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Diplomová práce

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**Sexual Identity as Cinematic Subversion:
The Discourse of New Queer Cinema**

Sexuální identita jako filmová subverze:

Diskurz New Queer Cinema

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Prohlášení:

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a výhradně s použitím citovaných pramenů, literatury a dalších odborných zdrojů.

V Praze, dne 20. srpna 2015

.....
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Klíčová slova:

queer, *queer* film, *queer* čtení, *queer* filmová studia, formálně-obsahová analýza, kritická diskurzivní analýza, teorie autorství, New Queer Cinema, *Swoon*

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Abstrakt

Diplomová práce předkládá kapitolu filmových dějin New Queer Cinema jako paradigma subverzivních praktik *queer* filmu. Teoreticko-historická část postupně zavádí pojem *queer*, vykládá jeho možné aplikace na film v rámci *queer* filmových studií, a ve třetí kapitole kriticky představuje 'novou vlnu' *queer* filmu New Queer Cinema. Analytická část určuje jako východisko svého zkoumání pojem *queer* a jeho možné funkce. Je rozdělena do dvou oddílů: první předkládá formálně-obsahovou analýzu klíčového filmu *Swoon* (1992); na její výstupy navazuje závěrečná kapitola, která na základě čtyř navrhovaných analytických řezů zkoumá korpus filmů New Queer Cinema, a popisuje, jak vytvářejí *queer* diskurz. Výstupem práce je otevřený model možných přístupů ke *queer* filmu.

Abstract

The thesis proposes the New Queer Cinema chapter of film history as a paradigm of queer film's subversive practices. The theoretically and historically focused first part establishes the term *queer*, expounds its possible applications to film in the realm of queer film studies and in the third chapter critically introduces the 'new wave' of queer film New Queer Cinema. The analytical part assigns *queer* and its possible functions as its basis for inquiry. It consists of two parts: the first performs the formal-content analysis of the pivotal film *Swoon* (1992); the final chapter builds on its conclusions and examines the corpus of New Queer Cinema films along four analytical cuts in order to describe how they produce the queer discourse. The final output of the thesis is an open model of prospective approaches to queer film.

Abbreviations

APA - American Psychological Association

GLAAD - Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

Ibid. - ibidem (Latin), "in the same place"

IFF - International Film Festival

LGBT - lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans*

MPAA - Motion Picture Association of America

NQC - New Queer Cinema

PFLAG - Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

U.S. - (The) United States (of America)

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o. Introduction

"If this is what queer cinema amounts to [now], then one can only wish that it had stayed away,"¹ lauded James Morrison's snarky sigh in 2006, expressed as he was looking at the currently 'hot queer film' *Eating Out* (2004) and back at New Queer Cinema.

Similar sentiments have overcome the author of this thesis at times - as a queer-identified woman, who growing up, hungrily longed for any representation of queerness and vividly remembers the moment she watched Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) on VHS, and saw it as a revelation in terms of both sexuality and cinema; and now as the program director of a queer film festival² who finds herself surveying the plethora of fantastic, boring, offensive, exploitative, straight-washing, innovative, generic, old and new allegedly queer films, constantly negotiating and reassessing *what* queer film actually *is* and *can be* in debates with colleagues, audiences and mainstream media, and most of all, with herself. And at these times I find myself thinking back to New Queer Cinema, in terms of my own impressions of how it is defined, and as a general paradigm of what queer films can do.

In the preliminary demarcation of the terrain in which this thesis is positioned, a working definition of the notoriously definition-resistant term *queer* is necessary. At this juncture, queer can be enveloped as the radical and productive oppositional expression to the heteronormative - while heteronormativity is the rigid structure that asserts strict gender division (man/woman) and procreative heterosexuality as the desired norm of human self-understanding, which in turn, attempts to interpret our behavior and the default ordering of the world as we experience it.³ Queer functions as a subversion of this order, opening the space for sexual and gender identities that do not adhere to it. This is the underlying framework from which *queer cinema* and its study rises.

¹ James Morrison, "Still New, Still Queer, Still Cinema?" review of *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron and *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.1 (2006): 135-136.

² Queer Film Festival Mezipatra in the Czech Republic, see the website - <http://www.mezipatra.cz/en>.

³ See Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17.

Queer film studies is a cross-over discipline in which the field of contemporary film studies, with its many branches of topics and methods, intersects with the wide analytical perspective of *queer*. The resulting area of ongoing and rapidly growing research presents a plurality of themes - to name just a few: representation of non-heterosexual characters, queer authorship, the specificity of reception in queer audiences, the practices of niche queer film festivals and distribution channels and so on.

Also expanding is the corpus of queer cinema - to illustrate it on the quantitative level, the 2nd edition of the comprehensive guide *A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian Film* lists over 2600 titles released worldwide by the year 2003.⁴ In the selection process for the Czech queer film festival Mezipatra, every year we see the accumulation of potential new titles for the upcoming edition (combining the films sourced from other festivals, where they were tagged as queer, and the submissions) and the number of new films (grouping together short, medium and feature-length films as well as fiction and documentary works) has surpassed 500 entries in the festival database for every respective edition for the past four years.

Looking at this rapidly growing terrain of queer cinema (plus television productions and other media) and scholarship concerned with it, this thesis turns back to revisit and critically examine its core foundation: namely the *queer* attribute of *queer cinema*; by zeroing in on the simultaneously controversial and paradigmatic chapter New Queer Cinema, as

New Queer Cinema was seen to mark a timely and unprecedented 'epistemic shift' in that it proffered a challenging new horizon of politics, identity, and pleasure far beyond the oppressive, suffocating landscape of the 'heteronormative.'⁵

In essence, this thesis takes *queer* and turns its prism back onto New Queer Cinema with the ambition of gaining a better understanding of how the queer discourse is produced by these films and how it is received in the queer film scholarship. The motivation for this approach is two-fold. Firstly, in my research

⁴ The gathering mechanism for inclusion of films into the guide is based on queer characters as well as queer implications of the plot: "Direct representations of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, as well as transgendered people are featured throughout, as well as mainstream films which contain strong queer sub-texts, or sub-plots..." (Lisa Daniel and Claire Jackson, *The Bent Lens, 2nd edition. A world guide to gay and lesbian film* (Crow Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 7-8.)

