Not Just a Phase

Queer Girlhood and Coming of Age on Screen

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Abstract: In this article, I seek to interrogate the visibility of queer girls in contemporary cinema. I demonstrate how queerness has long been associated with a passing phase of adolescent development in the teen media sphere. I reflect on the nuanced relationships between queerness and girlhood in four contemporary US independent queer films, arguing that *Pariah* (2011), *Mosquita y Mari* (2012), *First Girl I Loved* (2016), and *Princess Cyd* (2017) are representative of a new wave of queer girlhood on screen. Rejecting the pervasive tropes of *coming out as coming of age* and *just a phase*, these films use queer girlhood to challenge linear models of girlhood.

Keywords: diversity, independent cinema, representation, sexuality, queer girl

Over recent years, many films have sought to represent the lives, desires, and experiences of queer girls. While queer girlhood continues to occupy a marginal place in screen media culture more broadly (Monaghan 2016a), many queer girl characters have been represented in films that have screened to acclaim on international queer film festival circuits. Although this is not an exhaustive list, these include *Spork* (2010), *Pariah* (2011), *Mosquita y Mari* (2012), *Dohee-ya* (A girl at my door) (2014), *La Belle Saison* (Summertime) (2015), *À Trois on y va* (All about them) (2015), *Bang Gang* (*Une histoire d'amour moderne*) (Bang gang (A modern love story)) (2015), *The Girl King* (2015), *Barash* (Blush) (2015), *First Girl I Loved* (2016), *Thelma* (2017), *They* (2017), *Princess Cyd* (2017), and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018).

With the number of cinematic representations of queer girlhood substantially increasing, it would appear that queer girls have finally and emphatically come out of the celluloid closet. However, it is essential to interrogate this newfound visibility since increases in the number of representations do not necessarily correspond with shifts in the representational politics through which queer girlhood is made visible on screen. In the past, queer girlhood has been predominantly represented on screen via two dom-

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inant tropes; queer girls have gained visibility via the *coming out as coming of age* narrative, through which complex negotiations of sexuality are rendered as simple rites of passage (Monaghan 2010). In the second trope, queerness has been associated with a passing phase of girls' adolescent development, through which queer sexualities, identities, and experiences are written off as temporary deviations from a linear path toward heteronormative adulthood (Monaghan 2016b).

A sample of four independent queer feature films produced in the United States from 2010 onwards rejects these dominant modes of representation to produce nuanced relationships between queerness and girlhood. In this article, I argue that *Pariah*, *Mosquita y Mari*, *First Girl I Loved*, and *Princess Cyd* highlight a new wave of representing queer girlhood on screen. Drawing on an analysis of dialogue, narrative, aesthetic, and themes, I argue that these films demonstrate how girlhood can be imagined culturally in queer ways. In rejecting the *coming out as coming of age* trope, the four case studies shift the queer girl's narrative focus from questioning and articulating sexuality to negotiating belonging, sexual consent, familial relationships, and the complex intimacies of girlhood friendships. Additionally, I claim that this new wave of queer girlhood on screen represents queerness beyond the confines of a passing adolescent phase. In doing so, it uses queer girl characters to challenge linear models of girlhood development and emphasizes the queerness of queer girlhood.

Queer Girlhood on Screen

To begin this analysis I consider, first, how queer girls have been represented dominantly on screen and how these representations relate to broader images of adolescence and queer youth.[1] In film and television, adolescent characters are often represented through coming of age narratives in which they tackle issues of identity formation while negotiating "the boundary or demarcation between child and adult" (Monaghan 2010: 57). For Rebecca Beirne, this is "the dominant model of young lesbian representation in world cinema" (2012: 259).[2] However, in the case of queer characters, the coming of age narrative is regularly entangled with coming out, a process that involves the "negotiation of social boundaries that define both sex and sexuality" (Monaghan 2010: 58). As a result, the common trope of *coming out as coming of age* sees queer youth coming of age only by coming to terms with their sexuality and/or gender identity and verbally articulating it. Once they come

out, queer youth either mature immediately into adulthood or they are written out because their only possible storyline has concluded. Thus, historically, this trope simplifies greatly a complex negotiation of identity and represents very little of queer adolescent life outside the climactic verbal expression of sexuality (Davis 2004; Driver 2007; Monaghan 2016b).

