

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

Name: Deri Phillips

Student number: 2100966

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Which Desires Are Allowed to Move?
The Politics of Queer Desire, Visibility, and Acceptance in
Contemporary Film

Abstract

This essay examines how queer cinema navigates the politics of desire amid fluctuating levels of social acceptance, arguing that increased visibility does not always translate to greater freedom. Rather than representing a linear progression, queer representation oscillates between moments of refusal and affirmation, influenced by the cultural acceptability of desire at different times. Through a comparative analysis of *The Living End* (1992), directed by Gregg Araki, and *Pride* (2014), directed by Matthew Warchus, the essay examines how queer desire is portrayed as either disruptive and destabilising or as unifying and palatable.

Drawing on queer theory and film studies, including the works of José Esteban Muñoz, Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, and Lisa Duggan, the analysis considers how spectatorship, visibility, and narrative tone shape the representation of queer desire on screen. *The Living End* is interpreted as a film that articulates desire through themes of refusal, excess, and the collapse of futurity, challenging viewers with discomfort. In contrast, *Pride* is presented as a film that reframes queer desire through Emotional Safety, solidarity, and legibility, prioritising visibility at the expense of confrontation and risk. By engaging with these films in dialogue, the essay highlights the complexities of queer representation and its implications for understanding desire in contemporary cinema. The essay argues that acceptance functions as a regulatory force rather than a neutral achievement, reshaping the conditions under which queer desire is allowed to appear. Ultimately, the analysis questions whether contemporary queer visibility enables resistance or merely renders queerness manageable within existing structures of power.

How has queer media adjusted to societal acceptance or refusal, and how does this shift shape the representation of queer desire in film?

Introduction

Queer cinema is often perceived as progressing along a linear trajectory, where increased representation is seen as a sign of greater societal acceptance. However, this perspective can obscure the reality that such acceptance may inadvertently constrain how queer desire is depicted in films. Rather than a straightforward march toward liberation, queer media frequently zigzags between moments of defiance and times of adaptation, responding to what is deemed culturally acceptable at any given moment.

This essay argues that when queer representation becomes less disruptive for mainstream audiences, portrayals of desire tend to shift from expressions of rebellion to a desire for conformity. This phenomenon can be illustrated through a comparison of *The Living End* (1992), directed by Gregg Araki, and *Pride* (2014), directed by Matthew Warchus. These films present distinct narratives that reflect varying degrees of social acceptance and their influence on the portrayal of queer desire. *The Living End* emerges from a place of anger and defiance, offering an unvarnished glimpse into queer desire that is messy, unresolved, and at times, difficult to watch. In contrast, *Pride* embraces queer identity with warmth and humour, focusing on themes of collective struggle and unity, thereby making it more accessible to mainstream audiences.

These films invite different forms of identification; some encourage viewers to align themselves with the characters, while others provoke a sense of distance. Each film articulates different facets of desire, some that feel safe and others that challenge societal norms. By situating these films within the frameworks of queer theory and media studies, this essay critically examines whether increased visibility fosters queer resistance or makes queerness more palatable, thereby enriching the analysis of the effects of social acceptance.

Refusal, Anger, and Disruption in *The Living End*

In *The Living End*, a pivotal work in the articulation of queer desire, the narrative is profoundly influenced by the prevailing socio-political context marked by the AIDS crisis. Released in the early 1990s, this film exemplifies what critic B. Ruby Rich has characterised as the “New Queer Cinema”, a cinematic movement defined by its subversive and defiant ethos (Rich, 2013). Araki’s film eschews conventional sentimental or didactic frameworks typically employed to render queer suffering comprehensible, thereby establishing a tone imbued with nihilistic rebellion. From its inception, the film employs confrontational imagery, such as graffiti proclaiming, “fuck the world” and a bumper sticker reading “Choose Death”, which together signal a deliberate refusal of moral reassurance. This existential defiance is poignantly encapsulated in the representation of the lead character, Jon’s HIV diagnosis. Rather than portraying this diagnosis within the contours of tragedy or moral instruction, Araki opts for an approach characterised by striking emotional restraint. The scene unfolds through prolonged, contemplative takes that deliberately withhold immediate emotional cues. Jon’s reaction materialises internally, manifesting viscerally as he experiences solitary vomiting in a bathroom. This



moment starkly contrasts with the film’s generally flattened affect. The film often employs wide-angle lenses with distant focuses to create the illusion that the world is at a uniform distance from the camera, a technique commonly used in filmmaking to distance the audience

from the characters emotionally. Alternatively, to show the lack of progress in a journey.

