

Contextualisation, part 1: Queer cinema and the global

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ABSTRACT

In the first of two contextualising articles written for this themed issue, the notion of queer cinema is positioned within larger, global narratives of activism, theory-making and reception, while simultaneously nuancing its functional applicability in ‘world cinema’ contexts – in essence cautioning against the potential pitfalls of deploying it as if with global or universal reach. In reaction to such universalist assumptions, the national is rather conceptualised in/through queer cinema as multiple horizons of belonging, as frameworks of space which speak to interconnecting and overlapping surfaces; turning the focus instead to the *process* of queering the formations of nations, ethnicities and diasporas as marked by hierarchical (hetero)sexual binaries whose normative effects can be disrupted and undone.

Keywords: queer cinema, nationalism, New Queer Cinema, world cinema(s), worlding.

‘Queer’ is a term both contested and inclusive; indeed, its inclusiveness relies on that contestation. Its durability in Cultural Theory, Film Studies, and activism is partly based on its malleability, that is its use as a catch-all, shorthand summary of dissident sexual-political (‘LGBTQ’) positions. Furthermore, however, the momentum the term gained from the early 1990s onwards invites a historicisation of its origins, the better to examine the potential and pitfalls of deploying it with global or universal reach. Put simply, the period saw a convergence of activism, sub- or counter-cultural practices, academic discourse, and film-making around the word ‘queer’. As far as activism is concerned, Queer Nation, founded in New York in 1990 and spreading to other American cities, emerged from ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and its role in the 1980s in angrily, directly and provocatively confronting governmental and drug company failures to adequately address the calamitous health crisis created by the epidemic. Queer Nation, rather than pursuing a discourse and strategy of equal and

civil rights, minoritised acceptance and tolerance associated with much (but not all) post-Stonewall gay politics in North America, defiantly threw back the insult and the associated abjection of non-heteronormativity in campaigns of in-your-face visibility and protest against homophobia and homophobic violence. In parallel, the term 'queer' had undergone a long re-appropriation in the world of black and Latin drag balls in American cities, brought to wider prominence by the Madonna-inspired rendering visible of the 'voguing' phenomenon.

Partly in response to these developments, but mostly as a culmination of the growing presence in university humanities departments in the 1970s and 1980s of feminist and eventually lesbian and gay studies, along with that of 'post-modernism' and its challenge to stable binaries of meaning (including the homo/hetero distinction), key works appeared. These works include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1989) and *Tendencies* (1993), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and especially *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993), and the 1991 special issue of the journal *differences* on 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities', edited by Teresa de Lauretis. It is worth re-invoking these now well-established and widely read texts, for they articulate, usually knowingly, all the ambiguities and terms of debate that have followed. The first of these is undoubtedly that of identitarian and non-identitarian: based on Sedgwick's distinctions, we may speak of a 'minoritizing view' of 'homo/heterosexual definition', seen 'as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority'; or a 'universalizing' one, where it is seen 'as an issue of continuing determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities' (Sedgwick 1990:1). If I say 'I am queer or 'identify as queer', then identity has crept back in, and queerness becomes another, funkier form of minoritising identity politics; if the aim is to undermine binary thought, then implicitly everyone is actually or potentially queer, and it becomes a highly universalising concept. Sedgwick (1993:8) expresses elsewhere 'queer' as referring to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't be made*) to signify monolithically'. For Butler, these ambiguities form one of the strengths of 'queer' when its performativity (naming as a stylised repetition, queerness or male/female as something you do rather than are) is combined with awareness of the histories of discourse and power attached to it, so that it represents 'a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance' (Butler 1993:230). This mobility of 'queer', generating a self-awareness in space and time, with attendant risks, is a point to which we shall return. For the moment we may wish to stay with Sedgwick's dynamic, verbal rather than adjectival or nominal use of the term, as she traces its etymology in English: 'Queer is a continuing

movement, moment, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root – *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere*, English *athwart*’ (Sedgwick 1993:xii).

