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Being Queer in Turkish Cinema: Existence, Appearance, and Representation

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Abstract

Queer representations in cinema are both influenced by and reflective of local or global cultures. In the context of Turkish cinema, patriarchal Turkish culture often negatively impacts the portrayal of queer identities. These portrayals tend to reflect society's view of queers rather than illustrating their actual place within society. This study examines the evolution of queer representation in Turkish cinema from its inception to the present, highlighting queer identities and representation issues through the lens of Judith Butler's queer theory.

Keywords: Turkish cinema; queer theory; gender studies; representation; Judith Butler

Being Queer in Turkish Cinema: Existence, Appearance, and Representation[1]

Övünç Ege

Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response.

Judith Butler

Introduction

Defining language merely as a means of expression for daily communication misses the ideological dimension inherent in the concept. Language is fundamental to the construction of a subject, often coded to carry the dominant view surrounding the individual and shaping matters accordingly. The marginalization, isolation, or suppression of individuals who deviate from dominant codes is not only achieved through (referring to Althusser) *ideological state apparatuses* and *repressive state apparatuses*. It is also realized by individuals who internalize these dominant codes discursively and through certain practices. Thus, masculine language has ceased to be exclusively the language of men and has become the language of all individuals (regardless of assigned sex[2]) who reproduce it.

The marginalized individuals can deconstruct it by using the language of the dominant discourse that marginalizes them. Their critical attitude and resistance toward the dominant language allow them to redefine terms that previously carried negative connotations, such as

humiliation, judgment, or condescension. This deconstruction places them in a position of questioning, suggesting that the ruler is not natural or eternal but constructed. Linguistic and discursive resistance against the dominant group eliminates insulting words directed at them, enabling them to define themselves and normalize their presence in the public sphere.

The semantic transformation of the term *queer*, initially used derogatorily for gay American soldiers, into a theory defining LGBTQIA+[3] and rejecting hegemonic binary gender identities and sexual orientations, illustrates a broader transformation in various fields, including daily life, theory, culture, politics, and economics. *Queer* encompasses everyone marginalized due to their gender identity and sexual orientation within the context of domination, uniting disadvantaged groups.

Today, *queer* is used both among LGBTQIA+ and in academic literature, reversing its homophobic connotations. The transformation of the word's meaning signifies more than just a political stance against the pejorative connotation of marginalized people who reject heteronormativity. Individuals identifying as queer demonstrate that they cannot be marginalized through social codes or excluded for not conforming to masculine-coded norms. As Özkazanç points out, queer nomenclature is based on a new perspective on the relationship between subjectivity, identity, and politics, not merely a simple gay and lesbian politics (Özkazanç, 2018,

p. 98). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the political position of *queer* and its resistance to the word's original meaning to grasp the concept, theory, and individuals who identify with different gender identities and sexual orientations.

Mainstream cinema is often consciously blind to queer. The cinema industry puts heteronormative narratives at the center to reach a wider audience (Hernández-Pérez and Sánchez-Soriano, 2023). As Chitra (2023, p. 1127) noted, "during the nineties, any mainstream representation that the LGBTQI+ communities received was limited to merely stereotypes that were custom-made exclusively for humor and ridicule". This trend extends beyond the nineties, with cinema often hostile to queer in the areas where it gives them visibility. It presents representations that reinforce their otherness, legitimize systematic violence against them, and strengthen social judgments. Consequently, studies examining these representations are scarce in existing literature due to the limited quantity in cinema.

Language is essential for understanding the implicit meanings of representations and the codes they reproduce. The way a group is represented, or not represented, in society provides ideological data for media analysis. This study focuses on queer representations that reinforce *other*ness in Turkish cinema, exploring why they are underrepresented, and the problems associated with their representation.

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Using the systematic review method, this study analyzes data within the framework of feminist discourse, centering queer theory. During the evaluation phase, films are categorized and discussed based on common contexts, including visual images that enrich the discourse and findings. This study explores the relationship between Turkish cinema, queer theory, and queer representation, discussing whether the theory reflects its political claims. The reflection of LGBTQIA+ representations in cinema shows how these views are coded and society's attitude toward queer. The research aims to determine the meaning of queer theory and how queer representations are depicted in Turkish queer cinema. Therefore, films from *Leblebici Horhor Aga* (the first Turkish film featuring a man in women's clothing) to *Aile Arasında* (the most recent example from the study period) are analyzed. The selected films feature LGBTQIA+ protagonists and center queer existence in their narratives.

Throughout this study, "queer" will refer to LGBTQIA+, and queer theory, in its narrowest form, will be addressed as a theory opposing binary gender stereotypes and examining the political aspects of the subjectivation process.

Queer Theory and Cinema

Queer is not a term confined to a specific category or class; instead, it signifies cultural changes and transformations through its ambiguity and flexibility. As Annamarie Jagose (1996, p.1)

states, “Once the term ‘queer’ was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse.” In this context, the domination intended to be established on the class that the concept pointed to in the first days of its emergence was an attack on the right to life, even in the “best” scenario. The definition of “queer”, built on the hegemonic masculinity codes, was initially coded as derogatory, discriminatory, and marginalizing. These people were separated by being coded as *the other* by the hegemonic masculinity codes accepted by society. This separation brought hate speech with it.

