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Conflict Analysis in Luca Guadagnino's Call Me by Your Name

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33541/dia.v10i1.4713>**Keywords:** Conflict, Film Studies, Homosexuality

Abstract

This article analyzes the conflicts experienced by the main character in the film *Call Me by Your Name* by Luca Guadagnino. Guadagnino is an Italian director known for films such as *The Protagonist* (1999), *I am Love* (2010), and *Suspria* (2018). *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) is Guadagnino's film which discusses the issue of homosexuality set in a rural area in Lombardy, Italy in 1983. The analysis focuses on aspects of conflict because the issue of homosexuality is most clearly reflected through this aspect. The analysis is carried out to reveal the types of conflicts that occur, the causes of conflicts, conflict resolution, and how the film's cinematography helps visualize these conflicts. By using the formalism approach, it is concluded that there are two types of dominant conflict, namely social conflict and inner conflict. The main cause of the conflict is the character's inability to express his identity as a homosexual. The cinematographic aspect also helps conflict analysis through the visualization that is displayed.

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Tisca is a fresh graduate from the Bachelor Programme in English, Faculty of Languages and Cultures at Maranatha Christian University.

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CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN LUCA GUADAGNINO'S *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

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Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis konflik yang dialami oleh pemeran utama dalam film *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) karya sutradara Luca Guadagnino. Guadagnino adalah seorang sutradara asal Italia yang dikenal dengan beberapa filmnya seperti *The Protagonist* (1999), *I am Love* (2010), dan *Suspiria* (2018). *Call Me by Your Name* adalah karya Guadagnino yang membahas isu homoseksualitas dengan latar daerah pedesaan di Lombardy, Italia pada tahun 1983. Analisis difokuskan aspek konflik karena isu homoseksualitas ini terefleksikan paling jelas lewat aspek konflik. Analisis dilakukan pada jenis konflik yang terjadi, penyebab konflik, resolusi konflik, dan bagaimana sinematografi film membantu memvisualisasikan konflik tersebut. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan formalisme, ditemukan ada dua jenis konflik yang paling dominan, yaitu konflik sosial dan konflik batin. Penyebab utama konflik adalah ketidakberanian karakter untuk mengungkapkan jati dirinya sebagai seorang homoseksual. Aspek sinematografi juga membantu analisis konflik lewat visualisasi yang ditampilkan.

Kata kunci: Konflik, Kajian Sinema, Homoseksualitas

Abstract

This article analyzes the conflicts experienced by the main character in the film *Call Me by Your Name* by Luca Guadagnino. Guadagnino is an Italian director known for films such as *The Protagonist* (1999), *I am Love* (2010), and *Suspiria* (2018). *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) is Guadagnino's film which discusses the issue of homosexuality set in a rural area in Lombardy, Italy in 1983. The analysis focuses on aspects of conflict because the issue of homosexuality is most clearly reflected through this aspect. The analysis is carried out to reveal the types of conflicts that occur, the causes of conflicts, conflict resolution, and how the film's cinematography helps visualize these conflicts. By using the formalism approach, it is concluded that there are two types of dominant conflict, namely social conflict and inner conflict. The main cause of the conflict is the character's inability to express his identity as a homosexual. The cinematographic aspect also helps conflict analysis through the visualization that is displayed.

Keywords: Conflict, Film Studies, Homosexuality

1. Introduction

Love has been a fascinating and everlasting topic in the work of fiction. With the growing awareness of LGBTQ, love among the same sex has also become a focus of attention of fiction writers as well as film directors. This article focuses on the topic of homosexuality as reflected in a film. “Homosexuality derived from two Latin words ‘homo’ which means same and ‘sexus’ meaning sex” (Vito, 2020). Homosexuality is generally considered a taboo topic in all societies. Thus, gay people often encounter problems as they cannot openly reveal their identity due to social and religious norms.

