SAPPHIC GIRLHOOD ON SCREEN: NEGOTIATING IRISH LESBIAN IDENTITY IN *DATING AMBER* (2020)

LA ADOLESCENCIA DE LAS CHICAS SÁFICAS EN LA PANTALLA: NEGOCIANDO LA IDENTIDAD LÉSBICA IRLANDESA EN *DATING AMBER* (2020)

<https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202511375>

IRIA SEIJAS-PÉREZ
Universidade de Vigo
iria.seijas@uvigo.gal
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7326-198X>

Abstract

While no laws explicitly targeted lesbianism as illegal, Irish lesbians and queer women at large were active in the battle to decriminalise homosexuality — which finally occurred in Ireland in 1993. Irish lesbian activism also focused on the establishment of groups, organisations and helplines for queer women (Crone 1988, 1995; Connolly and O'Toole 2005). Despite such advancements, in the 1990s homophobia continued to negatively impact the lives of the Irish LGBTQ+ community (Moane 1995). It is in this climate of legalised homosexuality but ingrained homophobia that the film *Dating Amber* (2020) takes place. In this coming-of-age film directed by David Freyne, gay teenagers Amber and Eddie pretend to have a relationship to stop the homophobic harassment from their classmates, but once they discover the LGBTQ+ community of Dublin they are driven apart as Amber comes out and Eddie continues to deny his homosexuality. This article focuses on the character of Amber and how she navigates her lesbian girlhood in the rural Ireland of the mid-1990s. Particularly, Amber's oppressive environment in opposition to the more tolerant city and her friendship with Eddie will be analysed, bringing the two elements together in an attempt to explore the development of Amber's self-perception and her coming out.

Keywords: girlhood, lesbian identity, sexuality, Irish film, *Dating Amber*.

Resumen

Aunque no había ninguna ley que criminalizase el lesbianismo, las mujeres lesbianas irlandesas —acompañadas de otras mujeres *queer*— participaron activamente en

la batalla para descriminalizar la homosexualidad, lo que finalmente ocurrió en Irlanda en 1993. Además, el activismo de las mujeres lesbianas también se centró en la creación de grupos, organizaciones y líneas de apoyo para las mujeres *queer* (Crone 1988, 1995; Connolly and O'Toole 2005). A pesar de estos avances, en la década de los noventa la homofobia seguía impactando negativamente las vidas de la comunidad LGBTQ+ irlandesa (Moane 1995). La película *Dating Amber* (2020), dirigida por David Freyne, transcurre en este clima de homosexualidad legal pero homofobia arraigada. Los adolescentes Amber y Eddie, lesbiana y gay respectivamente, deciden fingir tener una relación para escapar del acoso homofóbico de sus compañeros del instituto, pero una vez que descubren la comunidad LGBTQ+ de Dublín comienzan a distanciarse, ya que Amber decide salir del armario mientras que Eddie continúa negando su homosexualidad. Este artículo se centra en el personaje de Amber y en como navega su adolescencia como lesbiana en la Irlanda rural de los años noventa. Particularmente, se analizarán el entorno opresivo de Amber en contraste con la ciudad más tolerante y su amistad con Eddie, juntando así estos elementos con la intención de explorar el desarrollo de la percepción que Amber tiene de sí misma y su salida del armario.

Palabras clave: adolescencia, identidad lésbica, sexualidad, cine irlandés, *Dating Amber*.

1. Introduction

The Republic of Ireland's same-sex marriage referendum of 2015 marked a transitional point in the history of the Irish LGBTQ+ community. It was the first time that the decision to legalise same-sex marriage was left in the hands of the popular vote (Macleod 2018: 1), and this event has been argued to "[reverse] a large part, if not all, of Ireland's reputation for a Catholic-led conservatism concerning sexual and gender identities" (Lesnik-Oberstein 2016).[1] Páraic Kerrigan and Anne O'Brien observe that, since the marriage referendum, "Ireland has been internationally recognized as a significant trail-blazer for gay rights and politics" (2020: 1063). However, prior to these positive —and undoubtedly necessary— developments, homosexuality had been historically condemned in Ireland, seen as a threat to the nation's standards of purity and morality.

Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, "sexual behaviour and its regulation became a national obsession […] in an effort to prove decency, respectability and capability in governing Ireland as an independent nation" (Redmond 2015: 73). Homosexuality was seen as a threat to Irishness and nationalism, endangering the heterosexual family discourse of the state (Conrad 2001: 125). According to Seán Mac Risteaird, since the establishment of an

independent Ireland, "nationalism and conservative political and religious beliefs went hand in hand. […] Homosexuality was not seen as a native or normal state of being or identity. Ireland, as a nation, strived to build a puritanical society, in order to remain safe from homosexuality" (2020: 64-65). Thus, the priority given to the creation of a morally superior nation rejected homosexuality, positioning this as incompatible with Irish identity.

It was not until 1993 that homosexuality was finally decriminalised after a long and arduous campaign waged by activists of the Irish LGBTQ+ community and David Norris, and marriage equality was seen as the "result of an over two-decade-long battle of activists, politicians and the LGBTQI+ community" (Charczun 2019: 203). Indeed, the fight for equal rights for the queer community in Ireland had come a long way from its early days in the 1970s, when the Sexual Liberation Movement was founded. Between the early 1970s and the 1990s, several LGBTQ+ groups emerged, mostly concerned with the decriminalisation of homosexuality, although others centred on providing safe spaces for the queer community and reaching those who were isolated from the urban areas where most of the action was taking place.