⁵ William Guynn, "Gay/Lesbian/Queer Cinema," in *The Routledge Companion to Film History*, ed. Willam Guynn (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), Kindle edition.

through available English-language literature, I discovered an intriguing void regarding the subject of New Queer Cinema, especially given the paradigmatic position it holds and the scope of published works - no available text thoroughly examines New Queer Cinema as a whole,⁶ in regards to the basic analytical perspective of what makes these films queer in the established possible applications of the term in cinema. The available texts are either historically and sociologically contextualized introductions to the phenomena that provide caveat characteristics without going into details, or analyses that choose to read New Queer Cinema from a specific interpretative angle. The largest part of literature consists of dedicated studies of individual films or filmmakers from the 'canon' of New Queer Cinema. I do not mean to dismiss this body of research - on the contrary, these studies were, together with the films, the primary source this thesis builds on. But the strategies they chose in approaching the topic leaves room for further examination; which is where this thesis claims its originality and validity in a seemingly exhausted field, and aims to examine the New Queer Cinema phenomenon anew. Secondly, the current abundance of queer films (and TV), the multiplicity of how they present queer topics and characters, the proliferation of queer film festivals, the growing scope of queer film scholarship and the ongoing mainstreaming of queerness; all set against the global backdrop of LGBT rights as a topical issue, gives ground to return, 25 years later,⁷ to the films that together present a major break in the lineage of queer cinema.

The structure of the thesis is based on a hierarchic sequence of questions which head each individual chapter, following the motivation to examine the basis of each question.

Starting with, 'what does *queer* mean?,' the first chapter lays out how the term has come to its current multiplicity of meaning, and what are the ramifications of its use in relation to heteronormativity, and the more traditional and less politically charged expressions of gay/lesbian. It asserts iterations of *queer* that form a framework of its

⁶ There is a fundamental problem of accessing what are the confines of New Queer Cinema and I address it in chapter 3, but the critical consensus posits it as body of films to which others can be added by expanding the original listing.

⁷ Ruby B. Rich's article "New Queer Cinema," which propelled the 'epistemic shift' by naming the heterogeneous group of *new* and *queer* films was published in 1992, but the origin point of New Queer Cinema is situated into the 1990, the release year of *Paris is Burning* (1990). See Ruby B. Rich, "New Queer Cinema: Director's Cut," in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, by Ruby B. Rich. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. Kindle edition.

analytical function as it will be used further on; and in compliance with queer's definition-resistant foundation, it remains dynamic.

The following chapter looks into the layered and sometimes conflicted space of answers to the question of 'what makes a film queer?', introducing the theoretical-historical assessment of queer cinema, along the distinct methodic lines of queer cinema studies.

The third chapter recounts the establishment of New Queer Cinema as the *new wave* of queer cinema in the early 1990's, its critique and academic reflection; consequently adhering to the conceptualization of New Queer Cinema as an event horizon for examining the possibilities of the subversive function of film, as it moves towards the dominant heteronormative discourse.

These three chapters constitute the preparatory part of the thesis, each providing a spectrum of answers to the three interconnected question of what queer, queer cinema and New Queer Cinema *can be* - as none of the three can in a satisfactory manner be rendered to an enclosed definition. The thesis deliberately chooses not to limit its conclusions to categorical interpretations, instead keeping the horizon pointedly open, in keeping with the rhetoric of *queer*.

The main part of the thesis takes *queer* in its possible functions as the foundation for its examination of New Queer Cinema, using the methodology of formal-content analysis, as well as elements of auteur theory and critical discourse analysis, to explore how queerness is produced by the New Queer films. It is split into two chapters, the first consisting of the case study of one quintessential New Queer Cinema film, *Swoon* (1992).

The concluding chapter of the thesis examines four distinctive analytical cuts, proposed as the components of New Queer Cinema's discourse on the basis of *Swoon's* analysis, across the corpus of selected New Queer Cinema films and formulates them as a possible framework for accessing queer cinema in the present.

Two notes are due regarding the methodology. Firstly, the formal-content analysis was selected as the principal approach of analyzing the films in order to provide the widest possible scope of accessing queerness as it is produced from within the films, thus barring pre-existing interpretative strategies.. Secondly, the concrete methodology broadens its range by employing the elements of auteur theory, specifically the concept of minority authorship as a productive point of view for works

of queer authors; and queer theory, while transgressing the field of queer theory by using *queer* in a far-reaching sense, as “queer as a crusading slogan is logically, and often practically, independent of queer theory.”⁸ It is acknowledged that this approach can be seen as undesirably methodologically eclectic - or positively as multifocal, in accordance with critical discourse analysis (CDA).⁹ The CDA, adapted to the topic and methodology of inquiry in this thesis, is the loose umbrella concept for its goal. It is fitting, as it takes an admittedly politically charged stance in exploring how New Queer Cinema films produce queer discourse that is both subversive in defiance of heteronormativity, and establishing its independent legitimacy.

⁸ Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), x.

⁹ Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), Kindle edition.

"Something in Dana's head felt weird,
but not any stranger than
the queer feeling in her heart."
Oxford Dictionaries example sentence

1. Queer

The original meaning of *queer* as an adjective in the English language lies in the territory of things and sensations that are strange, odd, suspicious and eccentric, even worthless, sick and counterfeit. *To queer something* is to spoil or ruin it. There is a transgression from the *normal*, in a mostly negative manner, embedded in the evolution of the very word, stretching all the way back to the early 16th century.¹⁰ Eve Sedgwick identifies the root of the word in *-twerkw*, providing basis for *transverse* and *to twist*, in German and Latin respectively.¹¹

It is not such a leap to imagine the murky path on which it came to pass that the strange, eccentric and suspicious took on one more specific meaning - a derogatory name for the *men who lie with men*.¹² On a side-note, it is a fitting and amusing comparison between *queer's* origins and the less problematic label of *gay*. The original meaning for *gay* as an adjective includes merry, lively, light-hearted and brightly-colored.¹³ The contemporary slang use expanded *gay* from a synonym of *homosexual* to the scornful equivalent of *stupid*, such as the phrase *that's so gay*, and adds another chapter to the etymology.¹⁴ Usage of *queer* as a noun standing for a homosexual male in an offensive, demeaning fashion spans from the early 19th century till present day.¹⁵ However, the insulting nature has been reframed for the

¹⁰ According to the online version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the first record of the word's use is 1508.