Araki's resistance to the conventional narrative arc of illness as a moral lesson or redemptive suffering serves to frame the diagnosis not as a catalyst for hope but as a dislocating reality that subverts any anticipatory notions of a hopeful future without providing solace. In the face of this crisis, desire does not dissipate; instead, it becomes disassociated from consequentiality or progressive trajectories, thereby amplifying the film's nihilistic tenor and prefiguring subsequent episodes of violence and excess.

This thematic disintegration of futurity resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's assertion that "queerness is not yet here," conceptualising queerness as an ideal delineated by its remoteness from the present moment (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, this perspective aligns with Lee Edelman's critique of 'reproductive futurism', wherein queerness is positioned as a rejection of societal norms that prioritise future-oriented investments (Edelman, 2004). In this frame, desire persists not as an aspirational force but as a strategic refusal, complicating traditional narratives surrounding queer identity and experience.

Luke's role within the film critiques conventional narrative structures by externalising Jon's most primal urges. Rather than being a fully autonomous entity, Luke serves as an embodiment of desire propelled by immediacy, self-interest, and excess. This destabilisation is emphasised through recurring motifs that render him disconcertingly unreal within the film's universe. For example, his cigarette remains unlit despite smoking being a prevalent visual theme, transforming an ostensibly habitual act into a hollow exhibition. In contrast, Luke's aloofness towards alcohol, juxtaposed with Jon's immediate and visceral response upon drinking, further alienates him from bodily consequence and realism.



The complexities of Luke's relationship with violence deepen this analysis. He exhibits a casual acceptance of outward violence, much of which is depicted off-screen, including several homicides and the implied chaos of a bank robbery marked solely by distant gunfire. This violence is seamlessly integrated into the film's rhythm, with minimal escalation or consequence. However, Luke's capacity for violence is fractured when it turns introspective. While Jon can inflict harm upon himself and physically assault Luke, he deliberately misses when he fires a gun at Luke, and when he places the weapon in his mouth, it is revealed to be unloaded. These instances imply that while destructive desires can be projected outwardly without restraint, they resist the possibility of complete self-annihilation. To eliminate Luke would entail erasing the aspect of Jon that has emerged in response to crisis, a scenario the film recurrently frames as unattainable. Therefore, Luke serves as a vessel through which desire can be expressed yet not resolved, solidifying his status as a fractured element of Jon's subjectivity rather than a distinct other.

This asymmetry in violence is first established through the film's opening murder, portrayed with significant emotional detachment. As Laura Mulvey posits, classical cinema organises visual pleasure through identification, a structure that Araki intentionally subverts by withholding emotional and moral cues. Mulvey argues that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). The murder occurs abruptly and from a distance, framed in a

wide shot that maintains emotional neutrality. By abstaining from close-ups or expressive reaction shots, Araki denies the viewer access to catharsis or moral grounding. Consequently, violence is registered not as spectacle but as a banal occurrence, positioned alongside desire without a hierarchical framework. This flattening of affect echoes Mark Fisher's assertion that contemporary society more readily assimilates catastrophe than envisions transformation. As Fisher writes, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). Hence, the murder appears less as a narrative disruption and more as a continuation of the film's pervasive detachment.



The film expands this logic into moments of public indifference, particularly evident in a scene where a violent confrontation unfolds in plain sight yet is largely overlooked by bystanders. As Jon observes a fight occurring near his car, his act of watching attracts more scrutiny than the violence itself; he faces reprimand for looking rather than being afforded protection. Violence is tolerated if it remains part of the background, while the act of observation becomes the genuine transgression. This dynamic aligns with bell hooks'* assertion that "there is power in looking" (hooks, 1992, p. 115), especially for marginalised subjects whose suffering is rendered visible only under controlled circumstances. By prioritising the punishment of spectatorship over the violence itself, Araki reveals how systems of visibility dictate whose pain is acknowledged. The scene thereby reinforces the film's overarching rejection of moral guidance, illustrating that queer suffering is not only neglected but systematically positioned to be ignored.

From Refusal to Reassurance: Queer Desire in *Pride*

Pride (2014) is a film that portrays queerness as a unifying force, providing a common foundation for individuals to come together. Set against the backdrop of the 1984 miners' strike, the film is situated in a historical context characterised by shifting attitudes toward queer communities. Notably, produced during a time of increasing societal acceptance, *Pride* adopts a less rebellious tone than earlier works, offering a depiction of queerness that is warmer and more supportive. In contrast to the confrontational approach seen in *The Living End*, *Pride* reframes queerness as a construct that encourages unity and social productivity. Although the narrative unfolds during an era of significant hostility towards queer individuals, the film's perspective is more influenced by the cultural environment of its production than by the historical circumstances it represents. Produced in a time of heightened acceptance, *Pride* reinterprets queer desire through lenses of warmth, humour, and collective solidarity.