This article explores the film *Dating Amber* (2020) and its depiction of queer identities in 1990s Ireland, particularly the portrayal of Amber, a lesbian teenager who lives in a rural area in county Kildare. It will focus on how Amber negotiates her lesbian identity within her repressive environment. She is portrayed in contrast to sensitive, cowardly Eddie —her gay classmate with whom she has a fake relationship —as "more defiant, unabashedly wielding her punk rock feminism and biting wit against her unbearably heteronormative, rural life" (Brown 2020). She relies on witty humour and what Eddie labels as a "masculine" attitude to face her current situation: while she knows she is a lesbian, she denies it due to the homophobic bullying from her classmates, who often call her slurs denigrating her sapphic identity; on top of this, she is also coming to terms with her father's suicide, an event that complicates her relationship with her mother as both women silently deal with the loss. Thus, Amber holds on to the idea that she will soon be able to leave that place where she is suffocating under the weight of her father's ghost and the blatant homophobia that she must pretend does not affect her.

Nevertheless, Amber's perception of herself and her surroundings shifts as the story develops, moving from a concealment of her identity to a visible embrace of her lesbianism. Through her relationship with Trinity student Sarah, and possibly encouraged by the Dublin queer scene she discovers on her trips to the city with Eddie, Amber is able to openly reveal herself as a lesbian. Furthermore, perhaps feeling hopeful about the possibility of a queer future *within* Ireland, she comes

out to her mother, which leads to her public outing by the priest. Amber, hence, continues to confront her village's homophobic attitudes, though now she is able to challenge such discrimination through her self-acceptance, the safety of her home and the comfort of her relationship with Sarah. Before examining the film, we will discuss lesbian activism in late-twentieth century Ireland as well as the representation of lesbian identities on the Irish screen to provide context for the analysis that follows. The main aim of this research is to approach Amber's oppressive setting and her friendship with gay classmate Eddie in an attempt to reveal the development of her self-perception and her coming out as an Irish lesbian.

2. Lesbian Identity and Activism in Late-Twentieth Century Ireland

Irish lesbian accounts of liberation differ slightly from those of gay men. No laws explicitly targeted lesbianism as illegal, for the existence of lesbians was completely erased. Lesbians were rendered invisible because "women's sexuality was largely censored and controlled by a punitive, conservative Catholic morality, which enforced ignorance and shameful silences on women's own bodies and sexual desires" (Carregal 2021: 17). The criminalisation of male homosexuality further othered and marginalised lesbians, silencing their history and culture (O'Rourke et al. 2013). Moreover, the lack of legal recognition underscored how the perception of lesbianism as a taboo topic operated "as an unwritten law, suppressing not only the practice of lesbian sexuality but the awareness of its very existence" (Crone 1988: 346).

Therefore, the movement for LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland "in terms of public media visibility, was almost entirely homogenised by gay men" (Kerrigan 2019: 5). According to Allison Macleod, "[l]esbian issues and experiences have been […] subordinated within the Irish gay rights movement" (2018: 81). Linda Connolly and Tina O'Toole have also noted that despite the involvement of Irish lesbians in numerous campaigns, little information regarding their political activism is available, which contributes "to the general invisibility of lesbian lives in contemporary Ireland" (2005: 172). Nonetheless, Irish lesbians and queer women at large were highly involved in the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality. Similarly, they were active within the women's movement and participated in several social and political movements (Moane 1995: 92). Moreover, they also worked towards creating spaces for queer women, attaining recognition of their sexuality and combating the isolation that many of them faced due to the marginalisation of lesbian identities.

During the 1970s, different groups that addressed the needs of lesbians were created, such as Irishwomen United and the first Lesbian Line Collective. Additionally, a hotline was established to support lesbians in rural areas, advertised as Tel-a-Friend or simply TAF in order to avoid the explicit use of "gay" and "lesbian" (Crone 1988, 1995; Connolly and O'Toole 2005). This decade also saw the celebration of the first Women's Conference on Lesbianism in Dublin, which had a positive impact and boosted lesbian pride (Crone 1995; Connolly and O'Toole 2005).

Throughout the following decade, the 1980s, lesbian activism continued to see the creation of various lesbian communities, groups and organisations, mostly based in urban areas (Connolly and O'Toole 2005: 184), although this was not limited to Dublin. The Quay Co-Op was founded in Cork in 1982, leading to the emergence of the Cork Lesbian Collective a year later, and the first Cork Women's Fun Weekend took place in 1984 (McDonagh 2017: 72). In addition to these organisations, social events for gays and lesbians were also being held in different areas throughout the country, such as Galway and Tipperary (McDonagh 2017).

The 1990s were highly marked by the decriminalisation of homosexuality, but the lesbian community also saw the establishment of several cultural, political and social organisations (Crone 1995: 68). Lesbians Organising Together, or LOT, was established in 1991, including First Out groups and Lesbian Line collectives among other organisations (68). Furthermore, during this decade organisations such as Lesbians in Cork, Lesbian Education Awareness and LOT worked to continue the efforts of their predecessors, increasing resources, building community and providing services (Connolly and O'Toole 2005: 192). Unfortunately, homophobia was still prevalent at the time. Ger Moane contends, "Even in the relatively liberated 1990s, homophobia still imposes tremendous burdens on lesbians and gay men in Ireland. […] Positive attitudes in the media and among legislators do not easily erase homophobia, and it remains deeply embedded in Irish culture and psychology" (1995: 87). She remarks that calls to helplines and discussions in coming-out groups continued to demonstrate that feelings of fear, ignorance, self-hatred and shame prevailed, and stories of queer youth who committed suicide or were forced to leave their homes circulated around LGBTQ+ networks (87).

