CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Queer Cinema and Melodrama: A Perspective from Queer Directors[1]

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Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.744 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between queer cinema and melodrama through the works of queer directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Todd Haynes, and Ümit Ünal. It explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and queer identities, focusing on conflicts between feminist and queer theories. The study examines the historical context, aesthetic elements, and evolution of melodrama in relation to queer cinema. Through case studies and qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the findings reveal how melodrama highlights queer experiences, critiques social norms, and serves as a transformative force in queer cinema.

Keywords: queer cinema; melodrama; queer theory; Rainer Werner Fassbinder; Todd Haynes; Ümit Ünal

Queer Cinema and Melodrama: A Perspective from Queer Directors

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Introduction

The term queer, which means strange, eccentric, or crooked in English, underwent a significant transformation in both meaning and politics during the late twentieth century. Originally used pejoratively in a manner similar to the derogatory use of ibne in Turkish, queer was reclaimed by activists in the 1990s as part of a broader critique of heteronormativity. Movements like Queer Nation mobilised the term as a rallying cry against exclusionary sexual and gender norms, famously declaring: "We are here. We are queer. Get used to it." In this process, queer shifted from being a slur to serving as an inclusive umbrella term that encompasses non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, while also representing a political stance against cultural and social regulation (Stryker, 2015).

Queer theory, developing within this context, established itself in dialogue yet also in tension with feminist debates by emphasising sexuality as its primary analytic lens. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) is often seen as foundational. By conceptualising the closet as both a structure of secrecy and a means of regulation, Sedgwick shed light on how non-normative sexualities are shaped by invisibility, coded language, and

repression. Judith Butler further advanced these debates by theorising gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (2006). For Butler, gender is not innate but constructed through repeated acts, norms, and performances that make specific identities socially intelligible while excluding others. Sara Ahmed extended these ideas into spatial and phenomenological dimensions with Queer Phenomenology (2006), demonstrating how social spaces and orientations are organised by heteronormativity, guiding bodies along accepted paths and causing disorientation for those who deviate. These concepts—closet, performativity, orientation—remain central to understanding queer representation in cinema.

At the same time, melodrama offers a vital aesthetic and narrative form through which queer subjectivities are expressed. First coined by Rousseau in the eighteenth century to describe a drama that combined spoken dialogue with music, melodrama quickly developed into a modern cultural form. Rooted in the revolutionary upheavals of late eighteenth-century France, melodrama emerged as what Tunalı (2001, p. 10) calls a revolutionary cultural outcome: a form embraced by social classes who believed divine justice was unevenly distributed, and who sought to restore balance through "poetic justice" enacted via reward and punishment, good and evil, and the emotional language of sentiment rather than rationality.

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As Peter Brooks argues in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976, pp. 26–53), melodrama dramatizes the "moral occult," staging the invisible forces of power, repression, and desire. It achieves this through a "mode of excess": heightened emotions, stark moral oppositions, coincidences, reversals, and pathos. Thomas Elsaesser (1987) emphasizes that melodrama should not be reduced to just a genre, but understood as a cultural mode—a way of narrating and visualizing crises of identity, morality, and social order.

The link between queer narratives and melodrama is therefore not accidental. Both address the unspoken: melodrama transforms what cannot be openly conveyed into emotion and spectacle, while queer subjectivities often develop in environments of secrecy, repression, and denial. In this way, melodrama offers queer filmmakers an expressive language to uncover hidden desires, dramatise moral and social conflicts, and challenge normative frameworks. Historically, melodrama has aimed to "make visible the invisible," a role that closely aligns with the politics of queer representation.

This article expands on these theoretical frameworks to analyse how melodrama functions as a critical tool in the works of three directors from different cultural backgrounds: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Todd Haynes, and Ümit Ünal. By examining films such as *Fox and His Friends* (1975), In a Year of 13 Moons (1978), *Far from Heaven* (2002), *Carol* (2015),

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Pomegranate (2011), and Love, Spells and All That (2019), the study argues that melodrama is not merely a genre of heightened emotion but a transnational mode enabling queer cinema to reveal, oppose, and reimagine the normative structures of family, class, nation, and identity.