¹¹ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), Adobe e-book, viii.

¹² Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), Adobe e-book, 1-8. The phrase itself is a turn on the notorious Biblical verse "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." (Leviticus 20:13, English Standard Version, <http://biblehub.com/leviticus/20-13.htm>)

¹³ The original *merry* understanding of *gay* dates to the 14th century. The first use *gay* as homosexual (primarily male) is positioned in the year 1953 by *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

¹⁴ See for example Radhika Sanghani, "'That's so gay': Students now want to kill this and other 'offensive' phrases," *The Telegraph*, April 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10785653/Thats-so-gay-Students-now-want-to-kill-this-and-other-offensive-phrases.html>

¹⁵ One of the usages of *queer* listed reads: "Offensive Slang Used as a disparaging term for a gay man or a lesbian," see "Queer," *The Free Dictionary*, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/queer>.

most part, and the scope of its meaning stretches beyond an expression labeling homosexual men.

The word *queer* (as a noun, adjective and significantly, as the verb *to queer something*) was claimed in the late 1980's and early 1990's by activist groups, as well as academics, embraced by people as an identifier and by popular culture, becoming a mainstream go-to term covering a range of identities of the non-heterosexual and trans* spectrum.¹⁶ Annamarie Jagose makes a well-based cover statement that “part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition.”¹⁷ To simply define what *queer* means would be superficial as well as counterproductive to the analytical aims of this thesis, so the following sections outline how *queer* functions in four neighboring but distinct areas that constitute the contemporary usage and function of the term.

1.1 Queer as in queer activism

Richard Dyer sums up the historical notion of *queer* (as a homosexual man) in the following manner:

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in Western society, there was a notion of sexual attraction between men characterised by three features: that such attraction indicated a sexual category to which a man either did or did not belong, that it went along with other, non-sexual qualities and that it was humanly (morally, medically, socially) problematic. Men of this kind were queers (or fags, froci, poofs, Schwule, tapettes, etcetera).¹⁸

It was an encompassing label, both based on and stretching beyond sexual practices of such an individual, with a strong negative connotation. To call someone a queer was (and depending on the context still is) an insult and “a term of abuse”.¹⁹ As Dyer lists further, “...notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos were all part of the notion of queerness.”²⁰ *Queer* thus carried the societal rejection of same-sex desire,

¹⁶ See for example "A Definition of 'Queer,'" PFLAG - Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://community.org/abouttheq>.

¹⁷ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory. An Introduction* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1.

¹⁸ Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 1.

¹⁹ David M. Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol. 45 No. 2/3/4 (2003): 339.

²⁰ Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 6.

sexual practice and the presumed failings tied inherently to individuals who indulged in them.

This is where the gay rights activism comes in, taking the slanderous word and wearing it proudly, thus shifting the emphasis and taking back control: Queer Nation was a radical 'direct action' group, established in the wake of the HIV pandemic, connected by its purpose, methods and key figures to ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).²¹ The reclaiming of the word queer and the political significance of that gesture are apparent in the group's 1990 leaflet "Queers Read This. Published anonymously by queers,"²² as an act of empowerment and expression of the group's radical politics. The text reads:

Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. ... Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.²³

The claim of the unpopular insult by the insulted themselves bore the ramifications needed to underline the leaflet's revolutionary and fierce rhetoric. Queerness as a political challenge bears a legacy to Michel Foucault's work: "For Foucault "homosexuality" represented an historic opportunity and eccentric standpoint in the social field from which particular problems might be illuminated and alternative forms of life and self-understanding might emerge."²⁴ The *eccentricity* here is understood as an opposition to the general society which denotes itself as 'normal' and everything else abnormal, thus dangerous. In another contemporary interpretation of Foucault: "Homophobia is therefore, at least in some cases, not so much a reaction based on moral condemnation of homosexual sex acts as it is a conservative attempt to secure the supposedly heterosexual foundations of

²¹ For a history and overview of ACT UP (and the connected activities of Queer Nation and TAG), see their website <http://www.actupny.org>; as well as the archive of the organization's oral history project <http://www.actuporalhistory.org>. See also Joshua Gamson, "Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement 'Newness,'" *Social Problems*, Vol. 36 No. 4. (1989): 351-367. An excellent resource is also provided by the documentary films *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) and *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012).

²² Queer Nation, "Queers Read This. Published anonymously by queers," ACT UP Documents, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.actupny.org/documents/QueersReadThis.pdf>.

²³ Queer Nation, "Queers Read This."

²⁴ Jana Sawicki, "Queering Foucault and the Subject of Feminism," in *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 393.

society.”²⁵ Queerness thus presents a dangerous horizon that threatens heterosexuality.

This is where the split between queer and gay and lesbian activism happens: more traditional and extended gay and lesbian rights groups demand integration into the majority society; the goal being marriage equality with a rhetoric that foremost declares *dear straight people, we are the same as you*.²⁶ From the queer activist perspective, the celebrated success of achieving marriage equality is essentially flawed and misguided. As Gamson notes already in 1995: “Queer marks a contemporary anti-assimilationist stance, in opposition to the mainstream inclusionary goals of the dominant gay rights movement.” An anthology of essays by queer activists, published in 2010, bears the telling title *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*.²⁷ Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, one of the contributing authors in the anthology, expressed the view that “gay has become a narrow identity based in accessing straight privilege.”²⁸ From this point of view, the fight for equal rights for heterosexual and same-sex couples (marriage, adoption, spousal benefits) is a process of assimilation and thus annihilation of the voices which do not fit into the heteronormative narrative.

Going back to Foucault: “Foucault might have regarded the movement to legalize gay marriage as dangerous, because it threatens to “contaminate” homosexual relationships with the rigid norms typical of heterosexual relationships.”²⁹ Put bluntly, the gay and lesbian activism wishes that gays and lesbians are embraced and accepted by the mainstream society as *not actually different*, while queer activists attack the very idea of such a society and maintain their right to embrace their radical difference³⁰ from it, opposing the dominant heterosexual society itself.³¹

²⁵ Mark Kingston, “Subversive Friendships: Foucault on Homosexuality and Social Experimentation,” *Foucault Studies* 7 (2009): 14.

²⁶ To illustrate the point, the most vocal gay and lesbian equality group in the Czech Republic PROUD nests its legislative agenda under slogans about “the same kind of family,” see their website www.stejnarodina.cz.