In contrast to Araki's film, which emphasises moral ambiguity and discomfort, *Pride* deliberately seeks to provide moral certainty, portraying queerness as empathetic, comforting, and ultimately accessible to mainstream audiences. This mode of representation exemplifies what Duggan (2003) refers to as the "new homonormativity", wherein queer culture is assimilated into prevailing societal norms rather than engaging in a critical challenge to them (Duggan, 2003). This significant shift does not imply a straightforward linear progression toward liberation; instead, it illuminates how evolving societal conditions of acceptance influence the representation of queer desire on screen.



From its opening sequences, *Pride* positions queerness as a source of acceptance and communal belonging, contrasting it with notions of disruption. The immediate emphasis on community support signals the film's overarching themes, wherein instances of resistance or discomfort are often alleviated through humour or emotional release. When conflict arises, it is frequently resolved through comedic timing, thereby allowing the narrative to maintain a reassuring tone that seldom lingers. This framing encourages viewers to empathise with queer struggles as experiences to be understood rather than directly confronted, establishing alignment with the film's moral perspective from the outset. Unlike *The Living End*, which withholds emotional clarity and invites discomfort, *Pride* demands relatively little from its audience in terms of ethical ambiguity. The visual style and narrative rhythm are gentle and accommodating, fostering a sense of safety where silence appears natural and emotional resolutions occur seamlessly. Consequently, *Pride* constructs a moral universe wherein queerness is inherently justified, inviting viewers to inhabit a space of Moral certainty and solidarity rather than confrontation.



While *Pride* acknowledges the challenges faced by queer individuals, it often reframes these struggles as issues to be alleviated rather than experiences to be fully endured. Emotional conflicts, particularly those associated with coming out and familial rejection, are depicted as painful yet ultimately transient hurdles. Such moments are typically accompanied by musical cues that soften their impact, guiding the audience toward emotional clarity and a sense of stability. In this manner, queer pain is presented as an experience worthy of pity that can be swiftly resolved, rather than one that requires deep confrontation or remains unresolved. This approach

enables viewers to maintain emotional comfort even during the film's more distressing moments. In stark contrast to the raw depiction of suffering found in *The Living End*, where anguish is rendered in a visceral and unresolved manner, *Pride* quickly redirects any discomfort toward acceptance, humour, or collective affirmation, ensuring that sadness or tension does not linger long enough to unsettle the audience. As such, queer struggles in *Pride* are reframed in ways that reaffirm the viewer's moral perspective, transforming pain into a narrative device that ultimately fosters empathy and acceptance while not directly addressing the deeper systemic issues that engender such pain in the first place.

The film further reinforces the notion of reassurance by presenting acceptance as both natural and inevitable. Resistance to queer solidarity is often portrayed as a mere temporary misunderstanding rather than indicative of deeper structural or ideological opposition. This sentiment is communicated through language that minimises conflict, suggesting, for instance, that bigoted opposition represents a set of "teething problems" destined to resolve over time with increased familiarity and proximity. As the narrative develops, acceptance gradually increases not through sustained political struggle but rather through emotional connection and interpersonal camaraderie. The alliance between queer activists and the mining community is depicted as evidence that shared human experiences will ultimately foster unity, framing acceptance as a linear, almost preordained process rather than a contested one. This narrative construct reassures the audience that harmony can be achieved without substantial sacrifice or disruption, positioning queer desire as compatible with existing social structures. In this way, *Pride* minimises the potential for rejection, supplanting it with a vision of progress that is emotionally satisfying while leaving the deeper conditions of exclusion largely unexamined.

In conjunction with its narrative of inevitable acceptance, *Pride* establishes a moral landscape where opposition to queer solidarity is depicted as unmistakable, clear-cut, and easily rectifiable. Characters who resist or reject the activists' support are portrayed as misguided, fearful, or blatantly prejudiced. Their refusal is consistently presented as a matter that should be corrected rather than understood in context. This framing eliminates ambiguity from the film's ethical stakes, enabling the audience to comfortably align itself with the "right" side of the narrative without

confronting its own potential complicity in systems of exclusion. In contrast to *The Living End*, which intentionally withholds moral direction and compels viewers to grapple with discomfort, *Pride* reassures its audience by distinctly categorising right from wrong. By doing so, the film reframes political conflict as a matter of individual attitudes rather than structural power, portraying acceptance as a straightforward moral triumph rather than a complex and fraught political process. Under these circumstances, queer desire becomes something that can be endorsed without risk, stripped of its potential to unsettle or disrupt the social order it enters.