One film that deals with this problem is Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me by Your Name*, which is adapted from a novel of the same title by Andre Aciman. The novel received the Award for Gay Fiction in 2008 (Mirani & Mustofa, 2019). Guadagnino is an Italian film director who succeeds in raising the issue of homosexuality through an interesting storyline. The film won several awards such as Film Independent Spirit Awards, Grammy Awards, and Golden Ciak Awards among others.

Call Me by Your Name tells a story about Elio and Oliver and their gay relationship. The film is set in Italy in 1983 when society does not openly discuss homosexuality in public. Elio is a teenager who lives in Lombardy, Italy. Oliver is a doctoral student from the U.S. who stays in his house for an internship for Elio’s father. Elio is portrayed to be a quiet gay teenager who cannot openly express his sexual orientation. The arrival of an attractive, sociable, and open-minded American attracts Elio. It turns out that Oliver is a homosexual and gradually they become close and have a relationship.

Call Me by Your Name is a unique film because it looks at gay relationships in a subtle way, including how they try to look normal in their behavior. It is a great movie in that Guadagnino successfully shows love differently, regardless of sexuality. “Elio and Oliver’s romance is an important leap for Hollywood away from the typical narrative of an LGBT film” (Brock, 2018).

The information about the film above shows that conflict is an important aspect of this film as the film raises various problems that the gay characters encounter. The conflicts analyzed are related to homosexuality. To support the analysis of the conflict, the cinematography, “...the conceptual tools of visual story-telling” (Brown, 2012) is also discussed. This article will use the formalism approach, it “...studies a text as only a text...in an isolated way [where]...All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself” (Salcedo, 2023).

Number of research has been done to analyze the film and the novel, such as Gianelle's (2019) master's thesis where the author attempts to elucidate and compare the novel and the film through their distinctive uses of the classics. In her bachelor thesis, Albertsen "...explores how sexuality is portrayed by the narrative in André Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and Luca Guadagnino's film adaption *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) (Albertsen, 2020). Another bachelor's thesis discusses the symbolism of gay in the film *Call Me by Your Name* by using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Azbaldo, 2020). Pertiwi (2022) discusses the film by using Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narrative analysis and mass communication theory. Another bachelor's thesis analyzes the film using C.S. Peirce's semiotics and focuses on studying how the U.S. film industry represents gay phenomenon within teenagers in the middle of the society that sees it as a taboo (Effendi, 2022). An academic research paper interrogates "...the film's relationship to Italian-ness and its representation of homosexuality...[and concludes that the]... debate over Chiamami exposes a fraught intersection of Italian cinema and gay histories" (Galt & Schoonover, 2019). Another thesis focuses on the audience's response toward the issue of LGBT that the film offered, especially from the point of view of the LGBT and the parents. The study is limited in Yogyakarta area and the conclusion is that there are different perspectives toward the message the film carries (Hanan, 2022)(Hanan, 2022). Hermawan's thesis focuses on the meaning of masculinity in the film by using semiotics theory. He concludes that "the meaning of masculinity is marked verbally in the form of conversations that show concern for each other and do not shout at the other person. Non-verbal signs are depicted in the form of gestures, behavior, character expressions, as well as physical depictions such as body shape and the way the character dresses" (Hermawan, 2021). Meanwhile, Akter's thesis looks at how the novel is turned into a film by exploring the nature of desire between the two main characters (Akter, 2022). Another master's thesis compares the novel and the film by looking at the tropes and allusions in both media. It concludes that "both media present the story of this romance amid a host of classical tropes and allusions, but they each do so in different ways. While the novel engages with the classics in a thoughtful and interpretive way, the film exploits the controversial nature of the age-gap between the two protagonists, Elio (seventeen) and Oliver (twenty-four), alluding to the ancient institution of pederasty as its aesthetic defense" (Gianelle, 2019). Sriwulandari and Yaqin focuses on analyzing "... speech act used by one of the main characters in the film..."[and investigating] what acts emerge behind the utterances and the impacts for the hearer after the utterances is stated (Sriwulandari & Yaqin, 2021). From the number of analysis on the film above, none of them

discusses the conflict that happens between the two main characters, thus it becomes the novelty that this article offers.