Queer theory’s central critique targets the patriarchal matrix that marginalizes individuals for not conforming to hegemonic masculinity codes. The queer theory encompasses everyone who “thinks queer”, but does not become homogeneous with this coverage. It advocates for individuals with diverse identities, orientations, and characteristics to exist within society, drawing its essence from this uncertainty and heterogeneity. Consequently, queer studies is a constantly evolving and transforming field, complicating discussions on queer theory. Due to the concept’s inherent ambiguity, it has been described as “always ambiguous, always relational, it has been described as ‘a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory’” (Warner, 1992, as cited by Jagose, 1996, p.96).

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The historical transformation of the definition of "queer" demonstrates that gender identities, sexual orientations, and the subject cannot be fixed in any static position. Individuals are classified as male or female based on the sex assigned at birth. Gender, which is socially constructed based on this assigned sex, is also built on binary opposition. This binary framework marginalizes those with different gender identities and sexual orientations. "Queer theorists focus on linguistic binaries (e.g., heterosexual/homosexual) and the ways in which these conceptual oppositions are power relations that construct normality versus deviance and thereby function to regulate and punish" (Oswald et al., 2009, p. 44). In patriarchal societies, the central position of power is held by males, while women, LGBTQIA+, and subaltern men are excluded from this center. This marginalization arises from the fixation of sexual characteristics within two opposing categories. However, as Raewyn Connell (1987, p.224) notes, "it is not necessary to suppose a succession of dominant character types to analyse changes in motivation and personality organisation". Defining gender based on characteristics associated with assigned sex limits the visibility of diversity.

Queer theory can be seen as a framework concept formed within feminist discourse, opposing the heteronormative binary gender stereotypes established by masculine language. It is inevitably shaped in opposition to the dominant discourse. The evolution of the concept of *queer*

shows that it has come to encompass not only LGBTQIA+ but also everyone who *thinks queer*, reflecting the ambiguity and resistance inherent in the term. Alev Özkazanç (2018, p.107) defines *queer* as "the search for a new political subjectivity in which the question of subjectivity and identity is specifically concerned, not as the name of a new and coherent theory or coherent identity." A consistent understanding of identity is coded, produced, and reproduced by the dominant discourse, which requires identification within the binary gender pattern of male and female. The dominant discourse normalizes only heterosexuality, excluding all other sexual orientations and gender identities from the norm.

Queer theory opposes the fixation of identity through normative codes, as immobilizing its meaning would undermine its constitutive nature. Similarly, rigidly defining *queer* would trivialize inherent differences and mimic the patriarchal and heteronormative systems it critiques. Therefore, it is crucial for queer theory that "difference" exists not in a pejorative sense but as a fundamental aspect.

Queer holds political significance because its understanding of subjectivity lies outside the codes of the dominant patriarchal view. The dominant patriarchal language/discourse defines individuals within a binary gender system, thereby dominating them. Through coding, it becomes a learned sociological attitude dictating that individuals should conform to the dominant

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discourse. However, focusing solely on gender risks ignoring the existence of other sexual identities beyond men and women. Hence, assigned sex, like gender, is a problematic concept and a foundation of hegemonic relations.

Concealing the construction process of identity also obscures the fact that domination affects everyone, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. The invisibility of this construction by power structures, while marginalized classes are ignored or targeted by hate speech, highlights the ideological dimension of gender construction. This situation persists in media content, reflecting the social view of marginalized classes. While the legitimization of hate speech in cinema does not directly transform society, it reinforces stereotypes over time. For example, as Cemre Nur Meleke and Serpil Kırel (2016, p. 307) state, despite the increasing representation in Turkish cinema after the 90s, hate speech and homophobia against LGBTQIA+ have remained prevalent in many films. Consequently, increased representation in cinema does not positively influence societal attitudes; instead, the nature of the representation shapes societal perceptions negatively.

Didem Aşcı (2020, p.174) notes, “The queer movement’s strategy of using its language against power is also a situation that should not be skipped because the most fundamental criticism of queer theory is to create a discourse on breaking the dominant discourse”. By

deconstructing and repositioning hurtful expressions used by dominant discourse, queer theory invalidates the discriminatory attitude of that discourse. Although the dominant discourse attempts to fix the subject in an unfavorable position through the definition of *queer*, the subject redefines the term, transforming it into an empty signifier of the dominant discourse. The point at which queer breaks the ruler's discourse is where it recodes language. This transformation in meaning-making does not devalue LGBTQIA+; rather, it is the negative words directed at them that are devalued.

The spread of *Lubunca*[4] among LGBTQIA+ and the subsequent deconstruction of masculine language can be seen as a way of asserting their existence against dominant power structures. This deconstruction undermines the masculine language, which is fundamental in constructing subjectivity, because Lubunca is not built on masculine codes. By not having to express themselves in the ruler's language, LGBTQIA+ using Lubunca subvert their subordination and find their own voice. In cinema, the use of *Lubunca* by some LGBTQIA+ characters (such as in *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar*[5]) demonstrates that the marginalized are given a platform to represent themselves.

