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Abstract
This paper considers how the melodramatic form of *Out in the Dark* is employed to subvert the biopolitical discourses concerning queer migration across the Israel-Palestine border. In the diegesis, the queer Palestinian refugee is gradually stripped of his human rights, security, and legitimacy during border crossing, gradually being reduced into a state of 'bare life'. I contend that the film *Out in the Dark* represents queer bare lives to subvert the homonationalist discourses employed by Israeli state power. The melodramatic form of *Out in the Dark* alters the recognition of the victim/hero/villain and cultivates novel spectatorial sensibilities via aesthetics. Ultimately, I show how the film associates queerness with the confluence of nationalism, militarism, and heteropatriarchy on both sides of the Israel-Palestine border, which offers a critique of biopolitical governance over the lives of queer migrants.

Keywords
homonationalism, melodramatic political discourses, transnational cinema, pinkwashing

Out in the Dark (Michael Mayer, 2011) belongs to the emerging body of films detailing contemporary queer migration.[1] Queer Palestinian college student Nimr falls in love with a young attractive Israeli lawyer, Roy, in Tel Aviv, a city he frequents in the daytime and at night via an academic permit, at a university for an exchange course and at the gay clubs to meet other queers from both sides of the border. Nimr's education and aspirations are disrupted when the security service in Tel Aviv approaches and coerces him to become a collaborator, which Nimr refuses. The accidental exposure of Nimr's sexuality to his family exacerbates his precarity and he flees to Roy without a legal permit while hiding from the

authorities. The desperate lovers try every possible way to survive, legal and illegal, but fail to have a life in Tel Aviv. Focusing on the entanglement between queerness and border-crossing, *Out in the Dark* unfolds along a melodramatic love story of a queer migrant and draws on melodramatic conventions of 'pathos and action'[2] to highlight emotional sensibilities. In other words, the film is a melodrama of queer migration.

Scholarly discourses on queer migration focus on the intersectionality between migration and sexuality and expose inequalities and injustice towards queer subjects vis-à-vis migratory practices and procedures, meanwhile revealing national, racial, religious, and economic dynamics intersecting with sexual politics.[3] This paper considers one aspect of queer migration that *Out in the Dark* engages with, namely the master narrative of queer migrants unilaterally escaping from the homophobic and repressive homeland to the modern liberal state of sexual freedom in order to live out their 'true' sexual identities.[4] As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan cogently argue, 'nationalist biases and geopolitics contribute to this binary formulation, in which the United States and Europe are figured as modern and thus as the sites of progressive social movements, while other parts of the world are presumed to be traditional, especially in regard to sexuality'.[5] This binary formulation casts countries and regions that do not conform to the sexual politics of visibility and 'coming out' as primitive and oppressive, whilst imposing the master narrative of oppression to liberation on queer migrants. In this light, queer migration has been harnessed and regulated by homonormative and homonationalist regimes to solidify Eurocentrism and imperialism.[6]

Cultural products such as films dealing with queer migration have the capacity to critically interrogate the latent geopolitics, sexual politics, and homonationalism at work. Homonationalism, as theorised by Jasbir Puar, illuminates the ways in which homonormativity sustains itself through excluding racially minoritarian and non-normative queers in the United States.[7] Since then, the concept of homonationalism has transcended its context of US exceptionalism and inspired research in queer migration. For instance, Eithne Luibhéid observes that nation states in the Global North utilise the selective granting of asylum to queer refugees to maintain their liberal image without threatening the 'purity' of dominant populations.[8] The management of a population through controlling migration, along with the inclusion of queer liberal subjects and the exclusion of abject racialised others, provides a biopolitical insight into queer migration. Biopolitics refers to the state power that governs the administration and optimisation of lives, as well as the right to kill and maim.[9]

This paper explores the biopolitics of queer lives, represented in *Out in the Dark*, through Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of 'bare life'[10] to unpack an itinerary of conceptualising queer migration that challenges homonationalism. Agamben theorises bare

life as the form of life in the state of exception dictated by sovereignty, where it may be legitimately excluded or even annihilated, and as a political theoretical threshold marking the sovereign power capable of producing unlivable conditions. When Agamben considers the bare life as a general and universal condition innate to the modern subject, he inevitably overlooks the nuances induced by differently-attributed and distributed unlivable conditions imposed by heterogeneous regimes of power. This paper in turn uncovers how queer lives represented in *Out in the Dark* morphs into what I term 'queer bare lives' to demonstrate the unequal distribution of life and death of queer migrants.

