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Lesbian Image and its Representation in *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)* Movie

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Abstract:

This study will discuss how lesbian identity is represented and performed in the film *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)* in the form of characters Bee and Sophie. The textual analysis involves the analysis of the selected scenes where the researcher will examine how lesbian identity is produced in terms of visual signs, dialogue, emotional interaction and character behaviour. Based on the representation theories (Hall, 1997) and the concept of queer identity in cinema (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005), the analysis will be based on the production of meaning in the context of everyday interaction, bodily proximity, silence, vulnerability, and power dynamics. The results suggest that lesbian identity in the film is expressed as normalized and socially assimilated in an atmosphere of a modern youth, which is, at the same time, characterized by emotional insecurity, mistrust, and instability. Lesbian identity is enacted through emotional dependency, jealousy, reassurance, confrontation and power shifts and not through verbal declaration. The study adds to the discussion of the topic of queer representation in modern cinema by demonstrating how the performance of lesbian identity is produced and performed through minor visual and emotional practices in a mainstream film story.

Keywords: Lesbian Identity, Queer Representation, Performance, Queer Cinema

Introduction

The representation of marginalized identities in contemporary cinema has increasingly become a subject of critical scholarly inquiry, particularly as films continue to function as powerful mediators of cultural norms, social values, and collective understanding of gender and sexuality. Among the most significant shifts in modern filmmaking is the evolving depiction of lesbian characters, whose presence on screen has historically been constrained by institutional censorship, moral codes, and deeply entrenched cultural biases. Movies are among the most informative and emerging media

in creating sexuality perceptions, underscoring the critical role that film plays not merely as entertainment but as a site of ideological production and reproduction (Thomson, 2021, p. 2). As contemporary audiences grow increasingly diverse and socially aware, the demand for authentic, nuanced, and humanized representations of queer identities has intensified, making the study of lesbian representation in film both timely and academically urgent.

Historically, Hollywood's enforcement of moral codes severely restricted how same-sex relationships could be portrayed on screen. Filmmakers were compelled to code lesbian characters as deviant, tragic, or emotionally unstable, thereby reinforcing pejorative stereotypes that persisted for decades in popular cultural consciousness (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). These representational patterns were not merely aesthetic choices but were deeply ideological, shaping public perception of lesbian identity in ways that normalized stigma and exclusion. It was not until the broader social momentum of women's liberation and LGBTQ+ rights movements that cinematic portrayals of lesbians began to shift toward more complex, empathetic, and individualized characterizations. In this regard, meaning regarding gender and sexuality is produced through cultural codes and signifying practices, meaning that cinema actively constructs rather than merely reflects social realities (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

The urgency of studying lesbian representation in film is reinforced by a substantial and growing body of recent scholarship. Research has consistently demonstrated that repeated stereotypical media images can become naturalized within the viewer's perception, effectively normalizing marginalization (Hall, 1997). Conversely, more humanized and multidimensional portrayals have been linked to increased social acceptance and broader public engagement with questions of identity, equality, and belonging. The role of queer affect and emotional realism has been shown to significantly reshape audience expectations of LGBTQ+ screen representation (Tziallas, 2020). Independent cinema has similarly been identified as a more progressive space for queer visibility compared to mainstream Hollywood productions (Glyn, 2021). The intersection of gender performativity and screen narrative in queer-coded film characters has further been elaborated as a key mechanism through which identity is communicated to audiences (Subramanian et al., 2022). Within the horror genre specifically, queer identity has historically been leveraged as a source of narrative tension or comic relief rather than serving as a basis for genuine characterization (Nishikawa, 2022). More recently, contemporary A24 productions have been recognized for systematically disrupting normative representational conventions by centering marginalized voices as primary narrative agents rather than peripheral figures (Lapointe et al., 2023).