According to Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (2010, p.37), cinematic representations reflect the culture they are part of, and these representations are internalized, becoming part of

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individual identity. Cinema functions as both a carrier and reproducer of culture. Considering the social dimensions of this reproduction process, the political positions of these representations become evident. The media, particularly cinema, does not merely depict what society wants to see but also plays a role in constructing social reality. “Homosexuals and transgender people are usually depicted in the media in the context of criminal or judicial incidents” (Güner, 2015, p. 33). By constructing social reality, media stereotypes societal differences through ideological coding, thus homogenizing society to an extent while isolating those deemed as “others”.

Critical debates in the field of gender studies concerning cinema and representation in Turkey generally focus on the roles and representations of femininity (Özen, 2021; Doğan, 2020) and masculinity (Büyücek, 2024; Gürkan & Ege, 2023; Gültekin, 2020). This focus arises from the creation of representations based on gender stereotypes and the lack of adequate representation opportunities for LGBTQIA+. The scarcity of LGBTQIA+ representations is not because they are a minority in society, but due to the masculine structure of the dominant discourse. The “minorities” in the representation system are coded in specific patterns, excluding their differences within the class seen as minorities. This results in their marginalization and isolation from society based on these differences.

One of the main problems with representations is the stereotyping of the people and groups they reflect. As a result, people may accept the reality portrayed by these representations as social reality, overlooking the "real" problems faced by the represented community in the social field. They might also mistakenly believe that these stereotyped identities reflect all women, men, or LGBTQIA+ in society.

"A queer reading of a film exposes the hidden desires between members of the same sex" (Butler, 2005, p.91). Even when gender identities and/or sexual orientations are not explicitly shown in films, audiences often interpret representations as *queer* based on societal constructions that label masculine women and feminine men as *homosexual*. The close relationship between two characters of the same assigned sex in films is often interpreted as *homosexuality*. "Effeminacy, cross-dressing, particular walks and postures, a taste for show tunes and so on can be taken as signifiers of homosexuality, but not all homosexuals fit these stereotypes, and not all who do are homosexual" (Butler, 2005, p.93). Similarly, the masculine dressing or behavior of a female character does not necessarily indicate that the character is homosexual. Interpreting representations without a clear statement of identity and orientation is problematic in queer theory.

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Problems with the Representation of Queer Identities

When examining the issues of representation in cinema through the lens of gender inequality, several areas of concern emerge. These include the inherent masculinity of the camera, the director, the cinematic language, and the spoken language in society. The gaze in cinema, and consequently its codes, is both masculine and ideological. The camera's gaze, which captures the pro-filmic event (Mulvey, 2009: 721), reflects the director's perspective. In this context, the director's gaze, shaped by cultural codes, intertwines with the masculinity of the camera. These masculine principles, often mediated and reinforced, are reinterpreted by audiences who have internalized these codes, thereby perpetuating the existing male-centric viewpoint in society.

As Mulvey (2009: 715) states, "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly". Similarly, the male gaze transfers its "power" to LGBTQIA+ representations, shaping them to affirm this power and reinforcing its dominance through media. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ characters become stereotypes coded by the male gaze's perspective.

In mainstream cinema, "acceptable" sexual orientations are shaped by heteronormative codes and are confined to the heterosexual matrix. Identities, orientations, and characteristics outside the traditional male-female binary are marginalized, and their societal challenges often

go unrepresented in cinema. Queer identities in cinema—and more broadly in media—are frequently confined to the comedy genre. Although the narrative genre is not comedy, the representations of LGBTQIA+ are "different" from those in the story and are usually inserted into the narrative to make them laugh. Depictions of male characters as feminine or female characters as masculine are often coded as abnormal, and such portrayals are typically depicted as humorous, socially excluded, or deserving of misfortune.

Stereotyped representations of queer reinforce systemic violence against LGBTQIA+ in society. Queer are often viewed as "the other" within the social sphere. Additionally, queer stereotypes place these people in an "other of the other" position within media portrayals, perpetuating ongoing psychological violence. Identity, however, is not singular, fixed, or homogeneous. Exposing queer to what it avoids explicitly—the desire to improve its meaning in this way—devalues LGBTQIA+ in the other position.

Defining *queer* through media representations is problematic due to the inherent complexities and the tendency to confine the identity to a fixed position. As Jagose (1996, p. 101) notes, "Queer is markedly unlike those traditional political movements which ground themselves in a fixed and necessarily exclusionist identity". Including queer representations in the cinema, especially in supporting roles and/or a small part of the narrative, into a fixed and isolated

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identity from society shows cinema's ideological and political dimension. According to Butler (1993, p.226), the term *queer* is a linguistic practice that aims to shame both the subject it calls and the subject it establishes, and *queer* takes its power from this adverse situation. Although LGBTQIA+'s self-identification as queer challenges the pejorative connotations of the term, the persistent negative perspective within the representation system is a result of stereotypes perpetuated by the masculine gaze.