Set in Tel Aviv and Ramallah, *Out in the Dark* narrates a melodramatic queer love story across the Israel and West Bank border. Queer migration in this specific regional context is fraught with the homonationalist discourse of pinkwashing, a strategy adopted by the Israeli state to construct a modern and liberal image of Israel as a gay haven opposing Palestine as homophobic and reactionary.[11] Pinkwashing can be seen as the regional rendition of homonationalism, which epitomises how nationalist ideologies exploit queerness to differentiate queer lives – queer Palestinians' lives are marked by suffering, death, and abjection. In his work on pinkwashing discourses, Jason Ritchie asserts that the stories of queer Palestinians' escape from the homophobic East into the gay-friendly West are frequently manipulated to 'administer, optimize, and multiply [Israeli/Jewish] life' and 'regulate the distribution of [Palestinian] death'.[12] This West/East binary has been broadly criticised in queer studies which have reconsidered the formulation that queer is a Western construct. Enriched by global sexuality studies and queer diaspora studies, discussions surrounding queerness have been set in different cultural and regional contexts to disclose and criticise the imperial and hegemonic registers, while re-evaluating the legitimacy of the West as liberal and the East as backward binary.[13] As Gil Hochberg suggests, mapping out 'queer' politics in Israel and Palestine is to situate cultural particularities in a framework 'that effectively diffuses the authority of static narratives about cultural authenticity' and to contest the simplistic binary of Israel as modern and Palestine as backward.[14]

The West/East binary is predominant in the cinema of queer migration as it structures legible narratives of oppression to liberation that fit into the public imagination of non-Western queers. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover argue that transnational queer figures proclaim the regulatory structure of liberal capitalism and world system through the 'othering' of their figuration, whose cinematic representations render apparent the conflict between Eurocentric modernity and its counterpart.[15] However, cinema does not merely represent the conflict through figuring queer migrants, but also provides 'a privileged space for negotiating this intersection (of representation and politics), where intimate spaces are geopolitically defined and where embodiment, temporality, and desire have the potential to be imaginatively reworked'.[16] Galt and Schoonover are particularly invested in the

potential of queer rom-com that arranges a happy ending for queer couples, which can in turn be interpreted as a reimagination of transnational queer relationships long burdened with tropes of misery and precarity. In contrast, I am interested in the melodramatic form and genre conventions of the cinema of queer migration. I argue that the dominant homonationalist and biopolitical narrative of queer migration can be understood through the lens of melodramatic form. If the melodramatic form applied to public political discourses manifesting sovereign power manoeuvres the collective imagery and imagination of queer migration, the melodramatic form of *Out in the Dark* redistributes visibilities and sensibilities and offers an alternate emotive cognition of politics through its narrative structure and audio-visual style.

Drew Paul writes of the difficulty of representing queer Palestinian migrants living in Israel in cinema. Addressing them as the 'impossible figures', he argues that the queerness of Palestinians is consistently harnessed by different even polarised political discourses, encompassing homonationalism and nationalist rhetoric of queerness as Western. He writes: 'It seems that gay – and more broadly, queer – Palestinians are frequently burdened with representing the nation and politics in a politically palatable (and often overdetermined) manner.'[17] The representational dilemma as such is also reflected in *Out in the Dark*. The film clearly draws on some stereotypical representations of Palestine such as victimised queer Palestinians, borderline terrorism, and homophobic and conservative families. Reviewers thus caution against the underlying pinkwashing behind a story of a queer Palestinian seeking refuge somewhere else.[18] Nevertheless, Nir Cohen comments that *Out in the Dark* illustrates how Tel Aviv is a 'temporary' refuge at best.[19] Alla Ivanchikova argues that the film 'resists the vastly criticized pinkwashing of Israel by showing that behind the facade of benevolent liberalism there lurks a landscape of unmitigated racism and state-sponsored violence'.[20]

Queer cinema and migration cinema frequently engage with narratives and representations of misery, escape, and oppression, as well as stereotypical and even offensive images of queers and migrants. Negative representations or 'bad objects' could still generate heuristic critiques of latent hierarchies that would not be visible in the stories shying away from 'unproblematic' representations.[21] *Out in the Dark* is undoubtedly flawed in its lack of authentic representation of lived experience. Nonetheless, the film demonstrates how queerness is manipulated in the Israel-Palestine contexts; its melodramatic form stages critiques and subversion of dominant state-sponsored political discourses, cultivating viewers' sensibilities to potentially overcome the very stereotypes the film draws on.