Within this evolving representational landscape, the film *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)*, produced by A24, occupies a particularly significant position. A24 has established a reputation for producing anti-mainstream films that challenge conventional Hollywood narratives, with earlier productions such as Moonlight (2016) and Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) receiving widespread critical acclaim for their treatment of identity and marginal voices. Bodies Bodies Bodies extends this legacy by positioning lesbian identity not as a peripheral subplot or a source of comic relief, but as a central narrative and thematic element. The lesbian couple at the film's core Sophie and Bee drive the story's emotional and dramatic tensions, with their relationship marked by mistrust, emotional distance, intimacy, and insecurity that are inseparable from their characterization as a lesbian couple. This represents a meaningful departure from the genre conventions of horror filmmaking, where queer characters have

conventionally occupied subordinate or tokenistic narrative roles (Nishikawa, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws upon two complementary analytical frameworks. The first is Representation Theory, which conceptualizes representation as a signifying practice through which meaning is constructed via cultural codes embedded in images, dialogue, and narrative structures (Hall, 1997). The second is Queer Film Theory, which foregrounds performativity — encompassing gesture, emotional expression, physical intimacy, and behavioral communication — as the primary mechanism through which queer identity is constructed and communicated on screen without reliance on explicit verbal labelling (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005, pp. 1–18). Together, these frameworks provide the analytical tools necessary to examine how Bodies Bodies Bodies constructs, performs, and communicates lesbian identity through both symbolic and behavioral signification.

Despite the film's cultural significance and its innovative approach to queer representation, it has received limited sustained academic attention, particularly in relation to its specific treatment of lesbian identity and performance. This gap in the existing scholarship represents a meaningful opportunity for scholarly contribution. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the ways in which *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)* represents and performs lesbian identity through its visual language, narrative structure, character dynamics, and emotional registers, with the broader objective of contributing to the growing body of literature on queer representation in contemporary independent cinema and illuminating the film's novelty as a text that humanizes and centralizes lesbian experience within a mainstream genre framework.

Methods

The data used in this study comprises the choice of scenes, screenshots, and verbal dialogues acquired in the movie *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)*. These data are visual cinematic like colour tone, camera angle, distance of shots, lighting, framing, positioning of characters, facial expression, body gestures and entire mise en scene, and verbal in the form of the dialogue and tone of speech. These visual and verbal elements are discussed as the primary data as they serve as the representative signs in which lesbian identity is created and acted out in the screen. The data utilized in this study is provided in scenes, screenshots, and verbal lines, which show the details of lesbians in the movie. This is information that is directly taken out of the movie which is directed by Halina Reijn and contains both visual aspects, including the facial expressions, physical interaction and framing, as well as verbal aspects including intimate conversation between Sophie and Bee.

This study will use textual analysis since it is consistent with (Hall, 1997, p. 15-17) as representational practices that are based on signs and codes which manifest themselves in the form of dialogue and scenes in the film. Queer identity is expressed by scenes, emotions, gesture and dialogue (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005, p. 6-9) Three key activities are involved in data collection process, and these are, film viewing, documentation and selection of scenes. It will be viewed on several occasions during the viewing phase so that they become conversant with the plot of the movie, how the characters interact, and the visual conventions. Special attention will be paid to those cases when the instantiations of lesbian identity have the price of intimacy, antagonism or even emotional investment. All the conceivable scenes at the time of documentation will be captured by a description of the circumstance and the time. Screenshots will be used to facilitate the visual analysis. Finally, the choice of the scene stage implies the

tabulation of all those scenes that are found with the time and explain what contribution a scene contributes to the picture of lesbian identity.

Results

The following section comprises the scene-by-scene analysis of the chosen scenes of the film *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)*. The discussion dwells upon the visual signs, dialogue, emotional interaction, and the character behaviour that visualizes and performs lesbian identity. Both scenes are analysed through the theoretical lens covered in the previous section, namely the representation and queer identity in cinema, to answer the research questions on the representation and acting of lesbian identity in the personas of Bee and Sophie.

Figure 1. (00:01:18–00:01:46) Emotional intimacy and hesitation

In the scene in figure I, Sophie and Bee are lying side by side on a grass field. Close framing, eye contact and silence as representational signs are the elements of physical and emotional intimacy that creates meaning based on their visual language (Hall, 1997). Sophie expresses her love by saying that Bee do not have to say it back and Bee answers it with gaze, facial expression, and slow smile. Lesbian intimacy is created through silence and hesitation as emotionally complicated over explicit, and this notion suggests that queer identities in film are manifested not through sex itself but through emotional attachment and interaction patterns (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005; De Lauretis, 1994). The non-verbal response of Bee acts out minority lesbian identity by being vulnerable and uncertain, which is in line with the interpretation of identity as social and culturally constructed (Weeks, 2016).