²⁷ Conrad (ed.), 2010.

²⁸ Michel Martin, “A ‘Queer’ Argument Against Marriage,” *NPR*, June 10, 2010, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127740436>.

²⁹ Kingston, “Subversive Friendships,” 26.

³⁰ As Gamson writes: “Queer thus asserts in-your-face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism.” (Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma.” *Social Problems* Vol. 42 No. 3. (1995): 395.)

1.2 *Queer as in queer theory*

Queer activism has significant overlaps with *queer theory* in their objectives as well as their key figures. The works of queer theory carry an essential activist appeal and at the same time, queer activism uses theoretical framework - Judith Butler praises this two-way process in the preface to a re-edition of *Gender Trouble*, noting her continued gratification as her work influenced not only academia, but inspired activist groups such as ACT UP and pushed the American Psychological Association “to reassess some of their current doxa on homosexuality.”³² Still, it is important to keep in mind that these are two *sui generis* queer avenues.

Teresa de Lauretis famously proposed³³ *queer theory* and she summed up its aim in her introduction³⁴ to a special issue³⁵ of the feminist academic journal *differences*³⁶ while serving as its guest editor in 1991. Her hope for the conference itself overlaps with her proposal of queer theory’s purpose as it took off, so I quote her extensively on it here:

[it] intended to articulate the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenisation, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture. ... also [to] problematize some of the discursive constructions and constructed silences in the emergent field of "gay and lesbian studies," and would further explore questions that have as yet been barely broached, such as the respective and/or common grounding of current discourses and practices of homo-sexualities in relation to gender and to race... From there we could then go on to

³¹ Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17.

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), Adobe e-book, xvii.

³³ Halperin, “Normalization,” 339.

³⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” *differences* 3.2 (1991): iii-xviii.

³⁵ The issue includes papers from the “working conference on theorizing gay and lesbian sexualities” held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February 1990. De Lauretis points to an earlier conference as her source of inspiration, namely the “How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video” conference, held in New York City in October 1989 (de Lauretis, “Queer Theory,” xvii). Papers and transcripts of discussions from “How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video” were later published under the eponymous title, see Bad Object-Choices, ed., *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

³⁶ The full title of the still published (currently by Duke University Press) peer-reviewed journal is *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. See the journal’s homepage at <https://www.dukeupress.edu/differences>.

recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way or thinking the sexual.³⁷

As Gamson notes four years later "it [queer theory] has defined itself largely against conventional lesbian and gay studies".³⁸ As Halperin recalls, to unite *queer* and *theory* was "scandalously offensive"³⁹ and a deliberate provocation on de Lauretis's part - bringing "the perverse" into academia while challenging what *theory* in general hinges upon.⁴⁰ In 1991, de Lauretis writes how the term *queer* was suggested to her and she found it fitting, while being "ignorant" of the establishment of the activist group Queer Nation around the same time (March 1990). She also remarks that her understanding of the word *queer* for the proposed approach of *queer theory* and Queer Nation's *queer* share little common ground.⁴¹ However, two key points on which de Lauretis' *differences* essay and Queer Nation's leaflet, which proposes the group's agenda, passionately agree are the inclusivity of women and the caution against silence. Both texts express their concern about lesbians (or rather gay women) having been added under the gay umbrella as an afterthought and the undisputable fact that the activism, in the streets and in academia, is overwhelmingly concerned with men. And as de Lauretis warns about dominant discourses silencing marginalized voices, Queer Nation called for war using the SILENCE = DEATH⁴² rhetoric of the AIDS crisis - the argument being that the disregard of the HIV epidemic as well as virtually no public information provided by most mass media and government agencies is the direct cause behind the innumerable resulting deaths.⁴³

Queer theory draws greatly from Michel Foucault's work on sexuality⁴⁴ (broadly from post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction and the

³⁷ de Lauretis, "Queer Theory," iii-iv

³⁸ Gamson, "Identity Movements," 395.

³⁹ Halperin, "Normalization," 340.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ de Lauretis, "Queer Theory," xvii.

⁴² As elaborated on the ACT UP website: "In its manifesto, the Silence = Death Project drew parallels between the Nazi period and the AIDS crisis, declaring that 'silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.'" ("Silence=Death," ACT UP Documents, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.actupny.org/reports/silencedeath.html>.) See also Gamson, "Silence, Death."

⁴³ See Vito Russo's speech - Vito Russo, "Why We Fight," ACT UP Documents, 1988, accessed May 11, 2015, <http://www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html>. Also see *How to Survive a Plague* (2012).

⁴⁴ Chiefly his three-volume *The History of Sexuality* (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; Michel Foucault, *The History of*

postmodern turn)⁴⁵ and is primarily a critical theory, questioning the discourses on sexuality. Also, while there is an important continuity and dialogue with feminist theories, queer theory is a point of critique and departure from *heterosexual feminism*.⁴⁶ De Lauretis is credited with the original spark which since led to the strong position queer theory holds in academia as the “hot paradigm.”⁴⁷ Meanwhile, it is also accused of evolving so that it is detached from the reality of queer lives, in its “academic arcana”,⁴⁸ where queer theoreticians themselves argue what queer theory is supposed to be and do⁴⁹ - partly because it has been so widely incorporated into such a variety of disciplines as sociology, history, religion, literature and film, postcolonial and critical race studies...⁵⁰ Keeping in mind that queer theory is in a constant state of being negotiated and critiqued, refined and divided according to application, I would like to outline what queer theory’s main line of inquiry is. We also need to remember that, as Halperin notes, “the two texts that, in retrospect, were taken to have founded queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, were written well before anyone had ever heard of it.”⁵¹

Sexuality. Volume II: The Use of Pleasure, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.) Foucault’s research into the historical discourse of homosexuality as well as his interpretation of its function vis-à-vis society and its power structures is crucial as foundation in the concepts of queer theory’s key thinkers - see de Lauretis, “Queer Theory;” Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Warner, “Fear.” The foucaultian discourse is still very present and being explored – see Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault;” Kingston, “Subversive Friendships;” Sawicki, “Queering Foucault.”

⁴⁵ See Halperin, “Normalization;” and Butler, “Gender Trouble.”

