

Intersections of Pariah and Spring Fever

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Why did you decide to watch the two films you chose?

I chose two films that I felt couldn't be more different from each other, based on key elements of summaries and description, and director history, and sought to examine how similar they are through the lens of queer cinema. For this, I have chosen the films *Pariah* (2011), directed and written by Dee Rees, and *Spring Fever* (2009) directed by Lou Ye. I wanted to choose something recent/modern that pertains to queer lives as they're happening in a space similar to our own, like early 2010s America. *Pariah* is an all-Black production, set in the United States, that covers the story of a 17-year-old lesbian, Alike, who explores her gender presentation and place within her family and community as a gay woman. Then, I wanted to choose an international film, something that may not have the same cultural connotations and demographics in mind. For this, I chose *Spring Fever*, a film about the intimate entanglements of a gay Chinese man, Jiang Cheng, and the dangers he faces in pursuing his authentic sexuality. It is set in Nanjing, China, following one male lead and the impacts of two relationships he finds himself in. I wanted to take these two movies, that have nothing in common by description and understand them as two relevant pieces of queer cinema.

What important pieces of queer social change history do they provide?

The time and ways that both films were created bring a relevant understanding of the circumstances directors and artists face when trying to portray queer lives on screen. Between

being a Black film student making her way through film festivals and a terrain lacking funding and resources, contrasted to an already fairly successful director who happens to hail from a conservative and censorship-filled country. Both directors had to overcome a multitude of hurdles just to bring these films into fruition, let alone the stories they portray. They demonstrate the incredible hard work done by creators who seek to create representation in a world that wants to silence. The films enact a state of being that, although around a decade old now, is still reflective of our modern relationships with queerness in society. Stein (2019, p. 17) navigates this idea that there is a perceived “radicalization” that occurs each time the 2slgbtqia+ movement reorients and navigates the next foremost issue, as though the activism for such has a start-stop start-stop motion to it, rather than a flowing and ever-evolving need for equity and diversity. There is then a comparison here that the radicalization of Stonewall was the moment of its time, but in these films, a highlight of domestic violence against queer people becomes the top issue within the lens. That is to say, there is never a point in time where the cause halts, but shifts to tackle what causes the most pain and injustices of their time. Stonewall’s was a period of “radicalization” contrasts to the relative freedoms that we have now that are shown within these films, while still shining light on the societal structures that we have in place and the strife people faced to exist with them.

In what ways are these films connected?

This is the question I wanted most to answer, and I found it more abundant than anticipated. These films explore stories of queer people navigating their lives as authentically as they’re able and the adversities they face in doing so. While *Pariah* is a coming-of-age story, and *Spring Fever* is an adult film about intimate longing and belonging, each main character is

searching to find the pieces of themselves that just *make sense*. They want to find a place in this world where they can feel loved, and comfortable, and just be who they're meant to be. They both address community and the... prerequisites to finding them. Wang Ping, Jiang Cheng's first lover of the *Spring Fever* story, is harassed by his wife, slurs thrown about, considered "one of *those*". A queer woman in passing within *Pariah* is called a 'bulldagger', a pejorative term for Black lesbians related to bull dyke (Jones, 2012, p. 1). Whether it be the main characters or just those who live within the universe, the stories portray the hate that is thrown upon queer people in the most passive of scenarios. It brings me thoughts of our Week 3 course content (Jahelka, 2023) where we discussed gendered language and its evolution, and how language constructs an overarching narrative to the lives of people and their experiences. The chosen families within each of these stories also happen to be some of those who enact harm, and the main characters must face these narratives, these verbal and physical abuses, head-on to further embrace their own stories.

Connect our course readings with the two films you watch.

I want to connect the film *Pariah* in particular to our reading of *Life as a Part-time Hijabi Ahmad-Chan* (2020) in the context that the author talks about playing two different roles within life and a sort of 'undercover' aspect. I believe the way that the experience of 'liberation' Islamophobic people think a hijabi woman is supposed to feel (when removing their hijab) is akin to the way heteronormative people feel when 'normalizing' gay and lesbian relationships without further nuance. In the film *Pariah*, Alike gets a moment to play the straight girl and do what her mother wants from her, but along the way, it becomes a more stifling experience and ultimately harmful to her by not being open with her true self. There is this piece of the queer

experience that is shared with and around the stories shared by Hijabi women in the article. The contrast that lives between being in danger and at risk by openly and proudly presenting as their truest selves, and the moments when not wearing the hijab is comfortable, too, but it limits the ability of the person to fully encompass their full intersectional identity. On the other hand, I found *Pariah* to also relate to Brant (2019, p. 170), as she speaks in really beautiful ways about accepting, embracing and nurturing a lesbian identity. Something the author shares with our main character of *Pariah* is that essence of youthful exploration in knowing what is truthful to self, before going on a journey of self-acceptance.

I found a lack in my films for their connection to our course readings that lines up with the ethnic isolation of each. The realms in which the stories are told separate them from the intersectional issues that we face in a multicultural society; for neither film so much as suggests a superior white cis man within the contexts of their struggles. Acknowledging that is a bit neglectful to say, on the historical levels of why such homophobia exists in those spaces in the first place, which is intrinsically linked to white supremacy. Moreover, the most immediate realm of storytelling does not play towards the Western narrative. Thus, it's easier to make parallel comparisons rather than find their perpendicular intersections.

State your personal response to the films.

As a non-binary, aromantic, asexual person, there were few things I could directly relate to, or rather, there is a queer understanding I get from these stories. There are shared experiences that come from diverse identities, and certainly, not often do we see them represented on screen. Plenty of those shared reflections come through from either movie, though. In the form of restriction from family, the instability of relationships, curious people or just the instability of an

unwelcoming environment. I feel that I can relate deeply to both film's senses of getting swept away in the current and having to ground yourself again and again in the course of having a queer identity. Although different in genre, I found both were targeted at an audience such as myself, just in the ways that they were raw and real. *Pariah* blew me away with its cinematic storytelling and the absolute immersion that comes with sitting down to watch it. I can see myself in the main character, Alike, while also seeing how intrinsically unique many moments are to the Black lesbian experience. In *Spring Fever*, I think I had a greater suspension of disbelief, mostly in the levels of maturity and the overall pace in which we see Jiang Cheng move between each moment, trying again and again to reidentify himself. Regardless, I felt *Spring Fever* call to specific parts of me, and draw me in at the small moments where you have the time to just absorb every feeling and every sense that's flowing through the scene. Although these two stories stood out to me, I feel with the ultimately overwhelming ratio of heteronormative film to queer film, it becomes hard *not* to feel personally associated with any queer aspect that broaches the screen. These two struck cords within me for relatable and dissimilar reasons but I'm left to wonder, is there such thing as a universal queer experience—and is it possible to capture that in a single documented cinematic moment?

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