This scene is analytically valid as the meaning is constructed by visual signs that are gaze, proximity as well as tone of speech. Hall (1997) holds that representation is carried out in such a way that there is consensus on the cultural codes instead of any direct statements. Thus, the fact that lesbian identity is not visibly marked by verbal means in no way makes it less visible, but rather, it reinforces the ways of identity construction through the everyday interaction. This is the reason why this scene should be included in the form of data answering the RQ1 and RQ2.

Figure 2. (00:07:32–00:07:50) Normalization within social space

The scene in figure II, Sophie introduces Bee to her group of friends, and the absence of surprise indicates normalization of lesbian identity. Representation here operates through ordinariness, where meaning is created by what is shown as normal and unremarkable within a social context (Hall, 1997). The scene echoes what is happening in the media today where lesbian identity is absorbed in daily communication and no longer discussed in terms of deviance or exceptionality (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005). The informal performance of identity is also in line with the contemporary media culture, as sexual identity is not pronounced but negotiated by means of social conduct (Cover, 2012).

The performance of physical proximity as identity is theoretically based on Benshoff and Griffin (2005) who state that the identity of queer in cinema can be seen on the basis of familiar signs of relation like touching, emotional dependence, and mode of interaction. In this way, the scene is not perceived subjectively but by using the conventions of queer representation, which confirms its suitability to RQ2.

Figure 3. (00:10:32–00:10:42) Intimacy without disruption

Bee and Sophie have physical intimate time together but are interrupted by David who has a neutral response that strengthens the normalization of the relationship. This expression makes lesbian intimacy appear non-sensationalized and this, in contrast to

past film conventions, was to code a relationship between queers as transgressive or tragic (Benshoff, and Griffin, 2005). The visual continuity and absence of narrative disruption also emphasize the meaning, which can be linked to the theory of representation by Hall, which stated that selection and framing are the main elements of the process (Hall, 1997). Lesbian identity manifests its performance in the form of natural physical proximity and flow of emotions instead of explaining them verbally (De Lauretis, 1994).

The role of emotional tension is the representational sign in the context of identity building by culture (Hall, 1997). This turbulence in this interaction is not just narrative drama but adds to the creation of lesbian identity in an environment of insecurity and vulnerability. This justifies the emotional experience in mediating identity (De Lauretis, 1994), thus supporting the analysis emphasis on this scene.

Figure 4. (00:15:59–00:16:12) Insider and outsider positioning

This scene brings out the feeling of insecurity experienced by Bee in the company of friends of Sophie, who seems to be calm and socially secure. Here lesbian identity is represented according to the social positioning and power relations in a group, and this shows that meaning is constructed by the difference and contrast (Hall, 1997). Bee insecurity and lack of conversation make her body language and silence do the lesbian identity, and this corresponds to the view of identity being constructed by lived experience and through its social interaction (Weeks, 2016). This scene is also in accordance with the representational practices that choose emotional vulnerability as a central indication of queer identity (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005).

Analytically, the social positioning of both Bee and Sophie in this scene is important due to the fact that identity is generated in terms of difference (Hall, 1997). The conduct of the main characters, in terms of marginal body language by Bee and social superiority by Sophie, is coded to indicate hierarchy to the relationship. This gives objective justification to the idea that identity is constructed in a dynamic and interactive process, as well as through the lived situations, which is why the scene is included in the analysis as suggested by Weeks (2016).
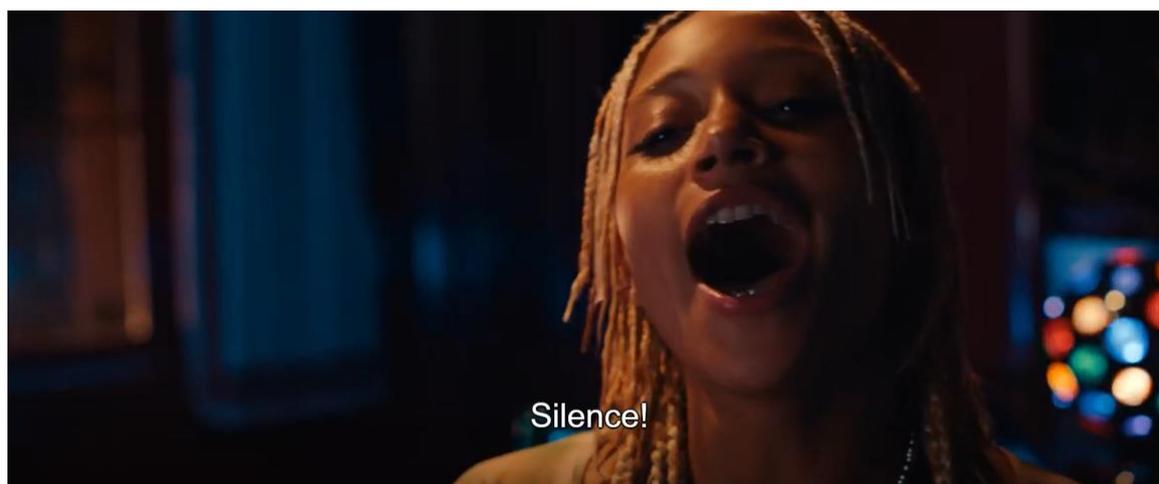
Figure 5. (00:19:00–00:19:25) Jealousy and emotional control