Nevertheless, despite the constant presence of homophobia, the advancements that were made in the three decades between the 1970s and 1990s were remarkably significant. In the mid-1990s, lesbian author Mary Dorcey, who had been actively involved in the fight against homophobia, spoke of the resistance from the Irish queer community against religious and state oppression:

> Lifelong brainwashing from the cradle to the grave to remain faithful to heterosexuality is still not sufficient to keep everyone suppressed. The entire force of Church and State, the entire weight of international culture, is not enough to suppress the strength of nature. The instinct to joy and love and intimacy is irrepressible. Centuries of repression have not worked and can't work. (In O'Carroll and Collins 1995: 28)

Queer Irish individuals have persisted in the face of oppression. Despite the constant messages about the dangers and sinful nature of homosexuality, and despite the attempts from church and state authorities to suppress any identity that would deviate from heterosexuality, the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland continued to make a space for itself within Irish society. The film *Dating Amber* explores the adversities of being gay in 1990s Ireland, and this article aims to reinforce Dorcey's statement of queer resistance through Amber's embrace of her lesbian identity against the persistent discrimination from classmates, neighbours and society at large.

3. Lesbians on the Irish Screen

The Irish film industry is characterised by a "lack of queer visual fare" (Kerrigan and O'Brien 2020: 1064), and within this shortage, queer women are even more absent on the screen. This "can be [...] linked to the general invisibility of lesbianism within Irish public and cultural discourses" (Macleod 2018: 5) mentioned above. In her review of Irish queer cinema, Macleod notices that queer women appear only in five of the different feature films that she examines: *Goldfish Memory* (2002), *A Date for Mad Mary* (2016), *Snakes and Ladders* (1996), *Crush Proof* (1998) and *Cowboys & Angels* (2003) (2018: 5). These films also share the characteristic of being urban narratives, which Macleod argues "suggest[s] that the emergence of a new urban sensibility in Irish cinema has not only been accompanied by more overt representations of queer sexuality on-screen but has also been integral to the cinematic representation of queer women" (80). Unfortunately, out of those five films, only *Goldfish Memory* and *A Date for Mad Mary* "offer these female characters any strong narrative agency", while the others either relegate sapphic women to the background or disavow their sexuality (5).

Goldfish Memory stands out as it "features openly lesbian characters and explicit sexual encounters between women, as well as a lesbian social space" (78). Nonetheless, lesbian desire is portrayed as humorous rather than revolutionary, as it is framed from a male heterosexual perspective (78). The butch-femme dynamics that appear in the film serve to constrain lesbian desire within gender binarism, as masculine women appear as the subject which desires and feminine women

as the object that is desired (Holohan 2009: 142-143). Similarly, while *Goldfish Memory* does portray lesbian desire within a public setting, perhaps in an attempt to transgress patriarchal norms that limit female sexuality to private life —if not directly to the closet— this challenge is often quickly discredited (143). Therefore, despite its depiction of out lesbian women and the focus on their relationships, the film ultimately fails at subverting heteronormative narratives.

A Date for Mad Mary, which is the most recent film with sapphic characters in Macleod's study, appears to show "a more fluid representation of queer female identity" (Macleod 2018: 90). The plot revolves around Mary, a queer woman whose experiences take centre stage. As Mary explores her sexuality, the film avoids restraining her to the sexual binary and relegating queer female desire to the subplot as Mary's sexual discovery is linked to other aspects of her life and is thus embedded within the general narrative (88). In doing so, the film "provid[es] a more fluid conception of how different facets of identity and personal relationships inform one another" (88). Macleod suggests that *A Date for Mad Mary*, as a post-Celtic Tiger picture, might be a metaphor for how contemporary Ireland is attempting to break away from established preconceptions about the meaning of Irishness (90). Nonetheless, though this film seems to offer a portrayal of female queerness outside common stereotypes, I argue that it does not contribute to the specific visibilisation of lesbians on screen due to the ambiguity that characterises the sexuality of the queer female characters.

I find it significant that all the films with queer women characters that Macleod includes in her study take place in an urban setting. This lack of sapphic representation within rural areas further enhances the dichotomies of the 'liberating' city and the 'repressive' countryside. While it might be true that bigger cities and urban areas offer certain possibilities to explore sexual identity that might not be available in more conservative places, the experiences of LGBTQ+ rural communities deserve recognition and should be represented in the wider media outlets, including films. Similarly, none of these films focuses on adolescent sapphic girls, even though it is frequently during the teenage years that sexuality is explored. This scarcity of sapphic girlhood narratives in Irish cinema could result from preconceived notions of youth as innocent —even asexual— in an attempt to preserve such ideas of purity. However, this only contributes to further erase non-normative, and specifically lesbian, girlhoods as their lack of representation renders them invisible.