In addition to this, queer girls are consistently represented according to a particular gendered temporal logic that asserts that queerness is *just a phase* to be overcome as part of the normal process of maturation into womanhood. As Susan Driver notes, queer experiences are "often valued only as temporary departures from a normative course toward feminine heterosexual adulthood" (2007: 7). This logic of queerness as a phase reflects a number of common cultural assumptions held about girlhood and it has been traced from early European sexological discourse to contemporary international screen cultures (Monaghan 2016b).

On screen, queer girl characters are frequently represented through limited frames of reference that determine how girlhood is culturally understood. In many films and television series about girls and girlhood, homosocial intimacy and/or gender play is related to normal coming of age rituals, while for boy characters this signals the origin of an adult identity. Hence, while queer boys are more regularly represented through narratives that culminate in the affirmation of boys' sexuality, girls' same-sex attraction or gender questioning is regarded as part of an unruly teen phase (Monaghan 2016b). Exploring the logic of queerness as a phase in popular culture of the 2000s, Driver notes that "a girl's queer transgressions commonly reinforce, rather than disrupt, her development into a normal woman" (2007: 7).

This dominant means of characterizing queer girls' experiences, desires, and identities reflects the influence of heteronormative temporal logics on the representation of queer girlhood on screen. A considerable body of work in contemporary queer theory (see Ahmed 2010; Edelman 2004; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Halberstam 2005; Muñoz 2009) exposes the ways in which certain temporal logics can be thought of as heteronormative because they valorize linear and progressive life narratives and celebrate certain heteronormative milestones (such as birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, monogamous relationships, marriage, reproduction, parenthood, anniversaries, retirement, and death). Queer experiences and desires are excluded from this straight line of development and queer identities are thus uncelebrated, rendered as deviant, or deemed aberrant in heteronormative culture.

In the case of queer girlhood on screen, the particular narrative and cinematic devices discussed above have been used to figure queerness as a

temporary disruption of the linear heteronormative temporal logic that asserts that girls grow up to become straight women. Within this frame, queer experience or queer desire is made visible largely as a temporary (and juvenile) departure from the linear path toward heterosexual adulthood. As a result, this dominant mode of representation suggests that queerness is *just a phase* of adolescent development for girls. Echoing the work of queer scholars who argue that heteronormative culture casts queer subjects as those without a future (Ahmed 2010; Edelman 2004; Muñoz 2009; Halberstam 2005), I argue that with queerness limited to an unruly period of girlhood and largely recuperated into the heteronormative path toward heterosexual womanhood, the possibility for queer futures for girl characters is also greatly diminished. Hence, on television queer girls are introduced as an issue needing resolution and, once this is resolved, are promptly written out (Monaghan 2010, 2016b). In cinema, queer girls are also depicted as nostalgic memories of an adolescence long past, as in Fran Martin's "memorial mode" (2010: 3) of representation. For some girl characters, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Monaghan 2016b), queerness is explicitly framed as an experiment or practice for future heterosexual relations as in *Cruel Intentions* (1999), while for others it is a rebellion fuelled by intoxication as in *Thirteen* (2003) and *The Runaways* (2010), or a distraction from teenage boredom as we see in *My Summer of Love* (2004). In each case, girl characters are not allowed to imagine queer futures because their queerness is limited strictly to a temporary phase of adolescence and resolved so that they can mature into adult womanhood.

Representational strategies such as these reveal much about the cultural value placed on queer girls' experiences of girlhood, growing up, feeling desire, and falling in love. In particular, they highlight the dominance of simplified cultural renderings of queer girls' complex subjectivities. However, in the analyses that follow, I explore how four independent filmmakers in the US have pushed back against the dominant modes of representation to articulate a number of nuanced relationships between girlhood and queerness on screen.