Melodramatic form, homonationalism, and queer bare lives

The conceptualisation of melodrama has encompassed the genres of family drama and the woman's film, 'which use the family and the social position of women as their narrative focus';[22] a style that privileges emotional excess, as exemplified by Douglas Sirk, and a mode of filmmaking, artistic expression, and spectatorial sensibility.[23] With the en-masse emergence of Hollywood films focusing on domestic settings and female positionalities in the 1950s, later theorised by Thomas Elsaesser as 'family melodrama',[24] melodrama as a genre has been since tethered to 'the woman's weepie',[26] dovetailed with its emotional and sensational stylistic characteristics. While earlier criticisms scrutinise the 'weepie' genre as a reflection of patriarchy and American middle-class bourgeois ideology through the lens of apparatus theories and 'social mise-en-scène',[26] recent scholarship has reconsidered melodrama as a fundamental and pervasive modality of cinema equivalent to realism and modernism, refuting the established genre of family melodrama and the woman's film. For instance, Linda Williams suggests that 'melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action.'[28]

It is Peter Brooks who first comments on melodrama's capacity to modulate a legible moral economy through staging the conflicts between the Manichaean good and evil in French theatre after the Revolution. Yet his theoretical concern focuses on the re-establishment of moral order in the post-Revolutionary secularised world, namely 'making the world morally legible',[29] and his analyses are more confined to theatre and literature. The axiom of moral economy in melodrama reads as: the more the victim suffers, the more virtuous they are. Building upon his framework, scholars have extended the concept of melodramatic form. Jörg Metelmann asserts that the role of the victim is functional in melodrama: 'depending on the recognizable grievances in a given society, it can shape-shift from being a young bourgeois woman to a penniless workman to a dark-skinned immigrant'.[30] Elsaesser claims that through 'a spectacle of righteousness wronged', melodrama performs a moral legibility that speaks to the viewer and transforms the spectatorial sympathy into a symbolic act of solidarity.[31] Williams emphasises that the cultural power of melodrama lies in the transition of the suffering victim to the righteous hero, through which suffering becomes the moral justification for taking action. Melodrama thus promises what could happen in a world of justice, generating outrage and hope simultaneously.[32]

Built upon moral legibility, Elisabeth Anker detects a melodramatic form in political discourses, as she contends: '[m]elodramatic genre conventions are found in political rhetoric, governing processes, citizenship practices, and formations of national identity.'[33] She names the political rhetoric exploiting melodramatic genre conventions 'melodramatic

political discourses', through which the nation state turns into the righteous victim, with the state's antagonist the villain. The suffering of the state proffers a 'felt legitimacy' that justifies the action taken, such as waging wars, to recover freedom and express virtue.[34] In melodramatic political discourses, the injured nation state is both the virtuous victim who morally justifies their vengeful action through that very injury and the hero who strives for emancipation, freedom, and sovereign agency. Investigating news coverage and official speeches after 9/11, Anker explores how the US government applies melodramatic conventions to justify its war on terror. In her framework, the melodramatic form of political discourses comprises applying a moral economy of good and evil, the designation of political agency through the role of the victim/hero/villain, the appeal to identification through intensified affect, legible narrative forms, and the anticipation of triumphant freedom.[35] Anker notes that, in addition to depicting the US as the injured innocent victim transforming into the moral hero regaining freedom through its war on terror, melodramatic political discourses cultivate political identifications and subjectivities insofar as the citizen supports the state's immoral behaviour. Just as melodramatic films kindle strong emotional reactions in viewers, melodramatic political discourses hinge upon affects to foment fear, resentment, and the felt sense of danger – 'orgies of feeling' in Anker's words – to influence the citizen. Anker's framework reveals how moral legibility constructed through the powerful tool of melodrama can be hijacked by state power to justify political manoeuvres, which significantly promotes the understanding of melodrama as a political genre.

While Anker primarily discusses American politics, I argue that similar melodramatic forms are also traceable in the homonationalist rhetoric in which the nation state is both the virtuous victim threatened by terrorism and the hero that protects LGBTQ+ minorities. Simultaneously, the homophobic and barbaric villain becomes legible, and the actions against them – checkpoints, surveillance, occupation – become justified. Ritchie demonstrates that Israeli public discourses depict queer Palestinians as both the victim of homophobia at home and a threat to the state, and queer Palestinians can only survive through discarding their Palestinian-ness and internalising the homonationalist rhetoric.[36] This ambivalent image illustrates exactly the melodramatic form of homonationalism: if the nation state is both the victim and hero, queer Palestinians are correspondingly figured as the victim to be saved by the liberal hero and as the villain threatening the security of the nation state. *Out in the Dark* instrumentalises the melodramatic form to reveal Israel's liberal image as fabricated through the figuring 'queer bare lives'. I first delineate the theoretical foregrounds of queer bare lives and then propose two ways in which the film draws on the construct of queer bare lives to challenge homonationalism – through reassigning the roles in the narrative structure and creating novel felt cognition via its audiovisual style.