Hence, the film *Dating Amber* (2020) seems to fill this gap of rural narratives of lesbian girlhood. Directed by David Freyne and produced by Screen Ireland, it takes place in a climate of post-decriminalisation yet ingrained homophobia, and stands out thanks to its focus on a gay boy and a lesbian girl who navigate their sexualities in their conservative village — narratives previously unaddressed

in Irish cinema. Initially, it had been entitled 'Beards', deriving from the term 'beard', which commonly refers to the fake partner of a queer person who wants to hide their queer identity by pretending to be in a heterosexual relationship — which is precisely what happens in this comedy-drama. The film is set in 1995 on the Curragh Camp, a military complex in county Kildare, at the time of the divorce referendum, which conveys the image of a Catholic Ireland dominated by a religious morality and the repression of sexuality. Teenagers Eddie Cotter and Amber Keenan are struggling with their gay and lesbian identities in a repressive environment during their final year of secondary school. Eddie is in denial of his homosexuality and pretends to be interested in girls to fit in with the boys at school, even though they are constantly harassing him. At home, he chooses to ignore his parents' fighting, reassuring himself that they are fine, and attempts to live up to his often-absent father's expectations to join the army, although that is not what he wants to do. Amber, while more confident about her sexuality, still hides that she is a lesbian from her immediate community to protect herself from ostracisation. As she is still dealing with her father's suicide, she dreams of moving to London, where she will open "an anarchist bookshop but with franchise potential" (Freyne 2020: min. 23) and will be able to be herself openly in the more liberating lesbian punk scene that she believes awaits her in the city. In the meantime, she helps her mother in the caravan park she runs, secretly renting out the caravans to teenagers seeking a private place to have sex, saving the money she charges them so that she can travel to London when school is over.

Both victims of their classmates' insults and mockery, generally connected to their sexuality though neither of them has yet come out, Amber and Eddie begin a fake relationship in an attempt to quiet the rumours about their queerness. As they continue to fake-date, their friendship evolves from a shared understanding of their common struggle and they confess to each other their hopes and fears as gay teenagers in rural Ireland. It is on their trips to Dublin that they experience queer culture and community for the first time, which will impact both adolescents albeit in different ways —"[a]s Amber becomes more comfortable with her queerness, [and] the taciturn Eddie retreats inwards" (Hans 2020)— and will bring trouble to their dating arrangement as well as their friendship.

Dating Amber has been described as "a one-size-fits-all coming-out narrative [...] handled with a lightness of touch" (Hans 2020) and "a well-meaning film that seeks to portray gay identity without problematising it unduly" (Bradshaw 2020). Andrew Scahill contends that the majority of images of youth in cinema have been created by adults, who often "represent an *idea* of youth — a memory, a trauma, a wish" (2019: 114, emphasis in original). There is, indeed, a biographical component to *Dating Amber*. In an interview, director David Freyne explains:

"When you grow up gay you are used to seeing yourself in tragic work. Being beaten up. Dying of Aids. Those films are important and relevant. But if that's the only way you see yourself om [sic] screen it's really depressing" (in Clarke 2020). While Freyne chose to set the story in the mid-1990s, he acknowledges that "[t]here are some people —generally older, straight people— who say: 'Sure, it's fine now!' [...] There is a misconception about how easy it is now" (in Clarke 2020). Therefore, while the film takes place in 1995 and reflects the homophobic climate of Ireland's recent past, the struggles confronted by Amber and Eddie in connection to their sexuality are still faced by many queer teens in modern-day Ireland — which makes the film timely as well as significant in its approach to queer girlhood and boyhood.

4. Lesbian Girlhood in 1990s Ireland

4.1. "Fucking lezzer"

In Ireland, homosexuality "occupied an uncomfortable place" (Conrad 2001: 124), and, hence, so did lesbian girlhood. The first scene in the film where viewers meet Amber depicts her at school, sitting by herself on a bench and reading a newspaper with the headline "Drugs in Ireland". When Kevin, another student, shouts a joke to insult her, Amber cleverly turns the joke around on him and, feeling embarrassed, Kevin cannot think of a better comeback than "fucking lezzer" (Freyne 2020: min. 2). John E. Petrovic and Rebecca M. Ballard point to the heterosexism that pervades institutions such as schools at large, "a form of oppression that both assumes and presumes the superiority of heterosexuality, suggesting that heterosexuality is required while (and by) casting nonheterosexuality as abnormal, deviant, or immoral" (2005: 195). Insults related to sexuality are not rare at school, as only a few seconds after his interaction with Amber, Kevin asks Eddie if he is a "faggot" because he has not "had the shift yet" (Freyne 2020: mins. 2-3). This brief introductory scene does not only reveal the heteronormative politics at work within Amber and Eddie's school, but also identifies the societal perception of homosexuality as shameful and unacceptable, this prevalence of heteronormativity that characterises the school system not only in Ireland but in general.

Throughout the film, insults that attack sexual identity such as "fucking lesbian" (Freyne 2020: min. 7), "benders" (min. 11) or "dyke" (min. 68) continue to be reproduced, exposing how homophobia is ingrained within the Irish psyche. This is further reinforced by the school's sex education — if a video of a nun advocating for sexual abstinence until marriage can be referred to as sex education. In a video entitled "A Guide to Love-Making", the nun uses hand gestures to condemn

homosexuality, exposing this as wrong, while heterosexual intercourse is right (mins. 16-17). The legalisation of homosexuality in Ireland did "not mean that it was not (as in fact, it still is) frowned upon by Irish society, especially by rural communities of Ireland where Catholicism has historically been more powerful than in Ireland's urban areas" (Charczun 2019: 129). Thus, Amber is constantly faced with the notion that being a lesbian is sinful and deserves denigration, a Catholic belief that is upheld by her school and enforced by her classmates' discourse.