According to Butler (2002, p.185), "the subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not* a *founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition…".* In this context, neither the ruler's labeling of an individual as queer nor the stereotypes in cinema are decisive in constructing the subject. LGBTQIA+ do not *become queer* simply because others call them that. However, the dominant discourse and codes become widespread in society through repetition, teaching that identity "should be so" by reproducing existing masculine codes.

The gendered subject, intended to be established through these codes and stereotypes, is ultimately "impossible to establish" in the way the power structure desires. Butler's discussion of the discursive construction of the subject aligns with Foucault's discussion of power, demonstrating that issues of sex and gender are political and ideological constructions. As

Özdoyran (2020, p. 1034) states, “Foucault’s theory has critical importance for Butler in the context of the process of *objectifying the subjective* as a disciplinary mechanism and normative power relations as the dominant actor of this process”.

The reproduction of the heteronormative matrix through cinematic stereotypes abstracts the existing patriarchal system, presenting it as a “natural” and “correct” structure, thereby positioning men above women and LGBTQIA+ in patriarchal power relations. What the power structure constructs is not the subject itself but the codes of femininity and masculinity.

The subjectivation process of the individual through gender identity involves subordination via discursively produced female or male identities. As Butler (1997a, p. 83) notes, “The term “subjectivation” carries the paradox in itself: *assujettissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency”.

This dilemma of subjectivation shows that identities in the social sphere are subject to the dominant view and/or power. Although identities may seem independent, they depend on the codes and mechanisms that construct them. This situation requires a deeper understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation. Power subordination does not change the individual’s

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identity but alters the meaning. Although the individual must conform to power and its laws to be autonomous and is defined through power codes, their characteristics, identity, and orientation remain unchanged by these codes.

The individual's sense of belonging to society and its culture is realized through the language of the dominant and/or power structure, coded as hegemonic. According to Ayşe Öncü and Petra Weyland (2010, p. 28), cultural affiliations are not merely expressions of identity/difference demands in the postmodern sense but products of power struggles that define hierarchical relations. The coexistence of different identities and cultures is fundamental to heterogeneous societies, yet these cultural affiliations also engage in hegemonic relationships. Minority and/or disadvantaged groups struggling for living space are positioned as lower class by the ruling power. This is why queers are portrayed as wrong, incomplete, or passive. The absence of queer representation does not mean that power structures do not see them, but that they ignore them.

"In our cinema, directors have struggled for a long time against censorship to represent individuals who experience sexuality differently" (Akser, 2016, p. 64). This highlights the inherent oppositional stance of queer thinking and its resistance to prohibition. Considering films where the discursive construction of the subject and its mediated reconstruction through

representations are evident, we can ask: Can the subaltern construct the ruler's language against the ruler? Does subaltern representation, shown as defenseless, play a founding role in this context?

Returning to Butler's discussion of agency helps answer these questions through representations. "Because Butler sees this vulnerability as a constitutive and positive condition, not as something that can be overcome, she attempts to explain the subject's agency in terms of this condition. According to her, the condition of subalternity is not what prevents the subject's agency, but what makes it possible" (Özkazanç, 2018, p.47).

The subject's resistance to subordination does not have to reproduce it within the context of "the subject's subordination to power," as Butler suggests. Opposition to the ruler and the ruler's discourse is not about reproducing power or accepting subordination, but rather about questioning it and redirecting the disadvantaged situation to a positive position. This favorable stance can maintain its positive status through representations and ideologies that encode representations or can shift towards a hostile area.

The resistance of filmmakers and queer representations against the dominant narrative highlights that power dynamics are being questioned. These representations act as a form of

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resistance by pushing beyond conventional boundaries and creating space for alternative narratives and identities. The variations in queer portrayals in films demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ in society are neither fixed nor objective. These representations reflect not the subjectivization process of LGBTQIA+ but how society perceives or wants to perceive them through social codes.

The ambiguous relationships between two women or two men, even when their sexual orientation is not explicitly stated, often encode the characters as lesbian or gay to the audience. Additionally, male characters using items traditionally attributed to women and female characters using items attributed to men are often labeled as "homosexual representations" in the literature. The portrayal of these characters, often defined as "masculine women" or "feminine men," reveals not only a problem within the literature but also a broader issue of representation and a lack of understanding of *queer* in society.