Bare life marks the state of exception where sovereignty includes certain forms of life through exclusion. Agamben draws on Aristotle's demarcation of *zoe* and *bios*, the former of which refers to the biological condition of life whereas the latter is understood as the form of life capable of speech and action. Aristotle believed that life using speech and action to participate in state politics is considered a 'good' life. Bare life contrasts with 'good life' or 'political life', indicating the lack of political rights,[37] and it is 'included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion'.[38] For Agamben, the sovereign power's designation of the state of exception is biopolitical in that it dictates what forms of life can be rightfully excluded. Achille Mbembe also aptly notes that 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die', clarifying how the figures marked by death – bare lives – convert sovereign power into biopolitics.[39] Anthony Downey underscores artistic practices' potentiality to render the overlooked bare lives and the states of exception visible, which he deems political aesthetics.[40] *Out in the Dark* vividly and meticulously makes visible the conditions of bare lives. The queer lovers' suffering portrayed in the film instantiates how queerness is manipulated by state power to create a state of exception, where queer subjects, especially those who fall prey to homonationalism, are reduced to abjection. The representation as such in cinema hence creates visibility of what state power wishes to covert and exposes them to the viewer, subverting the discourse of homonationalism.

Critiques of Agamben have pointed out that the universal construct of bare life as a constituent of the modern subject needs to be nuanced.[41] Indeed, in all states of exception, chances to live and condemnations to die are unequally attributed to bodies marked by different genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. It is hence imperative to question the 'unequal regimes of living and dying' and situate discussions of abjection in specific contexts.[42] My construct of queer bare lives unveils the unequal regime of living and dying that exists behind homonationalism. Queer bare lives establish how only Westernised and 'liberal' conditions of queer lives can sustain, whereas racialised, colonised, non-normative, queer 'bare' lives shall perish. Another strand of criticism questions the extent to which the essentialisation of refugee status as bare lives is productive, and whether the arts of refugees can visualise moments of resistance in lieu of victimisation.[43] *Out in the Dark* offers the space to challenge theoretical paradigms and resist dominant political discourses. This critical space can be found in the melodramatic form that alters the recognition of the victim/hero/villain in *Out in the Dark*. As Williams writes of the cultural power of melodrama, 'it is melodrama […] that has the ability to dissent'.[44]

Furthermore, melodrama's emotional and visual aesthetcs lends itself well to political critiques. Elsaesser famously writes that melodrama encourages 'a conscious use of style-as-meaning, the mark of a modernist sensibility working in popular culture'.[45] The Sirkian visually excessive style creates meanings outside the law of classism and rationality; it parallels how early melodrama viscerally shocks the viewer as modernity does to the human body in the early twentieth century – through sensation but not representation.[46] However, it does not necessarily mean that representation and sensation are incongruent or even separable in melodrama. Elsaesser himself implies how the excessively coded music, décor, and mise-en-scène thematise and symbolise the character's psychological and emotional conflicts, an emotional excess that can be felt by the viewer.[47] E. Deidre Pribram argues that melodrama draws on visual aesthetics to bridge the characters' emotions and the viewer's as 'forms of visual or nonverbal signification function on the edge of semantic availability rather than by means of linguistic articulation'.[48] Melodrama thus presents emotionally charged moments honed by its visual style and cultivates a cognition of the character's dilemma in the viewer, which Pribram terms a 'felt cognition'.[49] Therefore, in addition to adjusting its narrative structure to represent queer bare lives, *Out in the Dark* also motivates the viewer to feel the predicament of queer bare lives and calls into question the political power responsible for the unlivable conditions.

Melodramatic form: Narrative and roles

As scholars of melodrama have established, melodrama as a mode, intersecting with realism, can exhibit complex mechanisms more effectively – through the Manichaean good and evil and an explicitly legible morality. Williams argues that melodrama 'modernizes drama by confronting new and seemingly intractable social problems, to the melodramatic end of recognizing virtue'.[50] Contemporary global melodrama, though not necessarily abiding by a clear-cut binary of good and evil, also utilises the assignment of roles to render legible complicated political situations. In this film, the melodramatic form offers a compensating perspective into what is considered to be a liberal state and the violence upon the Palestinian queer migrants.

On the narrative level, *Out in the Dark* conforms to the trope of 'across-the-barricade' lovers, the impossible queer lovers impeded by incommensurate political, religious, economic, or racial differences.[51] The impossible lovers undertake the role of the virtuous victim, whose love is purified and sublimated through challenges and barricades. The film's plot also corresponds to the 'love-across-border' motif. Carla Marcantonio argues that melodrama about love across borders highlights 'the norms and restrictions to which we ascribe and by which we are bound' and promotes 'an emergent national imaginary'.[52] As the consolidation of national imaginary through melodramatic form is intimately knitted with

the assignment of roles, Marcantonio thus notices that in love-across-border melodramas, the 'modern' characters are usually from the Global North, whereas the 'backward' characters from the Global South.[53] Contrarily, the melodramatic form in *Out in the Dark* involves a different assignment of liberal and backward, heroic and villainous roles to subvert the nationalist imaginary foregrounded by homonationalism and pinkwashing. Therefore, instead of a narrative of repression to liberation, *Out in the Dark* presents a narrative of exception and becoming queer bare lives embodied by the trope of impossible queer lovers and love across borders. Its melodramatic form provides a subversive recognition of the victim/hero/villain as opposed to the melodramatic political discourses of homonationalism that posit the nation state as the victim/hero.