The film's dedication to reassurance is further reflected in its selective representation of queer life. Experiences that could complicate *Pride*'s warm, collective narrative, such as the darkest years of the AIDS crisis or expressions of queer despair characterised by nihilism or rage, are relegated mainly to the margins. Although there are brief allusions to illness and loss, these moments are never permitted to dominate the emotional landscape; instead, they quietly fade into the background as the story progresses towards themes of solidarity and uplift. Furthermore, queerness in *Pride* is predominantly framed within a binary, monogamous perspective, offering little room for bisexuality or identities that defy simple categorisation. This constriction of representation ensures that queer desire remains clear, communal, and ultimately survivable, while filtering out forms of pain or deviance that could disrupt the film's optimistic trajectory. In stark contrast to *The Living End*, where crisis and desire are intertwined, *Pride* presents suffering as peripheral rather than central. The result is a version of queer visibility that emphasises comfort and cohesion, allowing specific experiences to be acknowledged while subtly sidelining those that challenge the film's reassuring vision of progress.



In its closing movements, *Pride* ultimately reframes queer desire as a source of empowerment and social cohesion rather than as a potential risk or disruption. Acts of queer rebellion are celebrated as affirming and morally righteous, reinforcing the belief that visibility and self-expression naturally lead to acceptance and communal support. Moments that do acknowledge difference or challenge normative expectations, such as playful, self-aware gestures toward the audience's assumptions, are quickly integrated back into the film's benevolent tone, thereby avoiding the generation of any sustained tension. The narrative culminates in a collective display of solidarity, as seen in the finale's celebratory march, leaving little room for uncertainty and providing an ending that is uplifting, emotionally satisfying, and carefully contained. In contrast to the unresolved discomfort characteristic of *The Living End*, *Pride* concludes by restoring harmony and affirming the value of inclusion, positioning queer desire as something that can be safely accommodated within existing social frameworks. While this form of representation offers clear political and emotional advantages, it also reveals the conditions under which queer desire is allowed to manifest; specifically, when it reassures rather than unsettles, and when it affirms the audience's moral alignment instead of challenging it.

The Pendulum of Queer Desire: Refusal, Acceptance, and Visibility

Placed in dialogue, *The Living End* and *Pride* illustrate not a linear progression in queer representation but rather a pendulum-like movement influenced by changing social acceptance. Both works emerge from contexts marked by political struggle and collective trauma; however, they respond to these circumstances in

fundamentally different ways. Araki's film conveys queer desire through themes of refusal, disorientation, and nihilism, opting for unresolved intensity rather than providing comfort or moral clarity. In contrast, *Pride* reframes queer desire as a source of emotional healing, offering intimacy, clarity, and narrative resolution. This difference is not merely aesthetic; it is also ideological. While *The Living End* positions desire as something that persists beyond the collapse of a hopeful future, *Pride* envisions desire as a force that can be integrated into established social structures. Examining these works together reveals how queer desire is reshaped by the limits of what audiences are willing to accept. This suggests that increased visibility does not necessarily equate to greater freedom but instead indicates a recalibration of how desire is permitted to unfold.

A key distinction between *The Living End* and *Pride* is how they position the spectator in relation to queer desire. Araki's film consistently withholds emotional guidance, forcing the viewer into a state of discomfort, distance, and uncertainty. The use of long takes, flat affect, and sudden violence denies the audience opportunities for easy identification or moral reassurance, making the viewing experience uneasy. In *The Living End*, desire is something the viewer must endure rather than sympathise with, producing a mode of looking that resists pleasure and closure. Conversely, *Pride* actively fosters identification by aligning the audience with its characters through sentimentality, humour, and clear emotional cues. Moments of conflict in *Pride* are crafted to reassure rather than unsettle, encouraging viewers to feel ethically secure in their support of the film's queer subjects. This difference illustrates how spectatorship becomes a mechanism for regulating desire, either by challenging the viewer's comfort or by reinforcing it. While *The Living End* treats discomfort as politically productive, *Pride* frames comfort as a moral good, demonstrating how acceptance reshapes not only representation but also the very act of looking itself.