⁴⁶ Butler regards this distinction as a crucial inspiration for *Gender Trouble*, saying “I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, vii). Shohini Chaudhuri recounts the criticism by Theresa de Lauretis on Kaja Silverman (and Julia Kristeva) for the problematic “tendency in feminist writing to sweep lesbian desire and sexuality ‘under the rug of sisterhood, female friendship, and...the mother-daughter bond’” - see Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), Kindle edition.

⁴⁷ Adam Isaiah Green, “Gay but not queer: Toward a post-queer study of sexuality,” *Theory and Society* Vol 31 No. 4 (2002): 521, quotation marks by the author.

⁴⁸ Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (New York: Riverdale Avenue, 2014), Kindle edition.

⁴⁹ As Michael Warner put it in very early on: “The appeal of ‘queer theory’ has outstripped anyone’s sense of what exactly it means.” (Warner is quoted as the book’s motto in Jagose, *Queer Theory*.) This statement is considered “prophetic” for queer theory’s trajectory, see Bruce Drushel and Kathleen M. German, ed., *Queer Identities / Political Realities* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

⁵⁰ Halperin, “Normalization.”

⁵¹ Halperin, “Normalization,” 341.

Both Sedgwick's and Butler's landmark studies concern themselves with language - and set out to challenge and deconstruct the terms of gender and sexual identity deemed unproblematic. Sedgwick, outlining her project, writes about the "homo/heterosexual definition"⁵² and the "institutionalised taxonomic discourses"⁵³ that build on it. Butler points out and attacks the "normative function of a language"⁵⁴ at the very start of *Gender Trouble*, questioning what a woman represents within and outside of the feminist discourse. Elsewhere, Butler concisely presents her point that pervades her own work as well as the paradoxical essence of queer theory:

...identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalising categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies.⁵⁵

We can extrapolate queer theory as a tool of exposing the relations between language, the discourse its usage produces and powers - seeking to undermine the definitions and especially their perceived fixed and stable nature. As Jagose writes: "Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire."⁵⁶ The polarity of heterosexuality and homosexuality is realized in the strictly binary categories,⁵⁷ into which anyone should seemingly fit; their function of exclusion - and thus oppression.

It would be misguided to construe queer theory simply as a tool of deconstruction and negation. Its destabilizing force is crucial, but on the ruins of discourse, a new and exciting world is being built. The breadth of this field is immense (as suggested above by the invasion of queer theory into a variety of academic strains from history to cultural studies) but I would like to at least roughly point out the elements and

⁵² Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 2.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3.

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 308.

⁵⁶ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 3.

⁵⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 9.

tracks rooted in Butler's and Sedgwick's work that persist as those dominant and productive instruments of queer theory.

First, it is what is canonized as Butler's *theory of performativity* regarding gender. As Butler recognizes, it has been adopted, criticized and adapted by other theoreticians, and revised by Butler herself.⁵⁸ The core of the theory is, that "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body"⁵⁹ and this manufacturing is fuelled by the means of anticipation of what is expected of one in the assigned gender role (in Butler's words: "an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates")⁶⁰ while it isn't a singular act, but a continuous process over time, as "a repetition and a ritual."⁶¹ Such performative nature of gender opens the realm of possibilities of how we can think about and experience our gender, which is Butler's legacy in the contemporary trans* discourse⁶² that offers an array of (unstable) gender variants. As Butler reflects in 2014: "I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be."⁶³ Performativity in a different sense is significant in Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, namely the "performative aspects of texts"⁶⁴ and their "reader relations."⁶⁵ As she makes clear in the introduction, "the book's first focus is on sexuality rather than (sometimes, even, as opposed to) gender."⁶⁶ Generally queer theory employs exploration of both gender and sexuality, acknowledging how their discourses entwine (as Butler writes of "the sexual ordering of gender, maintaining that men who are men will be straight, women who are women will be straight")⁶⁷ while maintaining the notion, that their relationship is layered and most importantly that gender and sexuality are separate aspects of a person. Butler pointedly clarifies that

⁵⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv-xv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, xi. See also the 2014 interview with Butler - Cristian Williams, "Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate interviews Judith Butler," *The TransAdvocate*, May 1, 2014, http://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler_n_13652.htm.

⁶³ Williams, "Butler."

⁶⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 15.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

the performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. ... no correlation can be drawn, for instance, between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the distribution of hetero-, bi-, and homo-inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing.⁶⁸

Sedgwick's analyses in *Epistemology of the Closet* and its predecessor (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 1985) zoom in on male⁶⁹ homosexuality and *homosociality* in 18th and 19th century literature. These Sedgwick projects are universally credited as pioneering works of an important practice queer theory employs, that of *queer reading* or *queering*. Queer reading has a similar basis to feminist film theory's *reading against the grain*,⁷⁰ which seeks to "address issues of context via a consideration of gendered spectatorship."⁷¹ Queer reading applies a queer perspective (be it on literature, film or history) on texts that are "not 'openly' gay, lesbian, or bisexual",⁷² providing a *dissident*⁷³ reading. It is a productive method which discovers queer content in seemingly heterosexual (and heteronormative) works, providing an alternative and illuminating perspective, bringing out the possibility of such a reading. In doing so, it employs the role of the reader, empowering him or her, and points out the mechanisms of the dominant heteronormative discourse against which it is set.

In accordance with de Laetis's original proposition, queer theory (with all its complications and challenges), is a tool of critique and illumination, using the

⁶⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv.

⁶⁹ The approach to lesbianism must be fundamentally different and use different tools - see Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, "Between Men," in *Literary Theory, An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 711.

⁷⁰ "Reading against the grain" is credited to Elisabeth Ellsworth 1986 article "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and Personal Best" - see Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), Kindle edition, chap. 3., p. 37; Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film*. For a further exploration of the practice's roots, context and points of critique, see Aspasia Kotsopoulos, "Reading against the grain revisited," *Jump Cut* 44 (2001), accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/aspasia/againstgrain1.html>.

⁷¹ Kotsopoulos, "Reading."

⁷² Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2000), Adobe e-book, 1, quotation marks by the author.

⁷³ Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), Kindle edition.