2. Research Method

The research method used in this article is a qualitative research that combines formalism approach and film studies. To gather the data, multiple screenings of the film are done so that necessary visual proofs can be drawn from the film. In addition, library and internet research is also performed to support the analysis of the conflict. In the context of film studies, the film's cinematography and mise-en-scene also become a part of the discussion to show the visual proof that supports the conflict analysis. The visual proofs are then interpreted to support the conflict analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

The movie sets in 1983 in Lombardy, Italy and it focuses on two closeted homosexual characters named Elio and Oliver. Elio is a reclusive 17-year-old teenager who lives in the small quiet town of Lombardy in northern Italy with his mom and dad, while Oliver is an American doctoral student who comes to Italy as an intern for Elio's father, a professor in archeology. Oliver stays in Elio's house throughout the internship. Oliver is portrayed to be an easygoing, smart, good-looking, and charming character who not only attracts local girls, but also Elio. However, at this point, Elio does not know about Oliver's sexual orientation yet. Later when they have opened up to each other about being a gay, Oliver tells Elio that he actually likes Elio since the first time they meet. Oliver has tried to show this through some special attention to Elio. For example, when Oliver massages Elio's shoulder after they play volleyball, the way Oliver looks at Elio when Elio plays the piano, and the way Oliver often watches Elio from a distance. However, Elio says that he does not realize it. Meanwhile, Elio is more aggressive in approaching Oliver and their closeness happens gradually, which begins with a conversation, small touch, and eventually a kiss. However, Oliver and Elio never openly express their feeling in public and only show them when they are alone.

There are three social conflicts. The unifying element of all the conflicts is their inability to openly reveal their feeling and relationship and act like a gay couple in public. Thus, they do it discreetly which causes conflicts to happen. Even though the film does not explicitly show a society that forbids homosexual relationships, the two characters' cautious

and discreet actions imply that such a relationship may cause polemic in the small and peaceful community.

The first conflict happens before Elio expresses his feeling to Oliver. The cause of the conflict is the inability of both Elio and Oliver to honestly reveal their feeling although they both are attracted to one another. Oliver pretends to be a “normal” man when during a small local party, he dances with lots of girls in front of Elio as a way to see Elio’s reaction. Elio does not dare to show his feeling towards Oliver and choose to stay quiet despite his jealousy. The next day, as if to check Oliver’s feelings towards the girl, Elio tells Oliver about the girl’s good qualities and whether he will approach the girl. Unexpectedly, Oliver gets angry and tells Elio not to meddle with other person’s business and that he does not need to play as a good host.

On the one hand, Elio attempts to match Oliver with a local girl as a result of Oliver’s actions during the party. On the other hand, Oliver does not need Elio to help him in this matter and he is clearly annoyed by Elio’s statement because he actually likes Elio as can be seen when in one scene Oliver gives a shoulder massage to Elio days before and secretly watches Elio while he was playing piano. Later in the film, Oliver also tells Elio that the shoulder massage is a sign that he likes Elio. This conflict happens because both Oliver and Elio cannot openly express their feeling as they are being discreet about their sexual orientation, so they both only give subtle signs rather than express their feelings directly. The conflict is resolved when Elio apologizes and the visualization of the resolution can be seen in figure 1 below:



Figure 1. Oliver is mad at Elio inside a car (Guadagnino, 2017).

Figure 1 shows Oliver’s angry expression when he talks to Elio, while Elio is shown to be surprised and does not dare to face Oliver. Elio’s body language also shows that he is tense as he sits up straight and looks to the front while Oliver is by his side. The scene uses

a medium close-up shot, which is when the camera shoots “the subject from the chest or shoulders up and not revealing a lot of the surrounding environment” (MasterClass, 2022). This kind of shot makes the audience focus on Oliver and Elio’s emotional expressions. The frame of the car that splits Elio and Oliver also emphasizes the conflict that happens between them. The audience also can see that Elio looks “hidden” behind the glass and his face is blurred as if to emphasize that he is hiding his true feeling towards Oliver.