Defining the friendship between two close friends as a homosexual relationship reinforces the relationship codes established by the heterosexual matrix. This stereotyping, known as *queer coding*, underscores the significance of how cinema representations are coded. In *queer coding*, the character is not explicitly identified as queer; instead, the audience is made to feel this through various cues. These cues include behaviors that deviate from traditionally assigned

gender norms, close friendships between characters of the same gender, and, most subtly and crucially, through camera techniques. For instance, *İki Genç Kız* (Ataman, 2005) should be seen as a friendship movie when considered independently of the book, within the context of *queer coding.*

Queer representations in media are generally limited to lesbian, gay, and transgender identities, often neglecting other gender identities, sexual orientations, and characteristics[6]. Feminine men or masculine women, interpreted through heteronormative codes, are automatically labeled as homosexual. Transgenders are frequently portrayed as societal outcasts who *deserve* their exclusion. These portrayals depict gender identities and sexual orientations as diseases needing correction or change due to traumatic events. Defining an individual through gay, lesbian, or other identities and orientations, especially if the person does not identify as *queer*, exemplifies systematic violence. Coding a representation in cinema as LGBTQIA+ based solely on appearance or personality traits is a reductionist approach.

Queer Identities in Turkish Cinema

When discussing queer cinema, we refer to "a pluralistic cinema created by a rich collection of gender and sexuality-oriented films" (Ulusay, 2011, p. 12). The selected films encompass

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Turkish queer cinema from the first LGBTQIA+ representation in literature to the most recent film at the time of the study. The sample selection focused on ensuring that LGBTQIA+ representation was central to the narrative.

Historical Transformation and Queer Coding

LGBTQIA+ representation in Turkish cinema has evolved to reflect changing social attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Some of the earliest films identified in the literature should be considered examples of queer coding. Over time, LGBTQIA+ have begun to find more space in cinema, although these representations often rely on and reproduce stereotypes. However, there are also portrayals that reflect and critique social realities.

As Yayla (2019, p. 23) notes, before the films containing the first LGBTQIA+ characters known in Turkey were made, the tendency was to understand queer themes through certain films . While these early representations are considered queer in the literature, defining the characters as LGBTQIA+ using today's terminology can be problematic, which highlights one of the issues in the literature. “Gender reassignment in Turkish cinema first appeared during the period of operetta films. ... Cingöz in the same movie, dressed as a woman” (Özgüç, 1988, p. 39). However, *Leblebici Horhor Aga* (Ertuğrul, 1923), which Özgüç (1988, p. 40) identifies as the

first film with a "transvestite" representation in Turkish cinema, should not be considered a representation of a "transvestite" or "transsexual" character.

As the definition of *queer* has evolved, so has the definition of transvestism. This change is linked to how individuals define themselves. *Transvestites* were once defined as "people who enjoy using items associated with the opposite sex, wearing the clothes of the opposite sex, and exhibiting behaviors of the gender they wish to belong to" (Kaos GL, 2006). Today, this has been replaced by the broader term "trans." "Transgender refers to a situation where a person's gender identity does not match their assigned sex" (Cinsel Şiddetle Mücadele Derneği (The Association for Struggle Against Sexual Violence), n.d.). In the movie, there are two reasons why male characters dress as women: first, to protect Horhor's daughter, Fadime, and second, to hide the kidnapped Fadime from her father. Both reasons are problematic because they portray women as passive and in need of male protection. Additionally, the film is not considered queer within the scope of this study since the male character does not wear female clothes out of personal preference.

Fıstık Gibi Maşallah (Saner, 1964), which Özgüç claims "is fundamentally based on transvestism," is also excluded from this context. Although the main characters are dressed as women, they do not represent queer. However, "many parts of the film offer insights into LGBT[7]

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identities" (Yayla, 2019, p. 27). Despite this, the film reinforces heteronormative codes with its transphobic, homophobic, and sexist narratives.

Critique of Patriarchal Matrix in Films

Patriarchal norms, dominant in traditional societies, often shape the depiction of gender and sexuality in cinema. However, some films critique these norms by presenting them as they are, shedding light on power relations and standing apart from examples that merely reproduce them.

Lola + Bilidikid (Ataman, 1999) is a remarkable example in its treatment of homophobia through LGBTQIA+ characters caught between two different cultures and the intercultural differences of the gender issues encoded by patriarchy. Lola (Gandhi Mukli) is a trans character, contrasting with earlier examples. Although assigned male at birth, Lola voluntarily wears women's clothes because he enjoys it. When Bili (Erdal Yıldız) suggests that Lola should become a woman so they can get married and have a *normal family*, Lola clearly states that he does not want that. As Kitzinger (2019, p. 478) notes, "heteronormativity is embodied in what people do rather than in their beliefs, values, ideologies, or faiths". Bili's behavior demonstrates how he has internalized heteronormative codes.

The film normalizes all sexual orientations in the social sphere, showing that LGBTQAI+ individuals can conform to masculine norms, and it sends the message that the problem is not in gender or sexual orientation but in masculine codes. Although Bili is a gay man, he does not identify as *queer*. He marginalizes German LGBTQAI+ individuals and aligns with patriarchal norms to establish his identity. Bili rejects the notion of being *the other*. According to Lola, he is already considered *the other* in society, but this does not render him normal or abnormal. Unlike Bili, Lola acknowledges that differences are not abnormal. Lola, Bili, and their immigrant LGBTQAI+ friends are culturally marginalized, excluded, and subjected to violence due to their gender identity and sexual orientation.