This study aims to explore how melodrama serves as a critical instrument within queer cinema, as exemplified in the works of three directors: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Todd Haynes, and Ümit Ünal. It seeks to address the following questions:

What is the relationship between queer cinema and melodrama?

How do directors working in queer cinema incorporate melodrama into their films?

How do historical and geographical contexts influence their cinematic approaches?

This research contributes to film theory and gender studies by examining the aesthetic and political intersections between queer cinema and melodrama, ultimately offering new perspectives on cinema's role in social transformation.

Methodology

This research employed the multiple case study method, a qualitative approach, to examine the connection between melodrama and queer perspectives from the viewpoint of queer filmmakers. The multiple case study method allows researchers to systematically analyse various cases and explore different viewpoints (Creswell and Poth, 2024). Consequently, the study focuses on filmmakers from three additional countries and three

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distinct periods.

This research's primary data collection tools include visual and auditory materials (films, written sources, and interviews). One interview was conducted with Ümit Ünal, while published interviews were utilized for Fassbinder and Haynes. Additionally, the document analysis method was employed to examine films, videos, and photographs, and the obtained data were evaluated using descriptive analysis.

The data obtained in this study were analyzed using descriptive analysis, with queer theory serving as the interpretive framework. Queer theory is a theoretical approach that challenges heteronormative structures and emphasizes the fluidity of gender identities (Madison, 2005). Consequently, the data were examined through the critical lens provided by queer theory, aiming to explore the relationship between queer narratives and melodrama. Films and directors' statements were evaluated within the context of queer narratives and melodramatic structures, and the analysis was conducted based on the works of all three directors.

Queer and Melodrama Relationship in Fassbinder Cinema

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's cinema blends phenomena of otherness with melodrama, delving deeply into the struggle for individual existence. The director encapsulates this idea with the following words: "Only those who are truly identified with themselves need no longer

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fear. Furthermore, only those who are free of fear can love without judgment. The ultimate goal of all human endeavors is to live one's own life" (Fassbinder, 1992, p. 169). The characters in his films strive to construct their reality by confronting their fears, despite the risks that threaten their identities and desires.

In Fassbinder's cinema, it is challenging to adhere to a particular genre or style strictly; he shifts between various genres and aesthetic conceptions (Kovacs, 2007, p. 197). However, melodrama is at the heart of the director's narrative and forms the fundamental structure of his films, particularly those featuring queer themes. Fassbinder perceives melodrama not only as a narrative form but also as a queer practice of existence, utilising it as a tool to critique social norms. By combining melodramatic poetry with political context, he fuses emotional intensity with social criticism.

Fassbinder's interest in American melodramas stems from an analytical approach rather than from romantic admiration. He views the American melodramas of the 1950s as essential to modern German culture and employs these films in his formal pursuits. He reinterprets Hollywood aesthetics by adapting the simplified formal features found in Douglas Sirk's cinema to his narrative language. In Fassbinder's films, the idealized visuality of American melodramas is supplanted by what Kolker describes as "uniquely and perfectly ugly" faces (Kolker, 2010,

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p. 172). While he appreciated the non-artistic nature of Hollywood, he aimed to simplify the language of cinema rather than merely imitate its films (Kovacs, 2007, p. 197-198).

Fassbinder's queer melodramas challenge gender, sexuality, and power dynamics while subverting normative structures. His characters grapple with their identities and desires, struggling to survive in a hostile or indifferent world. The director harnesses the emotional intensity of melodrama to highlight the challenges faced by queer individuals and to amplify social criticism. Fassbinder's cinema fosters a space that redefines the struggle for individual and collective existence within an aesthetic and political framework.