Girlhood Caught between Worlds: *Pariah*

Dee Rees's *Pariah* (2011) directly confronts the dominant depiction of queer girlhood on screen. The film follows Alike (Adepero Oduye), an African-American lesbian teen who is caught between heteronormative and queer worlds. Alike is forced into a life of heterosexuality and hegemonic gender expression in her Christian home, but is out as an aggressive (or AG)[3] lesbian

among her openly gay friends. The film is notable for opening cinematic girlhood to the experiences of African-American girls, framing girlhood through New York's queer AG subculture, and shifting away from the *coming out as coming of age* trope. Unlike what happens in many queer girl films, Alike never questions her sexuality or gender identity, but questions, instead, her belonging in both heteronormative and queer social spaces.

Pariah opens with Alike and her friends at a gay strip club. They sit transfixed on women pole-dancing in front of them as Missy Elliot plays on the soundtrack. Later, outside the club, Alike and her friend discuss how many girls they talked to during the night. Alike reveals that she has missed her curfew and needs to leave immediately. On the bus, the film's soundtrack shifts from hip-hop to an acoustic guitar as Alike removes all the masculine traces in her outfit. She slowly takes off a black cap and removes a dark-coloured polo shirt to reveal a softer, sequined top beneath it. She stashes her masculine items in her backpack and puts feminine earrings on her ears. When Alike arrives at home she lies to her mother about her evening. It is in these opening moments that Alike's inability to fit into the world of her family is first revealed. Her discomfort extends throughout the film and increases in intensity as she conceals her sexuality and rejects conventionally feminine dress. Adding to the complexity of her representation, Alike's queer world offers no reprieve. It also has strict rules about gender expression and behaviour. In an early scene, Alike attempts to impress a girl by embodying AG masculinity and wearing a strap-on dildo under her pants. The strap-on is physically uncomfortable and she appears embarrassed to be wearing it. Her discomfort is made worse by the fact that it does not match her skin color. In this scene, the rules of this queer world, which dictate how to perform gender, desire, and identity, are made to seem as oppressive as Alike's mother's pink blouse.

It is significant that Alike appears at home in neither world since it is through their collision that she finds agency to build one for herself. This collision is sparked when Alike is pushed into becoming friends with Bina (Aasha Davis), the daughter of her mother's colleague. Bina is thought to be a good, Christian, feminine influence but a relationship soon develops between the two girls. As this relationship intensifies, it causes conflict in the queer social circle. Meanwhile, speculation about Alike's gender expression and sexuality cause increasing tension at home. In the film's emotional climax, Alike wakes to her parents arguing in the middle of the night. She overhears her mother yelling, "Your daughter is turning into a damn man right in front of your eyes!" and enters the argument.

AUDREY: Tell him. Tell him where you hang out! Tell him about your butch-ass girlfriend ...

ALIKE: Laura's NOT my girlfriend!

ARTHUR: What the hell are you talking about? You don't know what the hell are you talking about. Alike, please just go to your room, baby!

AUDREY: Tell him! Tell him you're a nasty ass dyke! Tell him you're a nasty ass stinkin' dyke!

ARTHUR: You tell your mamma that's not true. Baby, tell her.

AUDREY: You see!

ARTHUR: Would you shut the hell up?

ARTHUR: You tell your mamma that's not true.

ALIKE: You already know.

ARTHUR: No, I don't know. You tell your mamma it's just a phase.

ALIKE: It's not a phase.

In this scene Alike is confronted with both the violence of homophobia and the pervasive notion that queer identity is temporary; she rejects both completely. As a result, she finds the agency to create life anew for herself. In the film's conclusion, she takes up an early-entry college program and leaves both her heteronormative and queer worlds behind. Alike's poetry forms the narration in the film's final moments as she wipes away tears from her eyes.

And I am not Running
I am Choosing
Running is not a Choice
From the Breaking
Breaking is freeing
Broken is freedom
I am not broken
I am free.

This final monologue serves as one last reminder that Alike's narrative is not simply about finding a partner or following a linear path towards adulthood as in many teen-oriented films. Rather, Rees provides insight into the negotiation of a complex queer girlhood as Alike initially seeks to find her place in the world and ultimately sets about creating her own utopia.

Drift instead of Progress: *Mosquita y Mari*

In the back seat of a dusty wreck of a car abandoned in an empty garage, a teenage girl asks a simple yet important request of her friend. Softly and

romantically, in an almost breathless whisper, the words form: "Tell me something, something you never told anyone." This single line of dialogue in Aurora Guerrero's *Mosquita y Mari* (2012) performs a dual function in both establishing the intimacy of the relationship between the two characters and in drawing attention to the central concern of this film—an emphasis on the unspoken.