Figure 2. Oliver and Elio shake hands (Guadagnino, 2017).

Figure 2 above shows the resolution of the conflict. The camera places the two characters symmetrically on the frame creating harmony in cinematography, which also suggests that they are on good terms. From the mise-en-scène aspect, they are seen to be smiling at each other while shaking hands. In a humorous gesture, Oliver uses an arm of a statue to shake Elio’s hand which implies that there is no hard feeling on his side. This scene uses a medium shot which is “showing the subject from the waist up while revealing some of the surrounding environment” (MasterClass, 2022). The use of this shot gives the audience a better view of their body gesture and facial expressions.

The second conflict is a social conflict between Elio and Oliver. It happens when they visit a monument of the Battle of the Piave River. The conflict is caused by Elio’s attempt to express his feeling toward Oliver. On the one hand, Elio wants to tell Oliver about his feeling toward him by saying that Oliver is the only one with whom he can talk and relate, so implicitly he tells Oliver that he likes him. On the other hand, Oliver does not want to talk about Elio’s feelings, especially in public. Oliver does not verbally show that he is not comfortable talking about their relationship in public, but his action shows it by moving further from Elio and responds Elio curtly.

Both are in conflict because they cannot explicitly express their feelings. Oliver is aware of the controversy they may cause if people find their sexual orientations, which is why he does not want to talk about it in public. In the 1980s, being gay or lesbian were not accepted by most families and schools in Italy which drove some of them to commit suicide due to the unbearable pressure from the community (Chu, 2014). Oliver explicitly stops Elio from talking and brushes away the topic that he refers to as “those kinds of things”, although his response does not show how he feels about Elio. However, Elio’s “confession” makes Oliver aware of Elio’s feelings towards him. The conflict is resolved as Elio, despite being disappointed, agrees not to talk about their relationship anymore as Elio says it is fine for him not to talk about it any longer.



Figure 3. Elio and Oliver talk from a distance (Guadagnino, 2017).

The conflict is emphasized in the screenshot above. The audience can see that the conflict is underlined by the existence of fences between Elio and Oliver when they converse. The distance that Elio puts between him and Oliver suggests that he is being careful about the topic he is going to talk about. The fence can symbolize the local norm which serves as a barrier regarding gay relationships. As a guest and an intern, Oliver needs to be very careful as he is also aware of the local norms. Let alone, Elio is the son of the professor with whom he is working. In figure 3, the camera shoots Elio’s back during an argument so that the audience cannot see his expression, as if emphasizing his discreet way to reveal his feeling toward Oliver.

Figure 3 uses a medium shot so that the audience can see the proximity of the two characters as they converse. This shot is unusual for a scene showing conflict because usually when two people conflict, they will share an equal portion of the frame to emphasize that

they are in conflict, but since the conflict is not confrontational and more discreet, the film frames their argument in such a way.



Figure 4. Elio leaves Oliver (Guadagnino, 2017).

The resolution can be seen when Elio leaves the scene first and does not wait for Oliver. In figure 4, again the audience can see a barrier between them in a form of a car that stands between them. An object in a central frame usually becomes the focus, so this shot clearly shows that the two main characters do not want to be the focus of attention and the film visualizes this by putting them on the edge of the left and right frame, distanced from each other. For the second time, the audience can only see their backs which symbolizes their forbidden relationship. Figure 4 uses a long shot to emphasize the distance between them. A long shot is “a camera shot that shows the entire subject from head to toe and places that subject in relation to their surroundings” (Maio, 2020). Through a long shot, the audience can see when Elio leaves Oliver, also the placement of the car as a barrier.