Being a Queer Director in Post-World War II Germany

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was born three months after Germany's final surrender amidst the physical and social devastation of World War II. Munich, devastated by Allied raids, epitomized the post-war chaos. Fassbinder's childhood home served as both an "operating room and a home," accommodating his father's practice and frequented by sex workers, as it was located on Sedlinger Strasse, known as the "main street of prostitution" (Hayman, 1984, p. 2). Fassbinder, who had to share this cramped space with his mother Liselotte's relatives who had immigrated from Danzig, recounts his "lonely childhood in crowds" where the effects of the war were acutely felt with the following words: "All our relatives in the East needed help, and

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we all lived together in a huge communal family, which would normally have been very nice, but this life together soon turned out to be terrible" (cited in Hayman, 1984, p. 2).

As an openly gay man, Fassbinder grew up in the shadow of Article 175, which criminalized homosexuality in Germany from 1871 to 1994. During the Nazi era, this article, which was extended to “acts similar to sexual intercourse” with provisions added to the law in 1935, paved the way for the systematic persecution of gay men (encyclopedia.ushmm.org, 2024). SS leader Heinrich Himmler described homosexuality as “the scourge of the people,” while the Reich Central Office for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion, established in 1936, became the institutional basis for persecution. Although female homosexuality was not explicitly mentioned in the law, many lesbians were sent to concentration camps for different reasons (Schoppman, 1997, p. 163).

In post-war East and West Germany, Article 175 remained in effect for a time. This law was decriminalized in East Germany in 1958 and partially relaxed in West Germany in 1969 (Glass, 1993; Schäfer, 2006, p. 253), yet it failed to eradicate the social oppression of homosexuals. Fassbinder powerfully depicted the traumas of the war and the legal-social constraints on homosexual identity in his films.

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The place and period in which Fassbinder lived allowed him to focus on issues such as family dynamics, marginalization, and social inequality in his cinema. The oppression of queer identity became an important theme, as did the losses caused by the war. The loneliness and alienation of post-war urban life transform into a struggle for belonging in Fassbinder's characters. By placing the narrow, crowded, and lonely world he experienced in his childhood at the center of his cinema, he listens to the voices of "others." Thus, both the traumatic legacy of war and the prohibitions against homosexual identity become elements that profoundly shape Fassbinder's direction.

Queer and Melodrama Relationship in Todd Haynes Cinema

Todd Haynes' cinema merges the aesthetic and dramatic elements of melodrama with queer themes, exploring the impact of social norms on individuals. In his films, Haynes critically examines identity, love, and the pressures imposed by societal structures. Through this approach, he stands out as both a key figure of the New Queer Cinema movement and a filmmaker who expands the formal boundaries of queer cinema.

His education at Brown University shaped Haynes's cinematographic vision. Reflecting on his exposure to feminist, critical, and queer theories, he explains, "They felt like extensions of the critical positions I had already been experiencing in my life" (White, 2013, p. 139). This theoretical foundation enables him to examine social constraints from a critical perspective.

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Haynes reinterprets the melodrama genre as a means of questioning societal norms, transforming its emotional intensity through a queer lens.

Emphasizing that New Queer Cinema offers not only thematic but also formal innovations, Haynes argues that queer cinema should be defined not just by its characters but also by its cinematic language: "To define gay cinema solely through gay characters is an incredible failure of imagination" (Aaron, 2004, p. 42). Formally, he views melodrama as the most suitable narrative mode for his artistic expression.

In Haynes's cinema, melodrama emphasizes the conflict between individual desires and societal structures through a highly stylized dramatic aesthetic. The influences of Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder are particularly pronounced; echoing Fassbinder's remark that "a good director always makes the same film," Haynes reinterprets melodrama from a queer perspective (YouTube, 2024). Consequently, his films create a powerful space for making queer experiences visible while critically engaging with societal structures.