In stark contrast to the confessional, dialogue-focused *coming out as coming of age* narrative, the unspoken is taken up in *Mosquita y Mari* on both a narrative and stylistic level. It comes to characterize the relationship between Yolanda (Fenessa Pineda) and Mari (Venecia Trocoso), two Chicana schoolgirls growing up in a predominantly Mexican immigrant neighbourhood in Los Angeles. Yolanda and Mari are initially characterized as polar opposites. A quiet and dedicated student, Yolanda appears uneasy in the teen girl worlds of parties, fashion, and boys. She works diligently at school so that she can eventually help her family out of their difficult financial circumstances. This finds expression in the unique combination of responsibility and pride that flashes across Yolanda's face as she displays her high-scoring tests prominently in the living areas of her home. Mari, however, enters the narrative as a typical bad girl. Through Yolanda's eyes, she's first glimpsed from across the street as she rides her bicycle home, throws it to the ground and runs indoors. In a following scene, Yolanda's gaze again captures Mari's rebellious nature as she enters the classroom, headphones covering her ears. Later, this becomes more explicit when she is caught smoking in the school toilets. Mari's unique style and free-flowing hair is in subtle contrast with Yolanda's plainness, neat ponytail, and simple clothing.

The film follows the development of a friendship between these two contrasting characters. From its inception shrouded by conflict in the confines of the classroom, this friendship morphs into something much more romantic. What is particularly interesting about *Mosquita y Mari* is the way in which this relationship eschews common tropes associated with queer girl characters. As has been noted, the most common narrative for queer teenage characters is undoubtedly the coming out narrative through which, Glyn Davis argues, "[a] range of different models of homosexuality are brought into play" (2004: 132). In such narratives, dialogue occupies a privileged position as the verbal expression of (homo)sexual desire occurs at the climax of the film. Accordingly, as Davis writes, a tension is constructed "between language as a tool used to reveal an essential pre- or super-linguistic truth, and speech acts as the very creator of truth, repetitively producing ... factuality" (132). Yet this tension is evaded in *Mosquita y Mari* since the sexual

desires of the queer girls are left unspoken. In foregrounding the desire of her protagonists while de-emphasizing both dialogue and language, Guerrero accentuates the complexity of the intimacy between them. In the film's press kit Guerrero wrote,

> When looking back, long before I identified as queer, I realised my first love was one of my best friends. It was the type of friendship that was really tender and sweet but also sexually charged. Despite the fact that we had the makings of a beautiful teen romance we never crossed that line. The beginnings of *Mosquita y Mari* was reflecting back on that time and asking myself the questions, why didn't we cross that line and what kept us in 'our place?' I didn't grow up in a household where my parents forewarned me that if I turned out to be gay they would disown me ... the message was subtle. It was hidden in the silences around sex and desire; it was implied by society's expectations, you know, like you only experience those feelings of love and desire with the opposite sex. (2011: n.p)

Through *Mosquita y Mari*, Guerrero visualizes those silences of sex and desire, opening them up as ambiguous spaces for expression. With a central relationship that is left almost entirely unspoken, Guerrero shifts the focus to small gestures, emphasizing the intensity of certain moments and the dullness of others. Replicating that beautiful distractedness of first love, the camera also abandons the narrative and lingers on strands of hair blowing in the wind, awkward fingers fiddling with things, dust particles floating in the sunlight. Through this, *Mosquita y Mari* rejects the typical linear and progressive depiction of adolescence on screen, teasing out instead the complexities of intimacy in girlhood in moments of drift.