The phenomenon of ‘New Queer Cinema’, first fully summarised by B. Ruby Rich in *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound* (1992) as she brought together for discussion festival activity and film releases in 1991-2, was added to this mix in the first half of the 1990s. The ‘phenomenon’ was as much one of changing audience and marketing patterns (Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals, targeted queer audiences) as the emergence of films and filmmakers such as Jennie Livingstone’s *Paris Is Burning* (1991, on voguing and queer drag balls), Todd Haynes’ *Poison* (1991), Christopher Munch’s *The Hours and Times* (1991), Tom Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992), Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992) and Laurie Lynd’s *R.S.V.P.* (1991). While one of the points about the movement (or ‘moment’ as Rich later called it) was a diversity of film style (within invariably low budgets); what most of these films had in common was an edgy, unapologetic, confrontational approach to heteronormativity that eschewed the approach of creating ‘positive’ gay characters and embraced the idea of the outcast and outlaw. For example, Haynes’ film is structured as ‘Hero/Horror/Homo’; Kalin’s is a take on the 1920s Leopold/Loeb murder case that was previously adapted by Hitchcock in *Rope* (1948); and Araki’s portrays outlaws on the run. In 1993, the Canadian John Greyson’s ‘AIDS musical’ *Zero Patience* included a duet of singing assholes.

The evocation of Hitchcock here reminds us that there is a ‘pre-history’ to queer cinema, lying in both film consumption/reception and production. If Hollywood and other censorships had, within film history, restricted depictions of and references to same-sex desire, the latter nonetheless would rear its head, often and even usually in homophobic manner (see Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet*, 1981, and its adaptation as film documentary by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman in 1995). However, as for example Richard Dyer’s work on Judy Garland and other stars (*Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*), and Mark Rappaport’s documentary dissection of Rock Hudson attest (*Rock Hudson’s Home Movies*, 1992), this does and did not prevent alternative queer (*avant la lettre*) readings and identifications. In terms of production, the ‘moment’ of New Queer Cinema can be seen as a mainstreaming (or more accurately, a broadening/enlarging) of the purview of underground or marginal cinemas in which most queer film-making had been confined. The evocation of the gay outlaw of course calls to mind, and is inspired, by the work of Jean Genet, whose short film *Un Chant d’amour* of 1950 was long banned, but which in its now classic status has been of huge influence (even referenced by Ridley Scott in *Thelma and Louise*, 1990). A director of an older generation such as Derek Jarman (1942-1994) could thus see one of his last films, *Edward II* of 1991, understood as partaking of ‘New Queer Cinema’.

Pointing to earlier work, the following names can also be included, namely Andy Warhol, in France Lionel Soukaz (*Race d'Ép!*, 1979), and others discussed in Dyer's *Now You See It* (1990).

This notion of New Queer Cinema, which continuously broadened and broke out into independent cinema and then expanded towards the more independent end of Hollywood production, in relation to new market segmentations, are issues taken up in a later article (2000) by B Ruby Rich. Writing of 'its short sweet climb from radical impulse to niche market', Rich laments, light-heartedly it must be said, developments such as that of quantity over quality of queer-themed films, and the sheer proliferation of queer film festivals in the world: 'Identity politics doesn't meld well with market considerations'. Her overall complaint is that of the dilution of the early 1990s New Queer Cinema's cutting-edge power, but she recognises that, within current fashionability, award-winning US films from the late 1990s such as *Gods and Monsters* (dir. Bill Condon, 1998), *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberley Peirce, 1999) and even *Being John Malkovich* (dir. Spike Jonze, 1999) have been enabled by that convergence of sexual politics, changing audiences, and new independent filmmaking that occurred earlier during that decade.