Being a Queer Director in America during the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a deadly retrovirus that weakens the immune system, making the body vulnerable to opportunistic infections. AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was first identified in the early 1980s in the United States, initially linked

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to cases in New York and California. As a result, the disease became associated with gay men, leading to its stigmatization as the "gay plague" and resulting in the intense marginalization of queer communities (Krämer, Mirjam & Klaus, 2010, p. 89). The visibility of AIDS as a disease affecting homosexual individuals prompted awareness campaigns led by organizations such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), founded under the leadership of Larry Kramer. However, misinformation and misconceptions contributed to the social exclusion of HIV-positive individuals, often resulting in job losses and discrimination (GMHC History).

As the AIDS crisis deepened in the 1980s, many states enacted HIV-specific criminal laws. However, these laws not only failed to benefit public health but also discouraged individuals from getting tested, leading them to conceal their HIV status (Mermin, Valentine & McCray, 2021, pp. 4-6). At the same time, the rise of the radical right and fundamentalist Christian rhetoric, which framed AIDS as a "divine punishment," exacerbated the pressure on queer communities (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, pp. 4-10).

When Todd Haynes moved to New York in 1985, he found himself at the epicenter of the social, political, and cultural effects of the AIDS crisis. In an era when the media fueled fear and discrimination by equating homosexuality with disease, Haynes positioned his cinema as a space of resistance against these pressures. His first feature film, *Poison* (Tod Haynes, 1991),

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stood out for its exploration of queer themes and its critical approach to the AIDS crisis. Although the film won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, it faced severe criticism from right-wing groups. Figures such as Senator Jesse Helms denounced it as "obscene and pornographic," but Haynes dismissed these accusations as unfounded (James, 1991).

While collaborating with activist groups such as ACT-UP and Gran Fury, Haynes expanded queer cinema through new formal and political perspectives. As a leading figure in New Queer Cinema, he emphasized that this movement was shaped by the urgency brought about by the AIDS crisis. Reflecting on the era, he noted, "We felt an urgency. It seemed to give relevance to what we were doing" (Rothkopf, 2022).

The AIDS crisis was not merely a public health issue; it also marked a period in which queer communities came together to redefine their identities. Haynes' works transcend individual experiences, transforming queer cinema into a vehicle for critiquing social structures and inequalities. To be a queer filmmaker during the HIV/AIDS epidemic was not just an artistic endeavor but also a political responsibility. Through his films, Haynes shed light on the tragedies, stigmatization, and marginalization faced by queer communities while simultaneously creating a space for solidarity and resistance. His cinema not only expands the

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aesthetic and political potential of queer filmmaking but also presents audiences with the complexities of social realities beyond individual narratives.

Queer and Melodrama Relationship in Ümit Ünal's Cinema

Ümit Ünal's cinema presents stories that go beyond traditional narrative patterns by combining queer characters and melodramatic elements. In an interview, Ünal states that being queer differentiates his approach to gay characters. According to Ünal, while many directors include gay characters, these characters are often portrayed as secondary or from an external perspective. They are typically depicted as weak or used for comedic purposes. However, Ünal seeks to provide an internal perspective by making gay characters the protagonists. He also adds that being a queer director is not the sole condition for offering a queer perspective, as many queer directors also create films within heteronormative codes (Ünal, 01:00–03:00). This approach has the potential to transform how queer characters are perceived in cinema, where heteronormative norms dominate. Ünal's internal perspective deepens queer representation and allows for multidimensional portrayals of characters. This makes it possible to move beyond defining queer characters solely by their sexual orientation.

Although Ünal frequently uses melodramatic elements in his films, he does not fully conform to the genre. Ünal states that he dislikes rigid genre structures and uses melodrama elements ironically, acknowledging the subconscious influence of Yeşilçam melodramas. For

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Ünal, using these elements with awareness presents an opportunity to create a new narrative language. He also notes that, except for *Ses* (2010), his films cannot be classified into a specific genre (Ünal, 03:00–08:32). His use of melodrama for ironic purposes, as well as his connection between Yeşilçam cinema and contemporary cinema, highlights the social critique developed through this connection.