From Coming Out to Consent: *First Girl I Loved*

This movie tells the story of high school student Anne (Dylan Gelula), a social outcast who falls in love with the star of her school's softball team, Sasha (Brianna Hidelbrand). With this basic premise, *First Girl I Loved* (2016) fits firmly into the teen genre. Like many teen tales, the film presents its audience with a narrative based on a star-crossed romance between an arty outsider and a high school athlete. *First Girl I Loved* is also a queer coming of age film, following both Anne's and Sasha's negotiations of queer desire and identity as they approach the threshold between child and adult. However, departing from the generic model of queer teen representation, Sanga shifts the primary focus of the queer girl's narrative from coming out to the negotiation of consent. This is achieved primarily by revealing Anne's attraction to Sasha and her articulation of this attraction very early on in

the film and this opens up the narrative to tackle other issues. *First Girl I Loved* begins with a shot of Anne riding her bike through an empty schoolyard at night. She approaches a softball pitch and the image cuts to her point of view. This is where we see Sasha for the first time, filmed in slow motion as Anne watches her play softball. Anne takes photos of Sasha and puts the camera down as the image fades to black. The title of the film appears here, explicitly identifying Sasha as the object of Anne's desire. Sasha, too, enters the narrative with queer coding. Her first dialogue in the film is giddy excitement about spending time with Anne after school.

As in *Pariah* (2011) and *Mosquita y Mari* (2012), *First Girl I Loved* uses particular cinematic techniques to reject dominant linear models of both storytelling and adolescent development on screen. Specifically, the film uses non-linear storytelling techniques to interrogate key moments of the story through flashbacks. These flashback sequences seem initially to connect to the film's narrative present via a simple cause/effect or action/reaction relationship. However, as the film progresses, these cause/effect, action/reaction elements are complicated—the flashbacks provide additional contexts that complicate both the narrative causes and their effects. For instance, Anne's attraction to Sasha is articulated early on in the film and returned to several times. In the first instance, which occurs in the narrative present, Anne explains to her best friend Clifton that she likes someone named Sasha. He responds, "Sounds like some dumbass baseball player or something." Anne replies hesitantly with a slight quiver in her voice and an elevation in tone, "Softball, not baseball" and the scene ends. We return to this scene twice again via flashback. The second time, remembered from Anne's perspective, we pick up at Clifton's "dumbass baseball player" comment and follow the scene through to an additional piece of dialogue as Clifton laughs and explains to Anne, "Boys play baseball, girls play softball." He then tries to kiss Anne. The third time, Anne's coming out gives way to the film's broader focus on consent. The flashback, relayed from Clifton's perspective to a guidance counsellor, details his raping Anne. At the conclusion of the scene Anne furiously proclaims her queer desire by saying, "I know girls play softball. I like a girl. I want to fuck her, not you!"

This flashback sequence, played over several times, is paralleled in the Anne/Sasha dynamic later in the film. Midway through the film, Anne and Sasha sneak out, get drunk, and go to a bar. They share a romantic kiss on the dance floor. Filmed in slow motion and at eye-level, Anne and Sasha are bathed in pink filtered light. They both hesitate and give into their desire in unison. The moment is captured on camera by a bystander who texts it to

Anne. Following the kiss, Sasha leaves the bar and is later distant toward Anne, who desperately tries to hold on to the intimacy of their relationship. In one scene she professes her attraction in front of Sasha's friends but is rejected.

> ANNE: I like you. I 'like' like you. I was thinking, you know … why be weird about it? Let's just keep hanging out with each other, or whatever. You and me. Please?
>
> SASHA: Sorry, I'm not … I'm not gay. But good luck with that.

After being publicly rejected, Anne prints the image of their kiss in the school's yearbook without Sasha's knowledge and, in effect, outs her without her consent. Meeting with her parents and the school's guidance counsellor, Sasha claims that she did not consent to the kiss. However, when later interrogated about it, Sasha remembers the night in further detail. In another flashback Anne and Sasha lie in bed embracing romantically. In the narrative present, Sasha is unable to deny completely that she wanted to kiss Anne in the bar. In the film's closing scene, Anne remembers the romantic embrace. She recalls it in the moments before she tells a healthcare worker, "I'm totally gay."

While *First Girl I Loved* does not have a happy romantic ending, Anne's queer sexuality is affirmed by the conclusion of the narrative, and Sasha's queer attraction is not denied—such is the power of revisiting this moment through flashback. What is particularly significant about this film is that although ostensibly concluding with Anne's coming out, this is not Sanga's primary focus or concern. Eschewing the typical *coming out as coming of age* narrative, Sanga instead foregrounds a broader thematic focus on consent in the negotiation of relationships, which is a rarity for queer girls on screen.