It is not surprising that in such an environment Amber struggles to express her identity freely and even denies that she is gay to her classmates (Freyne 2020: min. 7). Aware that Eddie is also not interested in the opposite sex, she decides to ask him to go on a date with her. When Eddie attempts to —very awkwardly— kiss her, she asks him "aren't you tired of being called a faggot?" and proposes that they fake a relationship: "We pretend to go out just to get everyone to leave us alone. Just-just until school is over and we can get out of this dump" (mins. 14-15). While Amber does deny to other students that she is a lesbian, this conversation with Eddie reveals that her denial does not stem from a lack of self-acceptance but is rather an attempt at self-preservation. Petrovic and Ballard discuss that different studies point to the construction of heterosexual identities as a "coping strategy" by LGBTQ+ students to fit in at school (2005: 196). Through the staging of a heterosexual relationship, Amber aims to avoid harassment from other students until she can leave her small village and finally come out as a lesbian.

Additionally, in her plan to fake-date, Amber not only seeks protection but also a sense of shared understanding, of kinship, that Eddie initially fails to provide in his own denial of his homosexuality. At first, Eddie continues to pretend that he is not gay and rejects Amber's idea. According to Whitney Monaghan, the "inability or unwillingness to accept one's identity is a standard feature of the coming out narrative" (2010: 61). This is the case for Eddie, whose narrative will appear in contrast to Amber's capacity to accept herself as a lesbian. He struggles to admit that he is gay, is unable to say it out loud, yet he agrees with Amber's plan to be her "pretend boyfriend" —though he prefers the term "pretend real boyfriend"— until school is over (Freyne 2020: min. 18). However, while Amber can easily declare that she is gay and so is he, Eddie continues to insist that "it doesn't matter because […] it doesn't matter what [they] are but [they] don't have to be", which Amber resignedly acknowledges because she is aware that Eddie will not go along with her idea otherwise (mins. 18-19). This is a remarkable difference between Amber's and Eddie's perception of themselves, which will later become a conflict in their relationship. Nonetheless, Amber continues to embrace her lesbianism in her private moments with Eddie and does see their friendship as a safe space where she can be herself openly.

4.2. "This place will kill you"

Her fake relationship gives Amber a break from the continuous ridicule of her classmates at the same time as it allows her to find a confidante to share her dreams about going to London, where she hopes a more accepting society awaits her. Amber's desire to go abroad was common among Irish lesbians at the time, who "at some point in their lives, have felt the need to emigrate, mainly to the UK, on the grounds of their sexualities" (Charczun 2019: 155). Amber relies on her side hustle renting out caravans to "horny teens" to save money so that she can leave: "The minute school is over, I am out of here. This place will kill you" (Freyne 2020: mins. 22-23). Two dichotomies are at play here: that of Ireland vs. abroad and that of rural vs. urban. It is not uncommon for Irish films to convey the message "that gay identities can only be confronted when relocated from the 'native soil'" (Barton 2004: 125). Homosexuality has been characterised as being "outside the nation, as a foreign threat or colonial pollutant" which is "subject to State monitoring and regulation" (Macleod 2018: 15). Amber believes that she can only be openly gay if she is in a big city and if she leaves Ireland, positioning lesbian girlhood and growing up in Ireland as incompatible. In this sense, Macleod observes that "the construction of queer subjectivity is frequently embedded within a story of rural to urban migration which maps the psychological journey of 'coming out' onto a physical journey to the city" (92). Amber initially believes that this journey is her only possibility to fully come out. Nonetheless, in the meantime, she manages to subvert Catholic expectations in her secret arrangement with Eddie — at school and at home, she is a heterosexual teenage girl dating a heterosexual teenage boy, while in private the intricacies of being Irish and gay are exposed through Amber's and Eddie's attempts at easing each other's adversities.

Amber and Eddie might not adhere to their society's beliefs, yet they have not been able to escape the stereotypical perceptions that have been culturally attributed to gay men and lesbian women. Macleod argues that while "queerness functions as a disruptive signifier of fluidity and excess in Irish cinema to challenge rigid identity categories and normative structures, such disruptive potential is often diffused through the queer subject's containment within sexual stereotypes, mainstream conventions and narrative function" (2018: 20). To some extent, *Dating Amber* reproduces stereotypes that are often linked with homosexuality. In her conversations with Eddie, Amber subscribes to those clichés that are used to describe gay men, such as that they have an interest in fashion and a good fashion sense or that they are feminine in their mannerisms. When Eddie pretends that he does not like Mr Sweeney but his clothes, Amber is quick to explain why that comment further proves that he is gay: "One, only a gay guy would say that, and two, he dresses like shit, which you would know because gays have a great

sense of fashion" (Freyne 2020: mins. 14-15). Similarly, Eddie tells Amber that she should "act a little less […] mannishly" and "walk more feminine", a critique Amber turns around on Eddie claiming that he is the feminine one, which worries him as he wants to hide his homosexuality (mins. 21-22). Moreover, Amber does subject herself to such stereotypes in certain moments. Eddie invites her over to his house for dinner, and asks Amber to "wear something girly" — to which she replies: "I will if you won't" (min. 23). In spite of berating Eddie for calling her masculine, she does wear a pastel-coloured dress and a flower pinned to her hair to Eddie's house, possibly trying to appear more heterosexual and therefore reinforcing stereotypes that lesbians are "mannish" and not "girly".