Bee's interaction with one of Sophie's friends is followed by Sophie's visible jealousy and her decision to control the social situation. This scene represents lesbian identity through emotional tension and possessiveness, elements often associated with unstable social environments in contemporary cinema (Carlson, 2025) Meaning is constructed through facial expression, camera focus, and interruption of collective activity, which function as signs within Hall's representational framework (Hall, 1997). The performance of jealousy reflects emotional insecurity rather than deviance, positioning lesbian identity within broader human emotional dynamics (De Lauretis, 1994).

Jealousy is not an action but a performative. Queer identity in the film is also realized based on the initiatives of activity and emotional exposure as presented in Benshoff and Griffin (2005). The apparent insecurity and jealousy shown here confirm identity as a performed and negotiated event and, therefore, directly respond to RQ2.

Figure 6. (01:00:30–01:01:10) Silence and abandonment

Bee is accused, physically expelled from the house, and left outside during a storm while Sophie remains silent. Silence acts as a sign of representation, which conveys the sense of emotional abandonment and imbalance of power (Hall, 1997). The vulnerability and the absence of protection represent lesbian identity that LGBT characters have a tendency to find themselves in the stories of suspicion and marginalization (Benshoff

and Griffin, 2005). The silence of Sophie is an act of emotional withdrawal; the expulsion of Bee is an act of accentuating the uneven nature of emotional and social capital in the relationship (Weeks, 2016).

The concept of silence is a significant mark in the representation theory. Hall (1997) notes that absence and omission are also used to generate meaning. This emotional withdrawal scene thus creates lesbian identity as vulnerable and unstable instead of verbalized. This confirms this interpretation to have been a theory based and not speculative one.

Figure 7. (01:07:18–01:08:40) Confession and reassurance

Bee's confession that she lied to gain Sophie's affection foregrounds emotional exposure and dependency. Sophie's physical reassurance through hugging represents lesbian intimacy as rooted in trust and emotional attachment rather than verbal certainty (De Lauretis, 1994). Meaning is produced through bodily closeness and emotional expression, aligning with Hall's view that representation relies on shared cultural understanding of signs (Hall, 1997). The performance of lesbian identity here emphasizes vulnerability and reassurance as central relational practices (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005).

The conflict shows that identity is constantly contested and not determined. According to Weeks (2016), sexual identity is a construct of the social world that can be redefined based on the interaction of life. This process is justifiably analytically relevant as it can be observed through the shifting blame, as well as the emotional volatility in this scene.

Figure 8. (01:23:33–01:25:11) Power reversal and confrontation

The act of Bee retrieving the gun and facing off with Sophie is a shift of power in the relationship. The concept of representation is changed to confrontation and agency, showing the way identity is not predetermined but can be changed under the influence of the altering social conditions (Weeks, 2016). The physical battle substitutes the conversation and supports the argument that the meaning can be created by the move and visual intensity instead of the conversation (Hall, 1997). The actions of Bee not only render the identity of the lesbian people of resistance and assertion, but also make the actions of the lesbianism in the past seem to be passive (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005)

The examples of performative identity can be seen in Bee with a change in physical and emotional positioning. Benshoff and Griffin (2005) explain that the dynamics of queer visibility in the film take place through acts of embodiment and relation. The reversal of power is therefore already a performative reconfiguration of lesbian identity, justifying the role of the scene in the answering of RQ2.