The melodramatic form of *Out in the Dark* assigns queer bare lives the role of the victim who suffers from various sorts of oppression constituting the exceptional state. When Nimr and Roy first meet each other at a gay bar in Tel Aviv, they encounter two male homophobic bigots harassing them in Hebrew: 'Check out those two faggots over there.' It is Nimr who proposes to confront those responsible for the derogatory slur while Roy hesitates but then complies. After they chase the men, cursing at them and scaring them away, Nimr jests: 'Maybe I should've shouted at them in Arabic', and Roy affirms, 'That would've been amazing.' The close-up shots of Nimr's and Roy's faces and the front shot of chasing taken in shallow focus compose what can be called a 'social mise-en-scène', in which the sexual and racial dynamics between Palestinian queers, Israeli queers, and homophobia are displayed. The sequence shows that homophobia still prevails in Tel Aviv just as in other parts of the world. Nimr's jest suggests that his sexual identity is racialised, and his action and mocking of the bigots show a moment of resistance as a queer Palestinian.

The representation of bigotry and homophobia in the film is inseparably associated with its portrayal of the security service directly liable for the creation of queer bare lives, as it stands for state power and can designate the states of exception. Before deporting Nimr's queer Palestinian friend Mustafa back to Ramallah, Yossi, the security agent, violently shouts at him, 'I'm fed up with the lot of you […] you piece-of-shit faggot.' Quite contrary to the gay-friendly and liberal image, Yossi personifies the villain in the melodrama. It has been documented that some Palestinian queers are blackmailed into becoming informants by the Israeli security service.[54] After Mustafa's death, Nimr is soon approached by Yossi. He immediately nullifies Nimr's academic permit and threatens to make his homosexuality public and spread rumours of Nimr's collaboration. Roy resorts to his powerful father, who cannot alleviate the peril because it is 'a matter of national security'. The father also warns that the implication with Nimr would ruin Roy's career and life, insinuating that his 'good life' could be reduced to a 'bare life'. The villain in this melodrama has the power to stipulate a state of exception in the name of national security to produce and exclude queer bare lives,

as from this point on Nimr and Roy, representing queer bare lives, are gradually stripped of prosperity and security.

Queerness in *Out in the Dark* is also framed in family drama and intergenerational conflicts, a common characteristic of melodrama visible in this film. When Nimr first meets Roy's parents, Roy's mother asks to talk to her son privately, where she passive-aggressively states: 'You could have told us ahead of time', referring to Nimr's Palestinian identity. When Roy retorts by asking what difference it would have made, their conversation escalates into the mother accusing: 'Ever since you came out, you find every opportunity to shove it in my face.' She proceeds to claim that she has learned to respect his 'choice', impatiently asking 'when is this flag waving business going to end?' The framing of familial conflicts unsettles the narrative of the unilateral movement from repression to liberation by staging intergenerational conflict factored into homophobia and exclusion that is universal and not exclusive to Palestine but also Israel. Melodrama has the vantage point of displaying complicity and rendering it legible through prototypical characters, archetypal roles, and dramatic conflicts. Countering the simplistic binarised liberation and backwardness, the film's melodramatic form provides a different legible story – throughout the diegesis, homophobia and its related discrimination and harassment prevail in the gay haven Tel Aviv, and the modern and liberal Israel.

Until the end, the film does not offer reconciliation and recovery of freedom as melodramatic conventions prescribe. Namely, no hero is present in the melodramatic form. As Anker argues, the power of melodramatic political discourse hinges upon the promises of emancipation and freedom as the recovery of sovereign power: '[m]elodrama becomes more potent after 9/11's radical destabilization of national narratives about freedom and power because the genre's employment of a familiar narrative trajectory – injury then redemption – seems to restabilize the promise of sovereignty.'[55] In *Out in the Dark*, however, there is a lack of redemption. The queer bare lives constructed in the film find no peace nor reparation. This deviation from conventional melodramas exemplifies a melodramatic form of queer bare lives. Commenting on the melodramatic form of Agamben's theorisation of bare lives, Anker writes:

> As homines sacri living in a state of exception, we are innocent victims, free of complicity with oppression, harm, and violence effected in our world. Morality is clear, and the discomforting work of self-evaluation is unnecessary, even obsolete. The perhaps unintended effect of this move is that individuals are left somewhat bereft of the capacity to shape society, and in this respect Agamben's melodrama resembles those of Sirk. Agamben's Sirkian narrative offers up victims but denies a readily available hero, and thus undoes the guarantee that freedom will be imminent.[56]