Queer diasporic films depict parallel societies, illustrating gay Turkish lives as marginalized within the already marginalized minority of Turkish immigrants (Poole, 2022, p. 230). *Lola + Bilidikid*, a queer diasporic film, highlights the social position of LGBTQAI+ through the lens of immigrant identity. Consequently, the resistance depicted in the movie can be seen as a challenge to hegemonic structures.

Güneşi Gördüm (Kırmızıgül, 2009) and *Zenne* (Alper and Binay, 2011) are striking examples of the pressure traditional heteronormative codes place on LGBTQAI+ and the power of family over personal rights. Both films, centered around masculinity in Turkey, demonstrate

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how traditional masculine norms influence the foundational rules of family and society. In Turkey, where gender identity and sexual orientation are seen as normative, gay representations in cinema are less visible than lesbian representations. Because gay relationships face stricter prohibitions in the patriarchal social space than lesbian relationships. Masculine codes exert the same dominance over individuals assigned male at birth. Representations that challenge these codes can prompt a reevaluation of the codes themselves.

In queer cinema, the concept of family is portrayed not as a biological entity but as a constructed structure consisting of individuals marginalized due to their gender identity or sexual orientation. As Samuel H. Allen and Shawn N. Mendez (2018, p. 76) note, "while 'genuine families' once referred only to married heterosexual partners and their biological offspring, the normative pole on the family axis of hegemonic heteronormativity now includes married lesbian and gay couples and their children, both biological and otherwise". Not only partners but also queers can come together to form a family structure. For example, "Özpetek uses the emphasis on family in almost all of his films" (Evlioğlu Gezer, 2022, p. 275). Queer families, depicted in Ferzan Özpetek's films, exemplify such families and take a critical stance towards the hegemonic heteronormative social structure.

In the early examples of Turkish cinema, LGBTQAI+ representations were shown only indirectly, and the relationships were depicted superficially. These representations have become more prominent in cinema from the late 1990s to the present. However, it must be remembered that not every representation is constructed positively. *Düş Gezginleri* (Yılmaz, 1992), *Yaşamın Kıyısında* (Akın, 2007), and *Nar* (Ünal, 2011) feature lesbian representations in their lead roles. Although *Düş Gezginleri* cannot escape stereotypes, it is significant as "the first film in the 90s, which had many firsts in the history of Turkish cinema, where the lesbian relationship was central to the film" (Yayla, 2019, p. 40). According to a study analyzing Ümit Ünal's films on hate speech, "*Nar* can be said to be one of the most positive films in the representation of LGBT in the 2000s period of Turkish Cinema" (Meleke and Kırel, 2016, p. 327).

However, when considering queer identities in Turkish cinema in general, it is striking that heteronormative codes persist, and LGBTQAI+ are often depicted through certain stereotypes. The presence of a feminine-masculine dynamic in gay and lesbian relationships (as seen in *Yaşamın Kıyısında* and *Nar* where one partner is portrayed as masculine while the other is coded as feminine) indicates that heteronormative codes are internalized. Moreover, the representations of LGBTQAI+ in many films, such as *Recep İvedik*, *Destere*, *Gora*, *Kabadayı*, *Kahpe Bizans*,

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and others, consciously or unconsciously degrade queer existence and constitute an attack against the LGBTQAI+ community.

Teslimiyet (Yalgın, 2010) includes the concept of "transvestite terrorism", a term widely emphasized pejoratively in the Turkish media in the 2000s. This term appears in the film through the language used in newspaper reports, particularly regarding Sanem (Didem Soylu) murdering Süleyman (Müfit Aytekin), who raped her. However, while the film portrays the societal belief that trans people are dangerous, it actually criticizes the masculine hegemony that produces this belief. Like other films about transgender people, *Teslimiyet* depicts trans individuals as isolated from society, living alongside other marginalized individuals and engaging in prostitution. Although this portrayal could be seen as reinforcing the marginalization of trans individuals in cinema, it realistically reflects their lives and exclusion considering the period's conditions.

According to Yüksel (2016, p. 144), *Teslimiyet* also "denies the fluidity between sexual identities and reinforces strict gender boundaries while circulating contradictory representations that can interrupt the questioning of the heteronormative order". The film suggests that heterosexual individuals who conform to social norms do not reside in Tarlabaşı, a neighborhood depicted as inhabited by *others* belonging to the lower class in hegemonic relations. This portrayal shows

that cultural belonging is maintained by drawing boundaries between *us* and *the other* (Öncü and Weyland, 2010, p. 27; Yüksel, 2016, p. 143).

Gendered Gaze, Systematic Violence, and Stereotypes

In cinematic narratives, the gendered gaze, systematic violence, and stereotyping often intersect to shape the portrayal of LGBTQAI+. This gaze is a male gaze shaped by the hegemonic masculinity criteria of society and is not only directed at women, as widely discussed in the literature. The cinema's gaze towards the LGBTQAI+ is a gaze towards *the other of the other*.

In *Ver Elini Istanbul* (Arakon, 1962) and *İki Gemi Yan Yana* (Yılmaz, 1963), there is a kissing scene between two women, marking the first lesbian intercourse scene in Turkish cinema. "Assuming that it appears more harmless or cared for in the Turkish cinema, female homosexuality took place before male homosexuality" (Kanlı, Agocuk, and Çiftçi, 2020, p.99).