However, whether it is the film or the characters that surrender to stereotypes is unclear. On the one hand, the scenes that make reference to Eddie's sense of fashion and feminine mannerisms and to Amber's masculine attitudes are reproduced for comedic effect. This could suggest that the film is relying on these stereotypes to appeal to a wider audience that is more accustomed to the representation of gay and lesbian characters as comic relief. On the other hand, the compliance of the characters with stereotypical notions about their sexuality could be an attempt to reflect the influence of heteronormativity upon queer subjects. Amber assumes that Eddie should be into fashion because he is gay, and Eddie understands that Amber should wear dresses if she wants to appear heterosexual. These notions do not simply convey stereotypical characterisations of male and female homosexuality, but are also subjected to heterosexual norms of masculine and feminine traits. In this sense, at the same time as she questions normativity through her lesbianism, Amber also reduces her sexual identity to heteronormative patterns.

4.3. "You can come out too"

The first time Amber goes to Dublin with Eddie, they see a pride flag hanging outside a venue, and hesitantly go inside. Eddie is quickly mesmerised by a drag queen performing on stage, yet Amber stays alone at the back, suddenly shy at this unapologetic display of LGBTQ+ community. When Sarah introduces herself, Amber does not say her name, instead replying, "I'm not a lesbian" (Freyne 2020: min. 36). It appears that, because she has never before been in a public space where being queer is not condemned, she does not feel comfortable. In Ireland, Macleod argues, "[t]he homosexual subject [...] has occupied a key role within Irish discourses in both historical and contemporary contexts, operating simultaneously as evidence of colonial perversion, a marker of national treason and a symbol of modernisation" (2018: 9). While in this new urban setting homosexuality is linked with "modernisation", Amber has grown up to see it as "perversion" and as "treason" to the national ideal. Within such a conservative

perspective, she has been able to negotiate her lesbian identity, playing the part of a heterosexual teenage girl and only allowing herself to admit her homosexuality in solitude or in the presence of Eddie; thus the idea of being perceived as a lesbian by a stranger scares her, likely an automatic response resulting from the suppression of her feelings that she has experienced in her more conservative surroundings where the LGBTQ+ community is lacking and looked down on.

Nevertheless, she convinces Eddie to attend a party Sarah has invited her to under the idea that "wasn't it cool being totally anonymous?" (Freyne 2020: min. 43). Despite her initial reaction to hide her homosexuality, Amber perceives Dublin as a place of anonymity where she can be herself without having to confront the harassment from her classmates and the rejection from her village. Her prior visit to Dublin has revealed to Amber that there exists an Irish LGBTQ+ community, which —for the first time— allows her to consider that being Irish and a lesbian is possible. Unlike at school, where sapphic girlhoods are not recognised, lesbians are generally "more comfortable exploring their sexual identity in places that are frequently outside the school setting" (Petrovic and Ballard 2005: 206). Hence, Dublin is portrayed as a place where Amber can explore her sapphic identity as there is a space there for lesbian girlhood that she cannot find in her conservative school and village.

On her second visit to the city, while Amber is still unable to articulate the word "lesbian" in front of Sarah, she does tell her she does not like boys: "I need to make a confession. I don't actually have a boyfriend. Not really. The whole penis thing kind of makes me vom" (Freyne 2020: min. 48). The girls quickly begin a relationship, providing for Amber a new safe space that allows her to grow more comfortable as a lesbian and to renounce the idea of having to go abroad to be herself, encouraging her to end her fake relationship with Eddie (mins. 63-64) and to come out to her mother, who without saying anything holds her daughter's hand as a sign of affection (mins. 65-66). In this sense, it can be observed how the film is marked by the shift in queer cinema "from the representation of homosexuality itself as a problem for queer characters to overcome, towards coming out and self-acceptance as the crucial issue for queer characters" (Monaghan 2010: 58). Amber's experiences are not determined by a need to suppress her lesbianism, but rather by her journey towards a coming out that liberates her from the oppressive systems that surround her.

After her coming out, Amber must confront the blatant homophobia of her village, unable to hide anymore under the pretence that she is not gay. Queer narratives tend "to represent rural space as inherently oppressive and characterised by traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality" (Macleod 2018: 92), which is depicted in *Dating Amber*. Her mother, though trying to show support towards Amber, shares the news with the priest — likely seeking understanding

or advice, shocked at the kind of news that Irish Catholic parents could not fully comprehend due to their own religiously oppressive upbringing. Now Amber is ostracised by students and neighbours at large, the latter blessing themselves as they see her pass (Freyne 2020: min. 78). On top of this, Eddie blames Amber for ruining their "relationship" and instead of supporting her after she is outed, he calls her "dyke" (min. 68), succumbing to the homophobic discourse that surrounds him and that he feels unable to escape without the protection of his relationship with Amber. Amber can no longer deny that she is a lesbian —nor does she want to— and Eddie still wants to rely on their lie to protect himself, demonstrating how the two adolescents have grown apart. She tries to convince him that he "can come out too" because "it's not about other people, […] it's about [him]", yet Eddie insists that he is "happy" and that "join[ing] the regiment and stay[ing] [there] and be[ing] miserable" is "better than being a faggot" (min. 71). It is here that Amber's process of self-acceptance becomes the clearest. While Eddie insists that they should be together and that he would rather join the army and pretend he is not gay, Amber has been able to challenge the heteronormative expectations of her rural Catholic and military setting, choosing to openly embrace her lesbian identity and to interrogate the established moral values.

