of sexuality alongside race, citizenship and diasporic identities “in order to demonstrate the significant ways in which sexual and racial identities are inextricable” (2013, xvii-xviii). Indeed, endorsing queer anti-identitarianism facilitates the fight not only for each letter’s interests, but for the entire LGBTIQ+ community’s worries in a more empathic way. As a general conclusion regarding all these related concerns to each letter in the acronym LGBTIQ+, the film forum discussions proved that each letter has its own fight and claims, although there is a common battle that affects the entire LGBTIQ+ community and it is to achieve a better legislation to protect all its members.

To sum up, the most important point to come out of the two editions of *Aules Sense Armaris* is that the university context proved to be the perfect territory in which activist proposals, in this case an LGBTIQ+ film workshop, can be

carried out as a means to promote critical thinking and social change. As Huerta remarks, this is exactly what “transeducate” consists in: addressing education towards social change in defence of human rights (2016, 16).

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