Queer without the Crisis: *Princess Cyd*

Also shifting the manner in which queer girlhood is represented on screen is Stephen Cone's *Princess Cyd* (2017) that follows sixteen-year-old Cyd (Jessie Pinnick) through a few transformative weeks in Chicago with her novelist aunt, Miranda (Rebecca Spencer). The film's narrative is put into motion when Cyd is sent to Miranda's house for the summer after struggling to get along with her father. Miranda has lived alone for many years and has not seen Cyd since childhood; there is a slight hesitation in her voice when she thinks about having a teenage girl in her house for the first time since she herself was a teenager. While this sets the film up to deal with issues of intergenerational conflict in a manner typical of teen cinema, Cone

promptly supplants this conflict with connection, empathy, and hope. Through this focus on connection over conflict, Cone also represents his queer girl protagonist, Cyd, flourishing in a supportive environment—a rarity in queer teen cinema.

Cyd's flourishing is rendered aesthetically throughout the film—she is bathed in warm summer light for most of the narrative—and encapsulated in her open frankness about sex, desire, sexuality, and gender. From the moment Cyd enters the narrative at Miranda's house she carries a unique self-confidence and rarely hesitates to follow her desires. In one scene she walks confidently into a summer poetry soirée wearing a tuxedo, never hesitating for a moment about the status of her femininity in masculine dress. When asked what she's "into," Cyd also responds without hesitation, "I like … everything," and her attraction to both men and women is represented evenly throughout the film. In one of the opening shots, Cyd kisses a teenage boy, who is later described as her "sort of" boyfriend. Later, whiling away her summer days, Cyd has a brief fling with Josh, the son of her aunt's lesbian friends. She also becomes engaged romantically with Katie (Malic White), a young barista with a Mohawk whom she meets after getting lost on her way home. In a key scene midway through the film, as Cyd and Miranda sunbathe in their swimsuits in the backyard, Cyd confidently expresses her desire for Katie. In this scene, Cyd probes Miranda about her sex life (Miranda explains that she feels no desire to have sex) and Cyd confesses a secret; she says, "I want to have sex with Katie. Is that weird?" Miranda replies, "Of course not." Without questioning what her attraction to Katie means for her identity, Cyd then moves quickly to a follow-up question, "How do I do it?" Rather than facing conflict (internal or external) as she figures out her sexuality, as one would expect from a queer coming of age film, Cyd spends the summer exploring her desires and engaging in other processes of identity formation.

In addition, Cyd also spends the summer getting to know her aunt, building a connection to a maternal figure that she has missed out on since her mother's death when she was eight years of age. The relationship between Cyd and Miranda is not always easy; they begin the summer with an inability to connect which is evidenced by an early conversation during which Miranda shows Cyd a bookshelf primed with great summer reads, but Cyd responds simply that she doesn't enjoy reading. However, as the film progresses, Cyd and Miranda push each other intellectually, spiritually, and experientially, Miranda pushes Cyd in encouraging her to expand her worldview while Cyd pushes Miranda by opening her world to sensorial pleasures

like lying out in the sun on a summer afternoon. The visit is transformative for both of them.

In a key moment between the two characters, Miranda delivers a piercing monologue that shifts Cyd's perspective on happiness and fulfilment. Late at night, while cleaning the kitchen after a party, Miranda declares,

> I wish that I could share with you the utter joy it brings me to spend three hours on a Saturday afternoon reading Emerson or Melville or Virginia Woolf, or discussing TS Elliot or James Baldwin with a dear friend until dawn. The fulfilment that I get from going to church, from reading theology, from reading science, from praying. But I can't because I am me and you are you. I can't relate to you the total fulfilment that I get from these things. It's impossible. And I understand, you're finding your own joy. You're engaging your own stuff. That's great. That's how it should be, and it's a beautiful thing. But hear me. It is not a handicap to have one thing but not another. To be one way and not another. We are different shapes and ways and our happiness is unique. There are no rules of balance.

In this speech, Miranda implores Cyd to enjoy life in her own unique manner while respecting the ability of others to do so. What is particularly significant about this monologue is that it occupies the pivotal emotional moment in the film, while Cyd's earlier declaration of her feelings about Katie is only a brief assertion. It is this moment that marks Cyd's coming of age, not her coming out.