In addition to the abovementioned list, one might add, *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016). The invocation of this film, and Rich's remarks in the previous paragraph, remind us of Butler's admonition to attend to *histories* of discourse and power, and thus to *when* and *where* the term 'queer' is wielded (or not). So far, our discussion has dwelt on production and debates in North America or at most the Anglophone, North Atlantic. Retrospectively, of course, gay European art-house directors such as Pedro Almodóvar (who began his career in the early 1980s), Jean Cocteau, Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Luchino Visconti can be seen, and read, as making 'queer cinema' if we enlarge that term without the early 1990s 'new'. In fact, an established French arthouse film director, namely André Téchiné, suddenly found himself in the 1990s as a mainstay of LGBTQ film festivals, with his films *J'embrasse pas/I Don't Kiss* (1991, about a male prostitute), *Les Roseaux sauvages/Wild Reeds* (1994) and *Les Voleurs/Thieves* (1996). Before discussing the implications of a global (including as in 'Global South') deployment of 'queer cinema', it is worth reflecting upon instances where the 'queering' gestures of filmmaking as concerning sexuality and heteronormativity intersect with realities and indeed 'normalities' of identities and communities, including the national, that partake of, but are not reducible to, the sexual. *Les Roseaux sauvages* in fact articulates its adolescent coming-out story with the denouement of the Algerian War and its effect on the protagonists, and as in Téchiné's other films proposes a national community, which, like sexuality and individual identity, is unfixed, unfinished, and whose borders/boundaries are problematised. In

Quebec, the queerness of Xavier Dolan's films depends on the term's lack of resolution (between identity and its undoing), and means a refusal of normative, Oedipalised identity trajectories. Quebec nationalism since the 1960s had drawn links with anti-colonial movements elsewhere, including Africa, with the French-Canadians cast as a colonised and conquered people whose emancipation passed through a reclaiming of autonomy expressed in very masculinist terms, in conjunction with a rejection of the 'false fathers' of the Catholic Church. In Dolan's work, however, films such as *Lawrence Anyways* (2012, about a transexual teacher), *Tom at the Farm* (2013, where a bereaved boyfriend is drawn into his lover's violent, rural family) and *Mommy* (2014, about an intense mother-son relationship) become touchstones for wider uncertainties of the national. Rather than gay characters embodying the antithesis of the nation's unified and heteronormative assertion, or, as later, a symbol of its modernising trajectory, all of Dolan's protagonists are swept along in a movement of change which disrupts the fixities by which they have lived and injects them, in most cases, with a renewed belief in the world in contrast with previous assumptions about gender binary polarisations and/or domestic stasis. Dolan's international success partly lies then in seeing the local or national as examples of multiple horizons of belonging, as frameworks of space which speak to interconnecting and overlapping surfaces rather than the monolithic 'depth' models associated with ethnic nationalism, filiation, and gender/heteronormativity.

One further example, Ferzan Özpetek's *Hamam: The Turkish Bath* (1997) is worthy of comment because of the problematic way in which it has been seen to cast a same-sex relationship within specific histories, notably the discourses of Orientalism. Francesco (Alessandro Gassmann), a married Italian professional, voyages to Istanbul to deal with the inheritance from an aunt, which turns out to be a Hamam in need of restoration. Francesco, who becomes sexually involved with Mehmet (Mehmet Günsür), the young son of his host family, is murdered in the midst of criminal pressure over his property, and his widow Marta (Francesca d'Aloja) takes up the baton of the dead aunt's becoming-other and becoming-Turkish. This example of a queer film with global reverberations has been the subject of some soul-searching, as reproducing Orientalist tropes in a straightforwardly Saidian sense: 'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 2003:1); or even 'Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' (Said 2003:3). Thus for one scholar writing on *Hamam*, '[t]his image of Turkishness is a textbook Orientalist representation, resting on Western notions of Oriental difference, antiquity, seduction, and alternative lifestyle; as a fixed set of aesthetic and moral conventions, it depends on an original distance between the Self and the Oriental

Other' (Girelli 2007:23-4). On the other hand, the film has been recognised as more complex owing to its place in a transnational, diasporic context of creation and production (the director's own Turkish origins), and its emphasis on a process of becoming, which 'destabilizes discrete categories like homosexual and heterosexual, inasmuch as it foregrounds bisexual behaviour and the process of becoming a queer, namely a person aware of how one's non-normative sexual and erotic practices define one's sexual identity as non-normative too' (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004:164).