As Anker notes, the lack of a readily-available hero dismantles the guaranteed recovery of freedom equivalent to the sovereign agency in her framework. In other words, the hero represents sovereignty, who has the sovereign agency to choose and shape their conditions

of life. While Anker argues that 'we' as liberal subjects distance ourselves from bare lives, I draw on melodrama's capacity to uphold the viewer's identification with queer bare lives to contend that the lack of heroic transition does not necessarily herald reactionary numbness. What melodrama of queer bare lives uncovers is that the liberal queer subject's sovereign agency of freedom is maintained at the cost of 'Others', as both Agamben and Puar concur. If Nimr and Roy accomplished a heroic transition and recovered freedom – for instance, if they successfully escaped and reunited in France, it would only reproduce another paradigm of from-oppression-to-liberation, only to elevate it from the regional to the global scale. Furthermore, the lack of reparation provides the viewer with an alternative emotional engagement, uniting the film's melodramatic aesthetics and the viewer's sensibility.

Melodramatic form: Aesthetics and sensibility

Melodrama as a genre and mode privileges the viewer's sensibility and felt cognition via its aesthetics including music, mise-en-scène, close-ups, and shot-reverse shots. This section charts the ways in which *Out in the Dark* utilises various cinematic techniques to figure queer bare lives and forge emotional bonding with the viewer as the affective aspect of melodramatic form. I argue that if melodramatic political discourses dwell on the citizen's identification with state power to justify its legitimacy, the melodrama of queer bare lives engenders the viewer's felt cognition of the predicaments of queer bare lives, which enables the viewer to actively challenge and criticise homonationalist ideologies.

The film title *Out in the Dark* can be understood through the lens of the politics of visibility, implying that the film narrates a story of queer love coming out into visibility despite darkness. However, as queer Palestinian scholars and activists point out, the logic and rhetoric of visibility and coming out do not apply to Palestinian queer communities.[57] Thus, I read the title as coming out into the dark, as in the diegesis of the film, the queer couple is entrapped in precarity after their love becomes visible. This reading of the title alludes to the condition of queer bare lives substantiated through melodramatic form that entails elements of suffering, impossible lovers, and love across borders. Through this lens, the film's melodrama focuses on how queer love coming out to light could cause precarity and asks what forms of queer life and love can afford to be visible and what force creates the insufferable and unlivable conditions of queer life.

The opening sequence continues to play with darkness and its opposite: light. In the film's first shot, the camera captures the protagonist, Nimr, walking in the dark via a medium shot, with his figure in the foreground blurred and the focus remaining on the background of Ramallah's cityscape. The viewer hears Nimr's footsteps and the sporadic barking of a dog when, suddenly, the frame turns into darkness before cutting to a long shot of Nimr

hastening again. The frame darkens repeatedly between short intervals when Nimr climbs across the border between Israel and his hometown in the dark. Darkness in this sequence functions as a disruptive force of both time and space, interrupting the temporal continuity and bolstering a sense of tension. When a border patrol car abruptly drives past, Nimr buries his face in the ground, fearing being exposed by the car light. The scene is shot in a close-up to increase the intensity and amplify the protagonist's emotional response. The naturalistic sound of Nimr's motion that the viewer hears in the opening shot is now replaced by the sound of the speaker in the patrol car and an ominous soundtrack. The transition from diegetic to non-diegetic sounds and darkness to lightness constitute a stylistic excess and reinforce a melodramatic effect. In the conversion from 'dark' to 'light', naturalistic to melodramatic, the light is coded as threatening and dangerous, indicating that visibility does not necessarily point to liberation and freedom. The precarity of the character has not yet been narrated, but the meaning reaches the viewer's senses through the melodramatic style. Through a contrast between dark and light within the mise-en-scène, a biopolitical concern is incorporated into the spectacle of the film.

In the following sequence, the viewer can see half of Nimr's face in an extreme close-up, who has successfully crossed the border and boarded a bus. The camera's focus shifts between the streetscape and Nimr's drowsy eyes and his fingers slightly caressing his lips. The swiftly shifting focus blurs the outline of Nimr's face, creating a dreamlike visual effect as the streetlights soften into colourful halos next to Nimr's obscured face in the frame. The shimmering close-up shot not only implies the precarious and sinister fate of Nimr, who shall perish and disappear as the plot unfolds, but also visualises the current mental state of Nimr, relieved and relaxed by the transient and trance-like tranquillity and safety. The first two sequences establish Nimr as the central figure of the diegesis in relation to the perilous environment surrounding him. The use of close-up and extreme close-up shots affectively draws the viewer close to the protagonist, foregrounding the emotional and affective bonding between the viewer and the queer bare life. These visual techniques complicate the economy of identification in melodrama. As Anker's study of melodramatic political discourses demonstrates, melodrama rests on affect to form the citizen's identification with the state. In *Out in the Dark*, the emotional charges are always directed toward Nimr and Roy, and the viewer is invited to identify with queer bare lives and 'resent' the villainous state image, which arguably forges a novel sensibility that alters the recognition of the roles and unleashes the resistant potentials of viewing.