Ünal's 2002 film *9* reveals hidden queer relationships through a murder committed in a neighborhood. Ünal states that *9* is not only a queer film because of its characters but also in its formal characteristics (Ünal, 12:16–13:25). The film, shot with digital cameras and later transferred to 35mm, employs a formal innovation and a questioning-camera aesthetic that gives the film both narrative and visual coherence (Gökgül-Kıral, 2021).

Ünal's 2007 film *Ara* incorporates queer themes and melodrama. Set in a single location, it explores the complex relationships among four characters. While Ünal notes that the film, like other "room films," was shot in one location for economic reasons, he also points out that many issues in his life occur in closed spaces (Uygun-Sevindi, 2011).

Ünal describes *Ara* as his most autobiographical film, reflecting his search for sexual identity and struggle with societal pressures. He explains, "Writing, reading, watching films, and making art have been my psychological support. If I had not made peace with my sexual

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identity, I might have been a hypocrite like Veli or unstable like Ender" (Yaşartürk, 2012, pp. 141–142).

Ümit Ünal's exploration of the relationship between queer themes and melodrama offers a unique perspective at the intersection of these two areas in Turkish cinema. The director's innovative approach, blending melodramatic elements with queer themes, creates both narrative and formal richness.

After the 1980 Coup, Being a Queer Director in Turkey

The 1980 military coup marked a period in which the Turkish Armed Forces took control of the government, severely restricting fundamental rights and freedoms. This repressive atmosphere significantly impacted the cinema industry, altering both production processes and content. Ümit Ünal reflects on the effect of the coup on his memory: "A soldier announced in a harsh voice that the armed forces had taken control of the administration, giving orders. (…) A burning sensation rose from my stomach, and it lasted for a long time" (Yaşartürk, 2012, p. 27). This statement provides critical insight into how the authoritarian atmosphere created by the coup shaped Ünal's cinematic themes of authority, repression, and social conflict.

In the post-coup period, societal issues in cinema were increasingly reduced to individual stories, and content changed due to time pressures. Şükran Esen emphasizes that "sex-themed films were replaced by films focused on arabesque and individual tragedies" (2000, p. 41).

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Meanwhile, representations of queer individuals became largely invisible or constrained by heteronormative codes. For example, Atıf Yılmaz's *Dul Bir Kadın* (1985) and Halit Refiğ's *İhtiras Fırtınası* (1983) explore female homosexuality but present these themes from a heterosexual male perspective, reinforcing certain stereotypes.

The violence and discrimination faced by queer individuals during the coup are depicted in *Lubunya Olmak*: "They made us line up. They beat us. When I went out into the street, my face was shattered, my clothes were torn. Everything was ripped apart" (Gürsu, 2012, p. 240). These testimonies reveal the traumatic impact of the coup on individuals' lives and the existential struggle of queer people during this period. Yasemin Öz points out that the effects of the coup on queer individuals were not sufficiently discussed in society, and these victimizations were often rendered invisible (2009, p. 276).

Ümit Ünal, who began his film education after the coup, felt the profound effects of this repressive atmosphere on his creative processes. He notes that although he was not actively involved in politics, many of his films touched on more daring points than political films. For Ünal, creating films with political methods, rather than traditional political films, was a more effective way to respond artistically to the darkness of the coup (Yaşartürk, 2012, p. 27). By creating a space for resistance against authority, repression, and social norms, Ünal deepens the

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individual and societal dimensions of queer themes, bringing a new dimension to the treatment of these themes in Turkish cinema. Ünal's cinema offers a political aesthetic that masterfully combines light and shadow in response to the darkness of the 1980 coup.