Beyond spectatorship, the two works diverge most starkly in their portrayal of the visibility of queer desire and the limitations imposed on it. In *The Living End*, visibility is depicted as unstable and often perilous, with desire manifesting in ways that defy containment and social acceptance. Acts of sex, violence, and intimacy are presented without moral judgment, allowing desire to emerge as excessive, contradictory, and unresolved. In this context, visibility does not guarantee

recognition or safety; instead, it highlights the precariousness of being seen in a hostile social environment. Conversely, *Pride* carefully regulates visibility, presenting queer desire in ways that emphasise collectivity, empathy, and social contribution. Desire in *Pride* is portrayed as acceptable only so long as it aligns with narratives of unity and shared struggle, glossing over elements that might disrupt the film's reassuring depiction of progress. This comparison reveals that visibility is not inherently liberating; its impact depends on how comfortably desire can be integrated into dominant frameworks of meaning. While *The Living End* uncovers the dangers of being visible without safeguards or support, *Pride* illustrates how visibility is granted selectively, conditioned by its ability to reassure rather than provoke discomfort.

The analysis of *The Living End* and *Pride* elucidates that queer representation does not progress linearly toward liberation; instead, it fluctuates in accordance with the societal tolerance for various forms of desire. Araki's film articulates queer desire through the lenses of refusal, excess, and instability, challenging moral reassurance and revealing the violence and nihilism that arise when visions of the future collapse. Conversely, *Pride* reframes queer desire as a construct of emotional openness, unity, and legibility, offering comfort and visibility while simultaneously sacrificing confrontation and risk.

This comparative analysis reveals that acceptance operates not as a neutral outcome but as a regulatory force that reshapes the representation of desire on screen. While more palatable depictions facilitate solidarity and recognition, they also constrict the spectrum of queer experiences that are permissible, marginalising forms of desire that remain disruptive, unresolved, or uncomfortable. Thus, rather than signalling unequivocal progress, the oscillation between refusal and assimilation highlights the conditions under which queer desire is allowed to manifest.

In examining which desires receive visibility and the costs associated with this visibility, the analysis posits that increased acceptance often renders queerness more manageable. This transformation raises critical questions about whether visibility genuinely fosters resistance or merely restructures it into a form that ultimately reassures the very systems it once sought to challenge.

Conclusion

This essay posits that queer cinema does not adhere to a linear trajectory toward liberation. Instead, it is shaped in response to fluctuating societal acceptance, which in turn influences the depiction of desire on screen. Through an analytical lens, a discernible pattern emerges in *The Living End* and *Pride*, wherein queer desire oscillates between moments of rejection and affirmation, thereby illustrating a dynamic that resembles a pendulum rather than a straightforward narrative of progress. These films do more than merely reflect distinct historical contexts; they actively engage with the parameters of visibility, comprehension, and acceptability of queer desire for their audiences.

In *The Living End*, desire is forged within an environment marked by crisis and a disintegration of futurity, manifesting through nihilism, excess, and a rejection of conventional standards. Araki's film eschews moralistic guidance and emotional solace, positioning both characters and viewers within realms of discomfort and uncertainty. In this context, desire is not depicted as a vehicle for aspiration or empowerment but rather exists as something chaotic and unresolved, intertwined with violence and despair. This refusal of closure amplifies desire as a disruptive force that resists facile integration into dominant social narratives while illuminating the risks associated with visibility in a culture that offers little in the way of support or acknowledgement.

Conversely, *Pride* reframes queer desire through lenses of warmth, community, and emotional clarity. While the film acknowledges the historical antagonism faced by queer individuals, it ultimately presents an emphasis on both attainable and morally commendable goals. Within this framework, desire is transformed into a source of upliftment and social utility, functioning as a bridge between diverse communities rather than a catalyst for conflict or danger. This more easily assimilated representation encourages visibility and solidarity; however, it risks constraining the range of queer experiences validated within the narrative. Elements of pain, anger, and ambiguity that resist neat resolution are often softened, sidelined, or entirely omitted, highlighting how acceptance can reshape desire into forms that offer emotional clarity in place of unease. Araki's film remains politically urgent precisely because it refuses the comfort that contemporary visibility often promises.

When analysed in conjunction, these films highlight the notion that visibility does not inherently equate to liberation; instead, visibility is dictated by the parameters that govern which desires are allowed to circulate freely and which remain marginalised or unseen. While increased societal acceptance confers significant political and emotional advantages, it simultaneously instils new forms of regulation that affect the portrayal of queerness. The oscillation between refusal and assimilation in contemporary queer cinema underscores the implications of palatability. It prompts critical inquiry into whether present-day queer media genuinely broadens the scope of desire or merely renders it more acceptable. This essay concludes by emphasising that the tension between disruption and comfort remains unresolved. Queer cinema, as exemplified by these two films, continues to navigate the limitations of visibility in ways that reflect rather than transcend existing structures of power.

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