Furthermore, Amber's coming out and her decision to remain in Ireland challenge frequent portrayals of sapphic sexuality "as 'just a phase' of unruly adolescent development" (Monaghan 2016: 4). Amber's sapphic sexuality does not conclude as she finishes secondary school, but is rather reaffirmed as the narrative develops. In this sense, *Dating Amber* supports Monaghan's assertion that "recent cinematic representations demonstrate the potential for nuanced relationships between queerness and girlhood to be articulated through screen media" (2019: 109). Amber has been able to negotiate her lesbian and Irish identities, no longer needing to run away. In doing so, Amber "challenge[s] linear models of girlhood development and emphasizes the queerness of queer girlhood" (99). Additionally, her decision to remain in Ireland, where she now feels she has a supportive network through her girlfriend, her mother and the Irish queer community at large, conveys a defiance towards Ireland's standards of sexual purity and breaks away from the trend that LGBTQ+ Irish people had to emigrate. Thus, as the film concludes, Amber's lesbian girlhood has been recognised and reaffirmed, claiming a space for it within the Irish setting and challenging homophobic national discourses.

5. Conclusion

Dating Amber provides insight into the development of Irish lesbian girlhood within the conservative framework of 1990s Ireland, a time when discrimination

against the LGBTQ+ community was rife. Nevertheless, while *Dating Amber* looks at the late twentieth century, Anna Charczun sustains that "the stigma and the feeling of being the society's outcast still pervades in many lesbians" (2019: 139), enhancing the relevance and timely production of the film.

The film approaches and reflects on what were —and still are to some extent— common experiences for Irish lesbians, such as the desire to move abroad, homophobic harassment at school and the denial of one's homosexuality in an attempt at self-protection. Discourses on the incompatibility of Irishness and lesbianism are brought to the forefront through the suffocatingly repressive setting where Amber must negotiate her identity. In contrast to her village, Amber finds a safe space in her friendship with Eddie and in the Dublin LGBTQ+ community. Her fake-relationship-turned-into-friendship with Eddie is Amber's first experience of queer kinship, paramount in the lives of queer people where community usually offers the acceptance that cannot be found within heteronormative institutions such as family, school or religion. It is, indeed, community which acts as a catalyst in Amber's realisation that she can be both a lesbian and Irish, resulting in her coming out and her decision to stay in Ireland *and* be herself openly. Her discovery of the Irish LGBTQ+ community in Dublin shows Amber that her sapphic girlhood can be recognised within Irish borders. In coming out to her mother, breaking off her fake relationship with Eddie in order to have a real relationship with another girl, and deciding to stay in Ireland instead of leaving, Amber challenges the established heteronormative expectations of Catholic Ireland. In doing so, Amber exemplifies the resistance from the Irish queer community that drove Irish lesbians in the late twentieth century to mobilise in order to make themselves visible and claim a space for themselves within Ireland.

Dating Amber broadens the scope of queer Irish cinema through its approach to the previously unexplored reality of lesbian girlhood, a gap that this article has attempted to address through its examination of the film and the development of Amber's character. The film also provides an alternative representation of sapphic women, as Amber's sexuality is not depicted as unambiguous and she does not ultimately succumb to heterosexuality, claiming a space for lesbianism within the Irish screen. Furthermore, *Dating Amber* contributes to what Rachel Lewis refers to as "the crucial —but still vastly under-theorized— question of what it means to think lesbian representation globally and transnationally" (2012: 287). It offers a distinctive approach to the perception of lesbianism in Ireland and, in turn, shows how "same-sex female desire can be configured into mainstream texts to create new narrative, aesthetic, and political possibilities" (Pick 2004: 107). In short, Amber's acceptance of herself as an Irish lesbian against a homophobic backdrop interrogates conventional discourses that aim to separate Irishness and lesbianism,

and in doing so she refutes the incompatibility of both identities and creates a space for Irish lesbian girlhood(s) to exist within Irish culture and imagery.

Acknowledgements

This publication is part of the research project "Communitas/Immunitas: Relational Ontologies in Atlantic Anglophone Cultures of the 21st Century", grant PID2022-136904NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by "ERDF A way of making Europe".

Notes

1. While the success of the referendum was certainly a great achievement, the priority given to marriage recognition in lieu of other more pressing matters and its message of assimilation were also criticised (see, for instance, Mulhall 2015; Silvera 2015).

Works Cited

Barton, Ruth. 2004. *Irish National Cinema*. Routledge.

Bradshaw, Peter. 2020. "*Dating Amber* Review - Gay Teenagers' Pretend Love Fails to Blossom". *The Guardian* (June 3). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/03/dating-amber-review-fionn-oshea-sharon-horgan>. Accessed June 16, 2025.

Brown, Tracy. 2020. "Review: 'Dating Amber' Is the Platonic Queer Love Story We All Deserve". *Los Angeles Times* (November 11). <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-11-11/dating-amber-review-lgbtq-love-story-review>. Accessed June 16, 2025.