Melodrama and Queer Identity: Performance and Excess

Melodrama, with its aesthetics of excess, reveals the social knots that are woven into private life. As Peter Brooks argues in The Melodramatic Imagination (1976), melodrama functions as a "mode of excess," staging heightened emotion to externalise conflicts that cannot be otherwise expressed. Within queer cinema, this role becomes especially productive: melodrama translates repressed desires, social exclusion, and failures of recognition into emotional and visual forms, revealing the coercive demands of normative society.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's in a Year of 13 Moons (1978) pushes this logic to its extreme. The tragedy of Elvira Weisshaupt is not reducible to personal "failure" or psychological weakness but rather highlights a socially constructed impossibility. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is illuminating here: gender is not an inherent essence, but a regime of visibility established through compulsory repetition; Elvira's "unrecognizability" results from her inability to conform to these reiterations (Butler, 2002). Fassbinder's formal strategies—sharp editing in the opening assault, extended long takes, and the dissonance of sound and image in the slaughterhouse sequence—visualise Elvira's internalised sense of worthlessness. Her

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voiceover confession, “his life is far more valuable than mine,” exemplifies melodrama’s power to externalise psychic devastation as a social allegory.

In this sense, Butler’s ideas also reveal how Elvira reconstructs her gender identity daily through performative methods. Her homosexual love becomes the turning point where she discovers her unstable gender. The undermining of gender categories through homosexuality thus takes visible form in Fassbinder’s melodrama.

Elvira’s death must therefore be read, in Brooks’s terms, as a catastrophe: not an individual collapse but a melodramatic event that dramatises the impossibility of survival outside normative recognition. Fassbinder’s melodrama thereby renders queer experience as both an aesthetic form and a political critique, exposing how the performative construction of identity collides with the systemic impossibility of recognition.

Family, Nation, and Social Constraint — Haynes’ Far from Heaven and Carol

In melodrama, the family is never simply a private unit but an ideological arena where national values, gender norms, and legal frameworks are enacted and contested (Gledhill, 1987). It is also the privileged stage upon which queer desire is tested, stigmatized, and disciplined. Todd Haynes’ Far from Heaven (2002) and Carol (2015) interrogate the institution of the family across axes of race, gender, and sexuality. While Far from Heaven dramatizes

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familial collapse to expose the fragility of heteronormativity, Carol reframes motherhood and law as arenas where queer desire must be negotiated.

Far from Heaven: Family Collapse and National Heteronormativity

Drawing on Douglas Sirk's classic melodramas, Far from Heaven situates the Whitakers within the 1950s American suburb, a space that is both coded as a domestic ideal and a national showcase. The family appears pristine until Frank's homosexuality and Cathy's intimacy with Raymond rupture its façade. Frank's attempts at "conversion therapy" exemplify what Eve Sedgwick (1990) terms the "violence of the closet," where secrecy functions not as private concealment but as a regulatory device sustaining the social order. Haynes' visual language—tight interiors, constricted framing, and a stifling color palette—translates this repression into cinematic form, making visible the implosion of Frank's masculinity and Cathy's entrapment.

Cathy's relationship with Raymond brings racial hierarchy into sharper relief. The restaurant scene, where Cathy confronts the impossibility of crossing racial boundaries, materializes what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls "straightening devices": spatial and social codes that steer bodies back into normative alignments. The collapse of the Whitaker family thus becomes a melodramatic catastrophe, dramatizing not personal failure but the fractures of national ideology.

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Carol: Motherhood, Law, and the Limits of Choice

If Far from Heaven exposes repression through collapse, Carol explores the negotiation of queer desire through the structures of motherhood and law. Carol's maternal role grounds her identity, yet Harge's attempt to strip her of custody reveals how patriarchy weaponizes legal authority to regulate women's desires. Here, the family operates as a disciplinary apparatus that delegitimizes women as both mothers and lovers. Carol's defiance in the courtroom resists this binary, embodying what Judith Butler (2014) identifies as the performative limits of recognition: she refuses to relinquish either her maternal role or her queer desire.