Figure 9. (01:27:30–01:28:40) Resolution and shared realization

The final scene reveals the truth behind the first death and reframes the conflict as an accident. Sophie and Bee's shared shock and silence represent emotional collapse and mutual realization. Meaning is conveyed through silence and facial expression, consistent with Hall's theory of representation through visual signs (Hall, 1997). The

performance of lesbian identity concludes with shared emotional experience rather than verbal resolution, emphasizing emotional connection as a defining feature of lesbian representation in contemporary cinema (De Lauretis, 1994; Benshoff & Griffin, 2005).

The last scene strengthens the point by Hall (1997) that the representation is dependent and contextual. The lack of moral punishment and outright labeling legitimizes lesbian identity in the narrative context. This helps to conclude that the movie is a representation of lesbian identity as a socially integrated issue and not a deviant one, and this directly addresses RQ1.

Discussion

This section presents the main findings derived from the analysis by identifying recurring patterns in the representation and performance of lesbian identity in the movie *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)*. The findings directly respond to the research questions by synthesizing the construction of lesbian identity in visual and narrative signs and its performance in terms of the emotional interaction, behaviour and power relations. These patterns are interpreted using the representation theory and queer film perspectives in the discussion (Hall, 1997; Benshoff and Griffin, 2005).

Representation of lesbian identity

According to the findings, the lesbian identity in the film is portrayed as normalized and being part of the modern social world. Bee and Sophie are depicted by ordinary interactions, bodily intimacy, silence, and emotional intimacy and not verbal expression. Meaning is created using visual signs gaze, proximity, and body language that reflects the opinion of Hall that representation exists in using shared cultural codes and not in utterances (Hall, 1997). Such kind of representation makes the lesbian identity just ordinary and grounded in the societal context which is now in tandem with current media practices wherein the lesbian identity is reflected as an aspect of everyday sociality (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005).

Meanwhile, vulnerability, mistrust, and emotional instability are also the manifestations of lesbian identity. Silence, hesitation and emotional withdrawals are key indications that build on the perception of the audience in the relationship. These representational patterns reestablish lesbian identity in the context of even greater insecurity and anxiety about the homeless social environment represented in the film, and emotional complexity over romanticized intimacy (De Lauretis, 1994).

Performance of lesbian identity

The results also reveal that Bee and Sophie express their lesbian identity by relying emotionally, reassuring, jealous and confronting. Lesbian identity is not only performed in terms of physical intimacy but also in terms of emotional exposure, confession, silence and conflict. The lack of vulnerability and the seeking to be accepted by Bee is opposed to the social confidence and the control of Sophie, which shows the power inequality in the relationship. Such performances demonstrate that identity is created in the process of collaboration and life lived instead of inborn characteristics (Weeks, 2016)

.The film probes in terms of jealousy, abandonment and reconciliation as some of the major modes of lesbian identity performance. The dynamics between Bee and Sophie in terms of power shows that lesbian identity is not something fixed but rather negotiated in terms of emotional tension and social interaction. This is one of the reasons that queer identities in the film are constructed through the relational behaviour and emotional practices but not only through sexuality itself (Benshoff and Griffin, 2005, p.118).

Conclusion

This study discussed the representation and performance of lesbian identity in *Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)* by the characters of Bee and Sophie. The stydy has shown, using the chosen scenes under analysis, that lesbian identity in the movie is made up of visual indications, emotional communication, silence, vulnerability, envy, and the changing power dynamics instead of declarative pronouncement. Based on the works by Hall (1997) and Benshoff and Griffin (2005), one can find that lesbian identity is projected as normalized and integrated into the social world of a modern youth, although it is also characterized by insecurity, instability, and the use of negotiation through relationships.

Placing the identity of lesbians in the context of daily communication and emotional multiplicity, the film goes beyond the previous stereotypical images and mirrors the wider shifts of modern queer image representation. The study is relevant to the debate on queer cinema through the emphasis on the production of identity using the hidden representational codes and the performative act within a mainstream film. Further studies can be conducted in the future to understand how comparable representational techniques can function within other movies that focus on the Gen Z generation or are produced by A24 to further study the changing patterns of lesbian representation in popular culture.

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