“potential [of queerness] to open up new life narratives”⁷⁴ and set out to “help us think what has not yet been thought.”⁷⁵

1.3 *Queer* as an (anti-)identity

A significant part of the criticism⁷⁶ aimed at queer theory is that it has grown completely detached from the lived reality of people who fall outside of the strict heterosexual paradigm. So the third branch of what queer can mean and how it is used presents *queer* as a descriptor of a personal identity based on the person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identification (with the awareness, that the nature and usage of *identity* is problematic).⁷⁷

As the adoption of *queer* in the realms of both queer activism and queer theory positions itself against (or at least as an alternative to) *homosexual* (or *gay/lesbian*, plus later *bisexual*),⁷⁸ a closer look at the contemporary concept of *the homosexual* has to precede it in order to make sense of *queer* in this context.

The crucial point at the bottom of the discourse concerning (homo)sexuality is the one that paradoxically gets next to none attention in the current debates about discrimination and equality⁷⁹ - what do we actually mean by and how do we use the descriptor *homosexual* (and *gay/lesbian*, which we can take as synonyms in this context)?⁸⁰ According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “sexual orientation ranges along a continuum, from exclusive attraction to the other sex to exclusive attraction to the same sex. However, sexual orientation is usually discussed in terms of three categories: heterosexual (having emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions to members of the other sex), gay/lesbian (having emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions to members of one’s own sex), and bisexual (having emotional,

⁷⁴ Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 4.

⁷⁵ Halperin, “Normalization,” 343.

⁷⁶ Wilchins, *Queer Theory*. The risk of disengagement is acknowledged by Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Halperin, “Normalization.”

⁷⁷ Theoretically, but also as an aspect of queer politics, as Warner calls for the necessity to cleanse it of the frame of *identity politics*. See Warner, “Fear,” 13.

⁷⁸ Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 3.

⁷⁹ “Attention” is of course unquantifiable and it is virtually impossible to account for a lack of something. Still, I believe my assessment to be justified. See for example Halperin, 1998.

⁸⁰ Generally, gay/lesbian is the preferred term due to the clinical history of the term homosexual. (source: <http://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive>)

romantic, or sexual attractions to both men and women).”⁸¹ As APA’s text confirms, the *usually discussed* part dominates the discourse and thus our perception - we see other people and ourselves as heterosexual or homosexual (and if need be bisexual) based on their attractions.

This is where we need to step back and for a moment separate⁸² a person’s *homosexual behaviour and/or desire* (sexual activity between the same gender as well as unrealized sexual feelings towards one’s own gender)⁸³ and the definitive labeling of that person as *a homosexual*. The distinction matters only not in the plane of abstract theorizing, but it represents a prevalent breaking point in our actuality, where we rush to assign the homosexual tag to a person at the slightest transgression from what we accept as heterosexual behavior. As Zach Howe summarizes this common tendency the popular blog *Outward*:

Heterosexuality’s power lies in perception, not physical truth—as long as people think you’re exclusively attracted to the right gender, you’re golden. But perception is a precarious thing; a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy has taught men that the way people think of them can change permanently with one slip, one little kiss or too-intimate friendship. And once lost, it can be nearly impossible to reclaim.⁸⁴

Today, we⁸⁵ are still embedded in the binary of hetero/homo - a person either one or the other, there is no space for navigation, and the designation is set for lifetime.

Attention to the distinction between “sexual acts and sexual identities”⁸⁶ was notoriously called to by Michel Foucault: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite was a temporary

⁸¹ See “Answers.”

⁸² The distinction runs thus “something you are, constitutively, rather than something you might do (have done), feel (have felt), mainly, sometimes, once, maybe.” (Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 3.)

⁸³ Unlike APA, I find using *gender* in this context much more appropriate than *sex*.

⁸⁴ Zach Howe, “Homophobia Is a Real Fear ... but of What, Exactly?” *Slate*, January 30, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/30/what_is_homophobia_why_straight_men_are_right_to_be_afraid_of_homosexuality.html.

⁸⁵ And this rigidity of thinking about sexual orientation is not limited to people who live their lives in blissful ignorance of the normative binary that shapes their attitudes - I recall vividly how I could not wrap my head around my friend, when she was having a casual affair with a man, while before and after she exclusively dated women and identifying vocally as a lesbian.

⁸⁶ David M. Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities and The History of Sexuality,” *Representations* 63 (1998): 95.

aberration; the homosexual is now a species.”⁸⁷ Simon LeVay, in his reconstruction of the roots of the gay rights movement, points to the proto-activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs who advocated the retraction of the sodomy laws at the Congress of German Jurists in Munich in 1867, and in his argument, “he declared that homosexuals were a distinct class of individuals, innately different from heterosexual people.”⁸⁸ The rhetoric of difference, based on sexual preference that establishes an identity, survives and blossoms today, on both the personal level of the coming out narrative⁸⁹ and in the debate about anti-discrimination legislation and marriage equality.⁹⁰

To sum up, the problem of the homosexual (and gay/lesbian) label is that it is reductive (there are only two major *options* - laid out as binary in accordance with the dominant heteronormative discourse), imperative (as both the APA’s definition and Foucault’s and Dyer’s elaboration show, the fact of the attraction itself (even putting aside the actual behavior) defines the person’s sexual orientation and thus identity in this equation) and external (it disregards a person’s perception of himself or herself - a man attracted primarily to men *is* gay in our eyes, even if he himself does not identify as such).⁹¹

⁸⁷ Foucault, *Sexuality Volume I*, 43; revised translation by Halperin. Halperin’s essay contest the common mis-reading of Foucault that states the persona of a homosexual as an invention of the 19th century. Which is, as Halperin argues, a superficial reading of Foucault’s own text. He agrees that the *modern* idea and status of *the homosexual* differs from *the sodomite* (or the pre-19th century *queer*, like Dyer states – see Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 1-8), but defy the widely held claim that the homosexual as a person did not exist. (Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault.”)

⁸⁸ Simon LeVay, “Queer Science. The Use and Abuse of Research into Homosexuality,” *The Washington Post*, 1998, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/books/chap1/queerscience.htm>.

⁸⁹ See “Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality,” American Psychological Association, 2008, accessed May 2, 2015, www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf.

⁹⁰ For illustration, see for example Adam Liptak, “Gay Marriage Arguments Divide Supreme Court Justices,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/us/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage.html>.