"In the early years of cinema, lesbian characters were only made 'visible', especially in Hollywood cinema" (Gürkan, 2016, p.42). This visibility did not penetrate the narrative, resulting in no positive or negative reflection on the visibility of LGBTQAI+ in society. Considering the conditions of the period, making LGBTQAI+ characters visible, even if they were not central to the narrative, was a significant step. However, the increased visibility of

LGBTQAI+ in society today has changed the interpretation of these representations in contemporary films.

The first lesbian relationship theme in Turkish cinema appeared in *Haremde Dört Kadın* (Refiğ, 1965). Although the film did not place the lesbian relationship at its center, it was the first to depict such a relationship in Turkish cinema. The issue with the portrayal of the lesbian relationship in this film (referring to Mulvey) is not that it is a product of the male gaze, but that sexual orientation is portrayed as a choice due to the absence of a man. This portrayal is common in LGBTQAI+ representations in Turkish cinema.

For example, the gender identity or sexual orientation of the character played by Bülent Ersoy in *Beddua* (Seden and Gülgen, 1980) is not explicitly stated. However, the character is described as a feminine man, and his childhood sexual abuse is given as the reason for this. Although the character's assigned sex is male, features such as wearing fur, wearing makeup, and displaying fragility reflect the character as non-normative and illustrate how "a man who does not conform to traditional masculinity codes" is perceived. This coding is also reproduced in the narrative.

The first gay character in Turkish cinema appeared in *Acılar Paylaşılmaz* (Zorlu, 1990). "The gay character in the film is not criminalized or stereotyped, and nothing happens to him at the

end of the film" (Yayla, 2019, p.74). However, from a contemporary perspective, the character's place in the narrative is problematic. Sinan (Kerem Tunaboyu), a gay man, grew up without a father. In various readings, Sinan can be seen as "gay because he grew up without a father" (that is, without a guiding male figure). After his father Erdoğan (Kadir İnanır) learns of Sinan's sexual orientation, violence against Sinan manifests cultural codes in cinema. One issue with the film is that Sinan's existence is coded as the conscientious obstacle the lead character must overcome.

In the film *Dönersen Islık Çal* (Ün, 1992), the trans character (Fikret Kuşkan) and the dwarf character (Mevlüt Demiryay) are portrayed as societal outsiders. The anonymity of both characters (we do not know their names) highlights the undesirability and ignored position of the "other" in society. *Dönersen Islık Çal*, a representation of gender identity and sexual orientation as the ultimate "other", presents the difficulties LGBTQAI+ face in a realistic manner. Both films, despite their criticisms, are among those that reflect a queer perspective for their period and give voice to queer issues. This film also illustrates the social pressure faced by LGBTQAI+.

In *Dönersen Islık Çal*, the transgender character and the violence they experience upon moving to Istanbul from their hometown due to being trans are treated similarly to the film *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* (Yılmaz, 1993). In these films, trans characters face psychological and

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physical violence from the police and the public because of their identities. Particularly in *Lola + Bilidikid* and *Dönersen Islık Çal*, the physical and psychological violence experienced by the characters is depicted strikingly, providing a realistic view of society's attitude toward LGBTQAI+ at that time. Unlike *Beddua*, the violence based on gender identity and sexual orientation in these films contributes to the resistance of marginalized people rather than being legitimized. Although this remains an issue today due to the dramatization of the films' subjects, these representations have contributed to raising awareness in mainstream cinema considering their period.

Representation in Cinema

Cinema representations that draw from the social sphere possess the power to shape perceptions, challenge stereotypes, and redefine social norms. In other words, cinema both influences and is influenced by society.

In the film *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017), Behiye (Ayta Sözeri) defines herself as a trans woman. The film addresses the issue of representation by allowing a transgender performer to play a character with the same gender identity. This is significant because it provides a space for queer individuals to define themselves authentically.

The question posed by Fikret (Engin Günaydın) to Behiye about her body adaptation process is offensive, humiliating, and hostile in everyday life. However, the film highlights how transgender individuals define themselves, transforming the question into an opportunity for self-definition rather than just an invasive query. The comedic element in this scene normalizes the existence of trans individuals, showing that they are not "the other".

A common feature of Ferzan Özpetek's films is that his characters are free from stereotypes (İmançer, 2018; Bauman, 2015; Boschi, 2015). As İmançer (2018, p. 145) emphasizes, "In Özpetek's cinema, characters imprisoned within the system reveal how to resist the order." From this perspective, the characters in Özpetek's films can serve as a reference point for addressing representation issues.

Cinema, as a form of cultural production, especially national cinema, reflects the culture to which it belongs. Therefore, analyzing representation in national cinema is also a sociological analysis. Considering the evolving social and political context, the increasing visibility of LGBTQAI+ representations in Turkish cinema over time demonstrates a shift towards more courageous and less judgmental portrayals, contrasting with earlier examples. This evolution can be seen as a reaction to the painful expressions mentioned by Butler.