After Mustafa is murdered following deportation, Nimr runs away from home to find Roy, devastated after having witnessed the ruthless killing. The next night they join some friends at a memorial for Mustafa where they drink, chat, and reminisce. The sequence is realised through medium shots and close-ups accompanied by soft music, creating an intimate

atmosphere that transposes the viewer to a community of queer bare lives along the lines of Mustafa and Nimr. Although it is tempting to regard this scene as representative of queer solidarity across the border, the aesthetics of the scene – the melancholic music, fragmentated editing, the camera angle – in effect obstructs the rendition of realist references, as if the characters entered into a utopian space. The scene mostly forecloses naturalistic sounds and is dubbed in wistful music and an unrecognisable voice of mumbling imitating a supernatural and psychedelic whispering. Meanwhile, the frame is obscured by props such as lights and candles, as well as the shifting focus blurring the frame. The visual and acoustic aesthetics of the scene exemplifies a melodramatic mode of representing queer bare lives and exceptional states – the merging of melancholia and utopia. The melodramatic form renders apparent through emotional engagement to the viewer that, even in the state of absolute abjection and exception, the utopian space for reimagination is at work, where queer bare lives are managing to survive, to live on, and to resist. In this sense, queer bare lives, in transient moments of temporal, spatial, and stylistic ruptures in the film become victims without victimisation.

Another way in which *Out in the Dark* promotes alternative spectatorial sensibilities is by harnessing the perspective of queer bare lives via either point-of-view shots or shots-reverse shots, especially in the moments portraying severe violence and oppression, for the purpose that the viewer senses the precarity brought about by the state of exception. When Mustafa and Nimr are respectively confronted and abused by Yossi, the viewer sees the villain framed in close-ups from the perspective of the victims and senses the imminent danger. In the sequence where Nimr's family finds out about his relationship with Roy, the camera initially takes the point of view of Nimr, witnessing his weeping sister and disappointed mother and brother. Subsequently, the camera shifts to shots-reverse shots between Nimr and his mother when she accuses him of bringing shame to the family. As a result, the viewer is firmly rooted in this sequence of emotional intensity. The capacity to see through the eyes of queer bare lives amplifies the viewer's emotional engagement and makes visible the miscellaneous forms of violence and oppression mutilating queer bare lives. It is also through the perspectives of queer bare lives that the film's melodramatic form unfolds and challenges the homonationalist rhetoric of pinkwashing.

The film ends with Nimr fleeing to Paris after running away from Yossi and his henchmen. Following a high-strung sequence of Nimr combating the agents, through which the tension accumulates both in the plot and in the viewer's psyche, Nimr runs onto a rooftop where he reunites with Roy in a melodramatic scene of farewell. Roy has arranged a yacht to bring Nimr to France and promises to join him there. Scored in sombre background music and shot in close-ups, the melodramatic moment entrenched in tears, love, and sorrow is seemingly resolved by the decision to migrate together to France and seek support from humanitarian

organisations. At the end of the emotionally charged scene, Roy and Nimr change outfits with each other, which causes Roy's being arrested and Nimr to have the chance to board the yacht. In the interrogation room, Yossi sternly and viciously professes Roy's doom:

> You crossed the line tonight. You had to choose sides, and you did. Now I'm gonna bury you. And not even your dad and his powerful friends can help you.

Roy has thus been turned into a queer bare life. In the next and final shot of the film, Nimr sits on the yacht at the break of dawn, with a close-up shot capturing him pondering and contemplating, and his life, whether he manages to escape from the sea guards or not, continues to be as precarious as Roy's.

The seemingly ominous ending promises a resistant potential through the viewer's identification and emotional engagement with the queer bare lives. Without the resolution through the heroic recovery of freedom and defeat of the villain, the piled-up emotional charges in the viewer do not get to release, which arguably stimulates and encourages the viewer to question the ways in which queer bare lives are shackled in the absolute direness of precarity. In the departure scene, when Nimr asks Roy, 'what about your life?', Roy responds that he chooses to be with Nimr, illustrating that Roy's life has become a bare life because of his queer love and relationship with Nimr. As numerous empirical studies on queer migration demonstrate, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees in Europe face insurmountable precarity and systemic prejudice.[58] With this extradiegetic information, Nimr's escape to France proves to be another 'cruelly optimistic' attempt, and queer liberation will not be found nor recovered in France.[59] The film, though addressing queer migration on regional and global levels, refuses to point to one unilateral direction toward freedom. By denying any way out, it propels the viewer to look inside and reflect on the exceptional state that continuously creates bare lives.