⁹¹ To illustrate such an argument serves for example the monologue of the Roy Cohn character (fictionalized version based on a historic figure) from the HBO miniseries based on Tony Kushner’s 1993 eponymous play *Angels in America* (2003): “...you are hung up on words. On labels. "Gay", "homosexual", "lesbian"; you think they tell you who a person sleeps with, but they don't tell you that. Like all labels, they refer to one thing and one thing only: Where does a person so identified fit in the food chain? In the pecking order. Not ideology or sexual taste, but something much simpler — clout. Who owes me favors. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call. To someone who doesn't understand this, homosexual is what I am because I sleep with men, but this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who, in 15 years of trying, can't get a pissant anti-discrimination bill through City Council. ... Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys.”

Queer as an identity functions in opposition to these. Firstly, and most importantly, queer can only be self-ascribed⁹² - it fundamentally depends on the choice⁹³ of the person in question to identify as queer. Secondly, the queer identification highlights the conscious personal statement, that the available categories of gay/straight and man/woman are too narrow to encompass said person's perception of their own gender and sexuality, while pointing to the temporal dimension - that perception can shift in time, it is not fixed at one point. As Eve Sedgwick puts it:

One of the things that 'queer' can refer 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. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or ... people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.⁹⁴

Queer can mean different things to different people who identify as queer - and that is to be understood as a crucial advantage of the descriptor, the crux of the label the definition of which is in principle impossible.

On the other hand, the described gist of the queer anti-label presents also the major point of relevant critique - fundamentally, *queer's* biggest advantage is its greatest weakness. Because as it can mean anything, if stretched, it can quickly become void - not actually meaning anything at all.⁹⁵ Also, for many gay, lesbian and trans* people personally, to identify as queer is even repugnant - they feel as if the

⁹² Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 6.

⁹³ While not operating with the word queer, the Kinsey Institute describes the operative mechanism of the (in)famous 1948 Kinsey Scale (the full name is Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale) as "a method of self-evaluation based on your individual experience, and the rating you choose may change over time." Also, it is recalled that the idea of the research work with the notion, based on previous surveys, that "people did not fit into neat and exclusive heterosexual or homosexual categories." See "The Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale," The Kinsey Institute, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/research/ak-hhscale.html>.

⁹⁴ Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.

⁹⁵ For an elaboration of why this is problematic politically and also on the personal level, see Gamson, "Identity Movements;" Green, "Gay but not queer."

subversive nature and ethos undermines and even erases the identity they struggled to accept and defend against the majority society.⁹⁶ The discussions around the concept of identity and the role of identity labels have been of paramount importance in feminist, gay and lesbian as well queer academic discourses.⁹⁷ The axis of the discussion can be positioned as a binary⁹⁸ of social constructivism and *essentialism*.⁹⁹ The queer theoretical position attacks the definitive concept of identity and seeks to dissolve it, exposing how it is constructed and how inadequate it is in covering the spectrum of gender and sexual variants. The problem of essentialism is that it reduces the complex personal individuality to a cover identity, such as *woman*, *gay* or even *queer* and can paradoxically function as a means of oppression.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the cover identity is politically functional for marginalized groups - without emphasizing a shared identity, as Diana Fuss reiterates, any identity-based activism is impossible.¹⁰¹ Gamson sums up the problem thus: “An inclusive queerness threatens to turn identity to nonsense, messing with the idea that identities (man,

⁹⁶ For example, PFLAG states: “A non-label would have only allowed people in the mainstream culture to dismiss them and/or allow the individual to remain closeted in ambiguity.” (“A Definition of ‘Queer.’”)

⁹⁷ See Claudia Card’s analytical review of four influential works which provides a contextualization in the debate; Card, Claudia. “Review.” Review of *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* by Diana Fuss; *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* by Shane Phelan; *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish* by Christie Balka, Andy Rose. *Signs* Vol. 19 No. 1 (1993): 252-256.

⁹⁸ Card, “Review,” 252-254; Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking*, first published in 1989, is the work that aims to disrupt this binary - see Diana, Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), Kindle edition.

⁹⁹ Diana Fuss provides this generally accepted definition of essentialism and an illumination of the issue in light of the feminist thinking: “Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity. In feminist theory, the idea that men and women, for example, are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences has been unequivocally rejected by many anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminists concerned with resisting any attempts to naturalize human nature.” (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, Introduction.)

¹⁰⁰ Cressida Heyes sums up these dangers of the essentialist approach: “In the case of identity politics, two claims stand out as plausibly “essentialist:” the first is the understanding of the subject that characterizes a single axis of identity as discrete and taking priority in representing the self—as if being Asian-American, for example, were entirely separable from being a woman. To the extent that identity politics urges mobilization around a single axis, it will put pressure on participants to identify that axis as their defining feature, when in fact they may well understand themselves as integrated selves who cannot be represented so selectively or even reductively. ... The second form of essentialism is closely related to the first: generalizations made about particular social groups in the context of identity politics may come to have a disciplinary function within the group, not just describing but also dictating the self-understanding that its members should have. Thus, the supposedly liberatory new identity may inhibit autonomy ... replacing ‘one kind of tyranny with another.’” (Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition) ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/identity-politics>.)

¹⁰¹ See Diana Fuss, “Lesbian and Gay Theory: The Question of Identity Politics,” in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, by Diana Fuss (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), Kindle edition.

woman, gay, straight) are fixed, natural, core phenomena, and therefore solid political ground.”¹⁰² A middle-ground is desired, symbolized by queer theory pioneer Judith Butler carrying the sign saying 'lesbian' - questioning how identity is constructed and how it functions, but recognizing the necessary power of assuming it.

1.4 *Queer as a rainbow umbrella*

Building on all the complicated, linguistically and politically charged, facets of *queer* introduced above, the irony of the most prevalent and popular use of the term today comes to light: queer functions as an umbrella¹⁰³ or “catch-all”¹⁰⁴ term for identities other than heterosexual (or rather the normative heterosexual, as there are strong voices for the inclusion of heterosexuals, who are polyamorous or BDSM practitioners, to be included under it) or cisgendered (a person, whose gender matches the sex assigned at birth).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans*, grouped together under the acronym LGBT, and *queer* thus comes off as completely interchangeable, and up until today is used as such. For example, Berlinale's Teddy Award is presented simultaneously as both the "official queer award at the Berlin International Film Festival" and "international film award for films with LGBT topics."¹⁰⁵

The LGBT acronym is constantly being revised and expanded, at the current stage usually stopping at LGBTQIA,¹⁰⁶ with Q standing in for both *queer* (as a specific chosen identity under the queer umbrella) and *questioning* and *genderqueer* (which can be also seen as hidden in the trans* part of the alphabet), I for *intersex* and A for either *ally* (straight supporters of queer people) or *asexual*. Discussed on the additions list¹⁰⁷ are *androgyny* and *pansexual* (an expansion on the embedded gender binarity of *bisexual*, meaning attraction regardless of gender). *Queer* in this

¹⁰² Gamson, “Silence, Death,” 399.