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Conclusion

One of Judith Butler's aims in writing *Gender Trouble* is to criticize the stereotypical emphasis on femininity and masculinity in the understanding of gender. This emphasis introduces a new hierarchical system, making exclusion inevitable (Butler, 2002, p. vii-viii). This claim and purpose establish the text as one of the foundational works of queer theory and demonstrate why queer-free feminism is impossible. Similarly, this study examines LGBTQIA+ characters, their identities, and how they are portrayed through stereotypical femininity and masculinity in Turkish cinema. The text attempts to read the evolution of the definition of *queer* within its historical context and aims to present an alternative and current literature for future studies.

The impact of cinematic codes on daily life, and the reflection of these codes when re-mediated, reveal the political nature of representation in cinema. The transformation of these codes offers a lens through which to analyze social transformation and shifts in power structures. The change in LGBTQIA+ representations from the early examples in cinema to the present reflects the evolving societal perspective on LGBTQIA+ individuals. Over time, these representations have taken on a more oppositional stance. Films like *Nar* and *Yaşamın Kıyısında* position LGBTQIA+ characters centrally without their sexual orientations affecting the narrative, suggesting that lesbian women are not marginalized due to their sexual orientation, contrary to

societal norms. Similarly, films like *Aile Arasında* show that LGBTQIA+ can exist in society without being seen as anomalies.

Alsamua (2019, p. 27), who studies queer narratives in cinema, notes that "the multiplicity of representations that have recently emerged in mainstream cinema reveals Queer's actuality and the power it has gained". While such a rise in mainstream cinema is not as evident in Turkey, the increasing diversity of representations is promising.

As Özkazanç and Agtaş refer to Butler, if addressing means being named or summoned, the act of calling, which can be offensive, carries the risk of creating the subject that opposes it (Butler, 1997b, p. 2; Özkazanç and Agtaş, 2018, p. 4). The subaltern individual or community in a disadvantaged group can be seen as resisting the dominant language or the address directed at them. In these situations, where the subaltern tries to detach from social mobility, the resistance that emerges forms an infrastructure for self-expression. In this context, the individual finds their polyphonic voice through the collectives and discourses formed by queer and queer thinkers.

Examining Turkish cinema through the lens of queer theory reveals low visibility for LGBTQIA+ characters. One issue with queer representation in cinema is the scarcity of such representations and the pejorative coding of existing ones, whether consciously or

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unconsciously, or their narratives ending in trouble or death. The fact that representations typically consist of heterosexual men and women may be due to the low visibility of queer individuals in the social sphere.

Revisiting the films discussed in the study, it becomes apparent that the first LGBTQIA+ representation in Turkish cinema was lesbian, likely due to the use of women as objects of pleasure in cinema. The woman's body and sexual orientation are transformed into objects of desire for anyone with a masculine gaze. Later gay representations present a two-stage narrative: first, a man's sexual orientation is seen as deviant due to the absence of a father or due to abuse; second, the man who does not fit the heterosexual model is portrayed as at fault and must apologize to society. Films featuring transgender individuals tend to reflect reality more accurately than others.

The focus on gay, lesbian, and transgender identities in early films and the neglect of other identities may stem from the invisibility of these identities in the social sphere. Traditional notions of gender and sexuality are increasingly being questioned in contemporary cinema, with narratives reflecting a more nuanced understanding of fluid identities. However, the fact that these representations remain confined to art cinema and are invisible in mainstream cinema is a political issue.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's Note]: There is an enormous lack of scholarly studies on queer cinema in Turkey. The editor would like to point at some of the earlier and rare contributions in the subject. Please see Hoşcan (2006) and Hoşcan (2015).

[2] Throughout the text, the categories of men and women created by the medical world are included in the concept of assigned sex at birth. The point to be noted here is that not all individuals who define themselves through their assigned gender are seen as a problem in terms of queer theory. The individual can define himself or herself as a woman or a man, free from social codes, and this definition does not prevent individuals from thinking queer.

[3] LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that may vary periodically and culturally. For example, the abbreviation used in Turkey as LGBTI+ includes lesbian, gay, bisexual sexual orientations, transgender gender identity, and intersex gender status/characteristics and carries the + sign for "more" (Kaos GL, 2021: 8). The concept is constantly being updated. LGBTQIA+ defines all sexual orientations and gender identities coded as "other" in the heterosexual matrix and is therefore used in this study.

[4] "It is a jargon developed by transvestites today and can be spoken by many LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) individuals" (GMag, 2016) in Turkey.

[5] According to Aziz Mert Erdem (2019, p. 35) "*Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar*, is a controversial film for its depiction of real trans individuals, nudity, quasi-representation of sex between two men, and *lubunyaca*".

[6] *Masallardan Geriye Kalan* (Yağcıoğlu, 2020) shows us the first non-binary character in Turkish cinema. However, the non-binary representation in the film produces some new stereotypes.

[7] This abbreviation is used instead of LGBTIQ+ in the original text.