Edward Lachman's visual strategies—windows, mirrors, and fogged glass—further dramatize Ahmed's concept of orientation. Queer subjectivity is rendered through partial or obstructed perspectives, suggesting both visibility and constraint. The final restaurant sequence exemplifies what Brooks (1976) terms a "happy catastrophe": an ending that withholds complete reconciliation while leaving open a fragile possibility for reunion. Queer desire emerges not as resolution but as persistence within constraint, embodied in the precarious space between recognition and risk.

Class, Power, and Queer Melodrama

Since the French Revolution, melodrama has not only functioned as a genre of heightened feeling but also as a cultural mode that exposes inequality through what critics have called

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"poetic justice" (Tunalı, 2001, p. 10). By dramatizing stark moral conflicts, melodrama has historically staged social contradictions that elude rational discourse. Within queer contexts, it highlights the entanglement of desire with class, rendering intimacy inseparable from structures of exploitation and dispossession. Sara Ahmed's notion of "queer orientation" (2006) is illuminating here: queerness signifies not only a deviation in desire but also a disalignment from classed spaces and normative social codes.

Fassbinder's Fox and His Friends (1975): Exploitation and Abandonment

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's Fox and His Friends focuses on Franz "Fox" Biberkopf, a working-class carnival worker who suddenly enters bourgeois society after winning the lottery. His lover Eugen and the bourgeois circle surrounding him, however, exploit Fox financially until he is discarded. The film's settings—modernist apartments, high-end restaurants, art galleries—are never neutral backgrounds; they are class-coded environments that constantly mark Fox as being "out of place." His accent, bodily gestures, and social demeanour highlight his misalignment with bourgeois norms.

Fassbinder harnesses melodramatic excess—betrayal, humiliation, abandonment—not to depict private heartbreak but to reveal systemic exploitation. The final scene of Fox dying on a train station floor, while passersby ignore his body, exemplifies what Brooks (1976) describes as catastrophe: the breakdown of intimacy as an allegory for capitalism's ruthless devaluation

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of working-class queer lives.

Ünal's Love, Spells and All That (2019): Queering Yeşilçam Tropes

Ümit Ünal revisits these dynamics within the Turkish context by queering Yeşilçam melodrama's most recognisable formula: the "rich girl, poor boy" romance. In his film, the trope is reconfigured as a queer love story between Eren, the daughter of a wealthy family, and Reyhan, the gardener's daughter. Their reunion two decades later dramatises both unresolved desire and enduring class resentment. Reyhan's sardonic remark— "Rich girl in love with poor girl. The king of melodrama"—highlights the intertextual play with Yeşilçam conventions, even as the film destabilises them. Eren's confession, "I hated myself for loving women," reveals the psychic toll of repression, while Reyhan's retort, "I paid the price for your ease," reinterprets queer intimacy as influenced by unequal social privilege. Unlike traditional Yeşilçam stories where class divisions are bridged through marriage, Ünal leaves reconciliation unresolved. Queer desire is depicted as doubly marginalised—suppressed by heteronormativity and fractured by economic inequality—yet still insists on being expressed.

Transnational Dialogue

Placed in dialogue, Fassbinder and Ünal showcase melodrama's transnational ability to depict exploitation. In West Germany, the working-class queer body is exploited and discarded; in Turkey, queer love falls apart under the burden of class inequality. Their approaches differ—

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Fassbinder focuses on abandonment and bodily erasure, while Ünal employs self-aware irony by queering Yeşilçam tropes—but both harness melodramatic excess to portray intimacy as intertwined with the politics of class and dispossession.

Morality, Conflict, and Anti-Melodrama — Ünal's Pomegranate (2011)

Traditionally, melodrama reveals moral conflict through stark oppositions: innocence and guilt, sacrifice and selfishness, good and evil. Brooks's concept of the "moral occult" (1976) describes this process: melodrama externalises invisible moral orders through heightened emotion. However, in queer melodramas, these binaries often dissolve, giving way to ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Ümit Ünal's Pomegranate (2011) exemplifies this shift, transforming melodrama into a form of anti-melodrama.