The last conflict happens between Elio with a girl that he has been sleeping with, Marzia. In that scene, Marzia confronts Elio about their relationship by asking Elio whether Elio is her boyfriend or not. Her question implies that despite their closeness, Elio never explicitly expresses his feeling toward Marzia, so she needs assurance. On the one hand, Marzia wants to know if she is his girl or not, as they have been together for some time. On the other hand, Elio knows that his love is not for Marzia or any girl, so Elio does not respond at all, he just stands awkwardly, not knowing what to say. There is no dialogue spoken, but the silence and gesture are enough signs for Marzia that Elio does not love her. In addition, Elio does not even try to stop Marzia from leaving to explain the condition. Elio’s closeness to Marzia is to be just a pretense to hide his true sexual orientation from the public. The conflict is solved as Marzia takes Elio’s silent response as a no to her answer and then she leaves him.



Figure 5. Elio does not know what to say to Marzia and responds with a gesture (Guadagnino, 2017).

As can see from figure 5 and the dialogue, Elio does not verbally answer but uses a bodily expression to express that he does not know what to say. The mise-en-scène also emphasizes the conflict by putting some plants that stand between Elio and Marzia, suggesting that their relationship is not close. His silence further suggests that he cannot openly express his true feeling, which relates to the main unifying element. He does not love Marzia, which is why he cannot answer Marzia's question. The scene is in a medium-wide shot to let the audience see the distance between Elio and Marzia, in addition to some plants that separate them that emphasize the conflict between them.

Near the end of the film, Oliver is about to finish his internship and before going home, Elio and Oliver decide to take a summer holiday out of town. While on holiday, they can freely express their feelings without being afraid of peer pressure. However, they still act discreetly by going to quiet and empty places such as waterfalls and forests. After the summer holiday, Oliver goes back to America and leaves Elio heartbroken. Three years later, Elio gets a call from Oliver telling him that Oliver will soon get married to a woman. Their relationship does not end happily as they are unable to express their feeling openly.

What is interesting, the film never explicitly shows through other characters that such a relationship is forbidden, but the atmosphere surrounding the discreet actions of the two characters suggests that such a relationship may cause controversy because they live in a period when a gay relationship is still controversial as stated in an article that “in the 1970s – 1980s, homosexuality became a critical debate in Italy” (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2020).

Oliver and Elio keep their relationship a secret throughout the film. Elio's parents seem to already suspect their relationship but they never explicitly mention or confront it with Elio. As mentioned above, homosexuality in Italy was still a critical debate around the

1980s, and this is shown through how they keep their relationship a secret. An article also stated that homosexuals “belong to a discriminated minority in a continuous stress condition” (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2020) which further explains why Oliver and Elio cannot express their true sexual orientation.

4. Conclusion

The analysis shows that there are three social conflicts that are caused by their inability to express their true feelings. The first conflict happens when Elio tries to match Oliver with a local girl to confirm Oliver’s sexual orientation. The conflict is resolved when Oliver forgives Elio and they are on good terms again. The second conflict happens when Elio tries to confess his feeling to Oliver in a public space. The conflict is resolved when Elio agrees not to talk about their relationship further. The last conflict happens between Elio and Marzia when Marzia confronts their relationship. Marzia needs assurance about their status, but Elio knows that his love is not for Marzia, so he does not say a word to Marzia. The conflict is resolved as Marzia leaves Elio when Elio does not say anything to her.

The film ends when Elio receives a call from Oliver telling him that he will get married to a woman. The film does not explicitly show that same-sex relationship is forbidden, but the characters’ actions suggest that their relationship may cause controversy because they live in a period when society still see a gay relationship as a controversy.

Luca Guadagnino has successfully portrayed the challenges and struggles of gay characters who have to repress their feeling due to peer pressure and social norms. This film shows the struggle they have to face by pretending that they are “normal” in front of others. Their separation at the end of the film also suggests that social pressure is stronger to the point that they have to submit to the accepted social norm, as shown by Oliver’s decision to marry a woman.

In addition, the conflicts relate to the actual condition in Italy in the 1980s when homosexuals have to hide their sexual orientation from the public. Present Italy has changed and they are more open to the LGBTQ community so they do not have any problem expressing themselves in public anymore (“Gay relationship in Italy”).

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