What this suggests is that Cone's approach to the queer coming of age film sees questions of identity formation emboldened with bigger, metaphysical questions of happiness and fulfilment. Through *Princess Cyd*, Cone asks what happiness is, how it feels, what it means to experience it, what a fulfilled life looks like, and how such a life might be constructed. Significantly, and for the first time on screen, these questions are refracted through both middle-aged womanhood and queer girlhood.

Conclusion: Girlhood Queered?

While queerness has long been represented as a passing phase of girls' adolescent development, recent cinematic representations demonstrate the potential for nuanced relationships between queerness and girlhood to be articulated through screen media. Drawing on four films that challenge dominant models of queer girl representation I see independent cinema in the US as a vehicle for novel representational strategies. Each representing different facets of the experience of being a queer girl in the millennial era, these four films diverge from the traditional iteration of queer girlhood on

screen in unique ways. Common across all four is a rejection of the *coming out as coming of age* trope—in fact none stage typical coming out narratives wherein a character's sexuality is confessed in a dramatic climax—and each offers an expression of queer girlhood that challenges linear models of girlhood development that see being gay as *just a phase*. Whether through particular dialogue, narrative, aesthetic, or a broader thematic focus, these four films imagine a queer girlhood that is presented as being well beyond the bounds of a passing phase. Also common across these films are close connections to the marginality of queerness as experienced by their creators. Both *Pariah* and *Mosquita y Mari* were created by queer women, *Princess Cyd* was directed by an out gay male filmmaker and the queer girl's perspective in *First Girl I Loved* was reportedly inspired by the coming out of director Kerem Sanga's younger sister. Away from the pressures of the mainstream studio-driven film industry, the independent sector has provided space for these filmmakers to reflect on queer girlhood in novel ways.

While the films analyzed here provide only a narrow glimpse into the diversity of queer girlhood on contemporary screens—as has been noted, the films selected for this article were all produced in the independent film sector in the US and have circulated internationally through LGBTIQ film festival circuits—these works do stand in for broader shifts in the representation of queer girlhood in recent years. Internationally, films such as those mentioned in this article follow suit in their complex depictions of girlhood on screen. Writing a little over ten years ago, Marnina Gonick, in asking "Are queer girls, girls?" highlighted a problematic trend in discourse on girlhood. Gonick suggested that "when the category 'girl' is named … it is white, middle-class, and heterosexual girls whose experiences are referenced" (2006: 122).

The films discussed in this article demonstrate the potential for girlhood to be imagined culturally in new, exciting, and queer ways: opening queer cinema to the teenage girl as an influential cultural figure; opening the girl's coming of age narrative to queerness, thematically and aesthetically; and diversifying the representation of girlhood on screen in terms of class, race. and sexuality. Independent US cinema has prompted a rethinking of girlhood, queerness, and coming of age. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue as we move into the next decade, and whether similar representational strategies have been or will be taken up by other national contexts or alternative forms of media such as television or online video. Required now more than ever is further research that interrogates existing and emerging representational models of queer girlhood across national contexts and

media spaces, research that leverages analyses of representational strategies to revise cultural understandings of girlhood, prying open the once rigid category of the girl to all manner of diverse experiences and identities.

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Notes

1. Though not specifically tied to representations of girlhood, it is worth noting that desire between women is often equated with friendship or other forms of intimacy. This is evident in Jackie Stacey's (1987) research on desire, identification, and female spectatorship in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) directed by Susan Seidelman, and *All About Eve* (1950) directed by Joseph L. Mankeiwicz, both of which have been critiqued by Teresa de Lauretis who argues that such works contribute to "the sweeping of lesbian sexuality and desire under the rug of sisterhood, female friendship, and the now popular theme of the mother-daughter bond" (1994: 116).
2. It should be noted that there are some examples in which queerness is firmly situated in childhood. Although they are not the only ones, two notable films are Celine Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011) and Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* (1997), both of which use girl characters to explore gender diversity in childhood.
3. The term "Aggressive" or "AG" originated in urban communities of color and refers to queer women of color with masculine gender presentation.

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