The Confrontation Scene: Moral Authority and Queer Vulnerability

The confrontation between Sema and Deniz heightens melodramatic intensity while also challenging it. Sema's justification "Sometimes the right thing is wrong"—inverts the traditional moral clarity of melodrama. The revelation that she falsified a hospital report regarding a child's death is presented as a melodramatic disclosure, but instead of resolving moral conflict, it underscores its intractability. As Ünal (2011) notes, Sema "chooses the male world and power," revealing how queer intimacy can reproduce, rather than escape, patriarchal authority. The contrast between Deniz's vulnerable emotionality and Sema's rational

Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.744 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

authoritarianism shifts heteronormative gender dynamics into queer relations, exposing asymmetries within queer desire itself.

The film rejects the traditional ending of melodrama that features reunion or reconciliation. Deniz moves into Asuman's home, while Ünal's metaphor "We are all like pomegranate seeds… when the shell breaks, the seeds scatter everywhere"—emphasises dispersal rather than unity. Here, queer desire is portrayed not as a force of cohesion but as one of fragmentation, highlighting the fragility of social bonds.

Pomegranate employs an anti-melodramatic approach. In line with Thomas Elsaesser's idea of melodrama as a "cultural mode" (1987), Ünal utilises melodrama not just as an aesthetic but as a critical method, revealing the intricacies of morality, class, and sexuality in modern Turkey. However, the emotional peak occurs not in synthesis but in dissolution. In doing so, the film not only highlights queer vulnerability but also exposes and destabilises melodrama's own representational codes.

Conclusion

This article examines how melodrama functions as a critical mode within queer cinema through the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Todd Haynes, and Ümit Ünal. Across diverse cultural and historical contexts—postwar West Germany, postwar and post-AIDS-crisis

Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.744 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

America, and post-1980 coup Turkey—melodrama emerges as a transnational aesthetic form that translates what is socially unspeakable into affective and visual clarity.

The analysis unfolds across four interconnected axes. First, melodrama explores queer identity through excess, as seen in Fassbinder's in a Year of 13 Moons, where Elvira's suffering reveals the impossibility of recognition outside normative performativity (Butler, 1990/2014). Second, melodrama questions family and nation as ideological constructs: Haynes' Far from Heaven and Carol demonstrate how heteronormativity, patriarchy, and racial hierarchy regulate desire (Sedgwick, 1990; Ahmed, 2006). Third, melodrama highlights the intersection of class and sexuality, with Fassbinder's Fox and His Friends and Ünal's Love, Spells and All That queering the Yeşilçam trope of "rich girl/poor boy" to depict exploitation and dispossession across different social contexts. Finally, melodrama challenges its own moral principles, as in Ünal's Pomegranate, where the fragmentation of queer intimacy resists reconciliation and signals an anti-melodramatic critique of morality itself (Brooks, 1976).

Taken together, these films demonstrate that melodrama is not simply a genre of heightened emotion but a cultural mode capable of rendering visible the invisible: the violence of the closet, the disciplining of space, the brutality of class, and the fragility of familial bonds.

Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.744 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

By mobilizing melodramatic excess, queer cinema exposes how identity is produced, constrained, and contested within broader structures of power.

Melodrama crosses borders while maintaining its critical power, adapting to local histories and cultural particularities. Its resilience within queer cinema depends on its refusal to resolve contradictions—between visibility and erasure, intimacy and regulation, desire and repression. By expressing these tensions without resolution, melodrama remains essential: both as a representational language for queer experience and as a critical method for imagining resistance.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] This article is derived from the master's thesis titled Queer Directors' Perspective on the Relationship Between Queer Cinema and Melodrama, written by Esra Yılmaz as part of the Art and Design Master's Program at İzmir Democracy University and submitted in May 2024.

[2] [Editor's Note]: There is very limited English language academic studies of queer cinema in Turkey. Some notable studies include Akser (2016) and Ege (2024). The authors' contribution is one that is unique and contributing a slow increase in the literature.