Carregal, José. 2021. *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction*. University College Dublin Press.

Charczun, Anna. 2019. "A New Framework for Rethinking Love Between Women: The Development of Lesbian Narrative in Irish Women's Writing, 1801-2017". PhD Dissertation. Brunel University London. <https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/18143>.

Clarke, Donald. 2020. "*Dating Amber*: A Story about Two Gay Teenagers, Being Each Other's Beards". *The Irish Times* (May 30). <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/dating-amber-a-story-about-two-gay-teenagers-being-each-other-s-beards-1.4262124>. Accessed June 16, 2025.

Connolly, Linda and Tina O'Toole. 2005. *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave*. The Woodfield Press.

Conrad, Kathryn. 2001. "Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity". *Cultural Studies* 15 (1): 124-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380010012630>.

Crone, Joni. 1988. "Lesbian Feminism in Ireland". *Women's Studies International Forum* 11 (4): 343-347. zhttps://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(88)90076-3>.

Crone, Joni. 1995. "Lesbians: the Lavender Women of Ireland". In O'Carroll, Íde and Eoin Collins (eds.): 60-70.

Freyne, David. 2020. *Dating Amber*. Screen Ireland.

Hans, Simran. 2020. "*Dating Amber* Review - Witty Irish Coming-of-Age Yarn". *The Guardian* (June 7). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/07/dating-amber-review-witty-irish-coming-of-age-yarn>. Accessed June 16, 2025.

Holohan, Conn. 2009. "Queering the Green: The Limitations of Sexuality as Metaphor in Recent Irish Film". In Le Corff, Isabelle and Estelle Epinoux (eds.) *Cinemas of Ireland*. Cambridge Scholars: 137-145.

Kerrigan, Páraic. 2019. "Projecting a Queer Republic: Mainstreaming Queer Identities on Irish Documentary Film". *Studies in Documentary Film* 13 (1): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2018.1535683>.

Kerrigan, Páraic and Anne O'Brien. 2020. "Camping It Up and Toning It Down: Gay and Lesbian Sexual Identity in Media Work". *Media, Culture & Society* 42 (7-8): 1061-1077. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720908149>.

Lesnik-Oberstein, Karín. 2016. "Children's Literature: Sexual Identity, Gender, and Childhood". *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*. <https://breac.nd.edu/articles/childrens-literature-sexual-identity-gender-and-childhood/>. Accessed December 18, 2024.

Lewis, Rachel. 2012. "Towards a Transnational Lesbian Cinema". *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16 (3): 273-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.673926>.

Mac Risteaird, Seán. 2020. "Coming Out, Queer Sex, and Heteronormativity in Two Irish Language Novels". *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 10: 63-75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-11752>.

Macleod, Allison. 2018. *Irish Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh U.P.

McDonagh, Patrick J. 2017. "'Homosexuals Are Revolting' - Gay & Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s - 1990s". *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 7: 65-91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-20751>.

Moane, Ger. 1995. "Living Visions". In O'Carroll, Íde and Eoin Collins (eds.): 86-98.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2010. "'It's All in a Day's Work for a 15-Year-Old Gay Virgin': Coming Out and Coming of Age in Teen Television". *Colloquy* 19: 56-69. <https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1762113/monaghan.pdf>.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2016. *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not 'Just a Phase'*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2019. "Not Just a Phase: Queer Girlhood and Coming of Age on Screen". *Girlhood Studies* 12 (1): 98-113. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2019.120109>.

Mulhall, Anne. 2015. "The Republic of Love". *Bully Bloggers* (June 20). <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/the-republic-of-love/>. Accessed June 16, 2024.

O'Carroll, Íde and Eoin Collins. 1995. "Interview with Mary Dorcey". In O'Carroll, Íde and Eoin Collins (eds.): 25-44.

O'Carroll, Íde and Eoin Collins. (eds.) 1995. *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland*. Cassell.

O'Rourke, Michael, Aideen Quilty, Eibhear Walshe, Moynagh Sullivan, Kathryn Conrad and Michael Barron. 2013. "Roundtable: Are We Queer Yet?". *Irish University Review* 43 (1): 12-54. <https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2013.0054>.

Petrovic, John E. and Rebecca M. Ballard. 2005. "Unstraightening the Ideal Girl: Lesbians, High School, and Spaces to Be". In Bettis, Pamela J. and Natalie G. Adams (eds.) *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*. Routledge: 195-209.

Pick, Anat. 2004. "New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films". In Aaron, Michele (ed.) *New Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh U.P.: 103-118.

Redmond, Jennifer. 2015. "The Politics of Emigrant Bodies: Irish Women's Sexual Practice in Question". In Redmond, Jennifer, Mary McAuliffe, Sandra McAvoy and Sonja Tiernan (eds.) *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland*. Irish Academic Press: 73-89.

Scahill, Andrew. 2019. "Fanfic'ing Film: Queer Youth Cinema Reclaims Pop Culture". *Girlhood Studies* 12 (1): 114-124. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2019.120110>.

Silvera, A.B. 2015. "Marriage Is Not Equality: Thoughts on #MarRef from a Worried Radical Queer". *Feminist Ire* (May 21). <https://feministire.com/2015/05/21/marriage-is-not-equality-thoughts-on-marref-from-a-worried-radical-queer/>. Accessed June 16, 2025.

Received: 19/12/2024
Accepted: 30/05/2025