I invoke *Hamam* here because its case exemplifies the potential fault lines that queer approaches can be seen to open up when cast upon non-Western (or non-North American, non-European) contexts. Namely, to what extent is it legitimate to apply these categories when a history of colonial domination overdetermines the relationship between East and West, North and South? Famously, the fight against HIV/AIDS in non-western countries has been discussed as problematised by the importation of categories of 'gay' identity and even consumerism into cultural spaces where same-sex desire, activity, and modes of being are mapped and understood in radically different ways (see Kole 2007 for a debate about AIDS prevention in the Indian context). A recent contribution to these debates, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt's *Queer Cinema in the World*, is concerned, on the one hand, that 'To propose a queer world cinema is to invite trouble':

The combination of terms creates a series of anxieties about the certainty of knowing and the privilege of position; it raises fears of mistranslation, of neocolonial domination, of homogeneity and the leveling of difference. It suggests the forcing of meaning or the instrumentalization of film aesthetics in support of a limiting identity politics (Schoonover & Galt 2016:4-5).

On the other hand, in the deployment of the term 'worlding', their project seeks to argue that queer cinema constructs the possibility of dissident spaces, and even the re-configuring of spaces, in relation to dominant forms and understanding of globalisation, even if this process is incomplete and open to question:

queer cinema elaborates new accounts of the world, offering alternatives to embedded capitalist, national, hetero- and homonormative maps; revising the flows and politics of world cinema; and forging dissident scales of affiliation, affection, affect and form (Schoonover & Galt 2016:5).

The specificity of the film medium is crucial here, with cinema seen as a critical means by which queerness *worlds* itself (Schoonover & Galt 2016:29). Thus, sidestepping arguments about the impasses and pitfalls of identity politics within capitalist crisis (as expressed in Penney 2013 for example), the authors proceed to explore the

manifestations of 'queer world cinema' via the categories of the queer (protagonist), festivals, narrative, the popular, feeling and affect, and temporality.

We should recall that all identities are lived and indeed created in a tension between forces, and that political or other assertions or strategies are always dialogic. The contradictions of 'queer' need not place us back in a 'cultural imperialism' argument that mistakes West and East, North and South, as plenitudinous, non-contradictory cultural or even social and political unities facing each other across a chasm. Rather, *within* these categories, spatio-temporal considerations must be borne in mind: different embeddings of modernity and tradition, as in *Hamam* or indeed *Inxeba*; the fact that the origins of 'queer' were at least in part determined by the need to include a wider set of ethnicised and racialised subjectivities within discussions of 'lesbian and gay'; or that a black British filmmaker such as Isaac Julien, with his take on London Caribbean, gay and punk subcultures in the context of the Queen's Silver Jubilee (*Young Soul Rebels*, 1991) could be seen as a harbinger of New Queer Cinema. This is not to deny grossly unequal distributions of cultural, economic and political power, far from it, but to recognise the lateral points of contact between differences that nourish creations and conversations around 'queer world cinema'. *Queering*, in my view, therefore has the potential actively to energise attention not only to specific groups within colonial and postcolonial societies, but moreover to the ways in which symbolic formations such as nations, ethnicities and diasporas are marked by hierarchical (hetero)sexual binaries whose normativities can be disrupted and undone, and realities reformulated and rewritten.

The continuing mileage of 'queer', at its best, thus relies on its instability, calling potential subjects into being and simultaneously propelling a questioning of that being, as Butler (1993:227) foresaw twenty-five years ago:

if the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing democratization of queer politics. As much as identity terms must be used, as much as "outness" is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism.

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