Conclusion

> Melodrama unveils good or evil to confront the horrendous failure of justice in a world that dares, as the tragic sensibility does not, to hope for it. Melodrama is a mode of feeling that generates outrage against a fate that could and should be changed.[60]

From nineteenth century theatre to contemporary cinema, the stories of good and evil, the victim and villain, remain relevant, especially in an era of political turbulence. Melodramatic forms are powerful in constructing and conveying political messages through archetypal roles and affect, which have been harnessed by sovereign states to justify political actions, a pattern visible in homonationalist discourses governing conditions of queer migration.

Out in the Dark subverts homonationalism and pinkwashing by figuring queer bare lives. Queer bare lives demonstrate how state-approved liberal queer subjects may live whilst abject queer subjects must be excluded from the political order of the state. Representing queer bare lives in cinema initiates visibility of marginalised and stigmatised groups exploited by state power. Queer bare lives in the film bring to light the abject conditions unequally distributed to certain forms of queer life through the reassignment of the roles of the victim/villain/hero in melodrama. The film's visual and acoustic aesthetics privilege felt senses and emotions to instil novel sensibilities in the viewer. Drawing on the relational and positional dynamics of sexual and racial politics, my reading of this film shows and contests dominant political discourses surrounding queer migration and queer Palestinians. In this light, melodrama indeed 'has the ability to dissent'.[61]

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Notes

[1] This corpus, which I term the cinema of queer migration, encompasses a wide range of films from various geopolitical locations such as Fireflies (Bani Khoshnoudi, 2018), Flee (Jonas Poher Rasmussen, 2021), Lesbian Factory (Susan Chen, 2010), and No Hard Feelings (Faraz Shariat, 2020), many of which have gained critical acclaim in both industry and academia. For more filmic examples see Williams 2021.

[2] Williams 1998.

[3] Luibhéid 2005, 2008; Raboin 2017.

[4] Luibhéid 2005, p. xxv.

[5] Grewal & Kaplan 2001, p. 669.

[6] Luibhéid 2008, p. 179.

[7] Puar 2007.

[8] Luibhéid 2008, p. 180.

[9] Campbell & Sitze 2013.

[10] Agamben 1997.

[11] Puar 2013.

[12] Foucault & Membe, quoted in Ritchie 2014, p. 113.

[13] See Eng 2010, Gopinath 2005, Grewal & Kaplan 2001.

[14] Hochberg 2010, p. 500.

[15] Galt & Schoonover 2016, pp. 36-50.

[16] Ibid., p. 57.

[17] Paul 2021, p. 552.

[18] See for instance Jankovic 2013, p. 118. For empirical research on queer Palestinians living in Israel, see Ritchie 2014 and Hochberg et al. 2010.

[19] Cohen 2021, p. 129.

[20] Ivanchikova 2016, p. 72.

[21] Keegan 2022.

[22] Mercer & Shingler 2004, p. 2.

[23] See Gledhill 1987, Willemen 1972, and Williams 1998.

[24] Elsaesser 2016.

[25] Gledhill 1987, p. 11.

[26] Martin 2014, p. 127.

[27] Williams 1998, p. 42.

[28] Ibid., pp. 65-69.

[29] Brooks 1985, p. 42.

[30] Metelmann 2016, p. 196.

[31] Elsaesser 2016, p. 36.

[32] Williams 2016.

[33] Anker 2014, p. 2.

[34] Ibid., p. 110.

[35] Ibid., pp. 31-36.

[36] Ritchie 2014, p. 116.

[37] Agamben 1997, p. 7.

[38] Ibid., p. 11.

[39] Mbembe 2003, p. 11.

[40] Downey 2009, p. 125.

[41] Haritaworn et al. 2014, Latimer 2011, Luibhéid 2008, Puar 2008, Schotten 2018.

[42] Haritaworn et al. 2014, p. 4. Luibhéid 2008, pp, 183, 190.

[43] Owens 2009, Sanyal 2018.

[44] Williams 2016, p. 64.

[45] Elsaesser 2016, p. 445.

[46] Singer 2001.

[47] Elsaesser 2016, p. 443.

[48] Pribram 2018, p. 240.

[49] Ibid., p. 247.

[50] Williams 2018, p. 215.

[51] Galt & Schoonover 2016, p. 230.

[52] Marcantonio 2015, p. 79.

[53] Ibid., p. 82.

[54] Hochberg 2010, p. 507.

[55] Anker 2014, p. 13.

[56] Ibid., p. 207.

[57] Hochberg et al. 2010, p. 605.

[58] See, for instance, Raboin 2017.

[59] Berlant 2011.

[60] Williams 2016, p. 58.

[61] Ibid., p. 64.