¹⁰³ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ See J. Bryan Lowder, “Ask a Homo: Queries for the Q,” *Slate*, September 3, 2014, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/09/03/ask_a_homo_what_s_the_deal_with_the_q_in_lgbtq_video.html.

¹⁰⁵ “Teddy Award,” Teddy Award Official Website, accessed September 4, 2014, www.teddyaward.tv/en.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Schulman, “Generation LGBTQIA,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2013, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/10/fashion/generation-lgbtqia.html>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

context has both meaning as one of the distinguished possible identities, and the overall cover for the full alphabet of dissident identities.

Using *queer* as a synonym for LGBTQIA can be seen both as a practical matter in terms of the economy of language¹⁰⁸ (lifting the necessity of spelling the acronym or even listing the identities included, which also includes the risk of omitting some of them) and as an expression of the mainstream appropriation¹⁰⁹ of the word, sometimes shorthanded to just *Q*.

1.5 *Queer* discourses and the subversive function of *queer*

Queer as a term historically carries the meaning of transgression and as a slang derogatory word for people, primarily men, who would be labeled homosexuals. The transgression with regard to gender and sexuality concerns not only the sexual acts and gender presumptions, but envelops presumed traits rejected or scorned by the majority society. This discursive legacy of *queer* is reflected in the appropriation of the word in activism and in academia, where it functions as a tool of subversion towards the dominant discourses of heteronormativity and gender binarism. The queer position seeks to excavate and provide space for suppressed and marginalized voices, and is thus inherently politically charged. It is both transgressive and seeking to establish itself as independent from the heteronormativity which deems it as ‘other’ and dangerous. A crucial aspect to keep in mind is that even though it may serve as enveloping all ‘non-straight,’ it persistently distinguishes itself from the normative tendencies of the gay and lesbian discourses of assimilation.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Credit for the normalization of the word can be attributed to the popular TV show *Queer as Folk* in its UK (1999-2000) and US (2000-2005) editions, as well as the more problematic reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2004). In the Czech Republic, one of the most favored Prague’s hangouts for LGBT(QIA) people is the *Qcafé*; the national public broadcaster Czech Television produced over 200 episodes of the magazine *Q* since 2007 and after a formatting change in 2013 continues with the thematic series *Queer*. See “Q,” Česká televize, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10121061347-q>; and “Queer,” Česká televize, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10520528904-queer/dily>.

*“And so the very first gay man
to be presented on film
ended in the obligatory suicide
that would mark the fate of screen gays
for years to come.”*

Vito Russo

2. Queer Cinema

The previous chapter outlines the main contemporary uses of the descriptor *queer*, demonstrating how layered and conflicting the function of the term can be. The elusive¹¹⁰ nature of *queer film* goes hand in hand with the definition-resistant *queer* itself.

The primary usage of the appellation *queer cinema* is, in accordance with *queer as a rainbow umbrella*, a "short-hand"¹¹¹ for the wide and embracing category grouping together films and filmmakers by means of the optics of queerness - again in the wide sense of sexual and gender difference from the dominant heteronormative discourse - in society and in cinema.¹¹² Associating queerness with individual films that in effect form this heterogeneous body of queer cinema is performed by different approaches and mechanisms.¹¹³ The dominant ones will be presented further on, coupled with the key branches of *queer film history* that build on the interpretative perspective of each.

2.1 Queer film history and criticism as an archaeology

Before entering the overlapping and divergent territories of queer cinema, a more complex look is due at how queer film history was and is being written. It is

¹¹⁰ Both Robin Griffiths and Chris Perriam use the word “slippery” in their respective introductions to *European Queer Cinema* and *Spanish Queer Cinema*, when referring to the “canon” or “segment of film culture” they mark as *queer cinema* - Robin Griffiths, "Introduction: Contesting Borders - Mapping a European Queer Cinema," in *Queer Cinema in Europe*, ed. Robin Griffiths (Bristol: Intellect Ltd. 2008), Kindle edition; Chris Perriam, *Spanish Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3.

¹¹¹ Barbara Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Gay Cowboys*. (London and New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Kindle edition, Introduction.

¹¹² See Griffiths, “Contesting Borders,” where he writes: “The term ‘queer’ in this context – though always somewhat problematic – in effect functions as a banner under which to unite a group of very different filmmakers whose works have, in varying ways, carved out a space wherein to address a number of quite provocative new questions about both the limits and unimagined possibilities of sexuality.” According to Benshoff and Griffin: “Queer can be used to describe sexuality not defined as heterosexual procreative monogamy (usually the presumed goal of most classical Hollywood couplings)...” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 1.)

¹¹³ Benshoff and Griffin offer five possibilities of how to approach answering the question “What is a queer film?” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 9.)

important to stress that history of queer cinema is embedded in the history of cinema (without labels), the crucial difference being the perspective from which the history is told.¹¹⁴ For this partisan history to be seen and acknowledged, it needed the work of queer film critics and historians that brought it to light.

Ellis Hanson claims that "the study of homosexuality in cinema has been a serious critical enterprise in the popular press since the 1960's,"¹¹⁵ while Michael Bronski marks the *serious* start a few years later, writing that "as a discipline it doesn't really begin until the early 1970s, several years after the Stonewall Riots and the birth of the Gay Liberation movement."¹¹⁶ What matters most is that the reflection and criticism of cinema from a queer (or not to be ahistorical, gay and lesbian) perspective is always deeply tied together with the state of the political paradigm, activism, academic discourses and general societal view on (homo)sexuality at any given time.¹¹⁷

Two American "pioneers"¹¹⁸ of queer film history and criticism,¹¹⁹ whose books with identical subheadings represent the stepping stones in this field of inquiry, were Parker Tyler¹²⁰ with *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (first

¹¹⁴ For example: "This book examines what American films, for the last one hundred years or so, have led us to believe about human sexuality. Its central focus is on the cinematic representation of homosexuality, but it also explores how other forms of sexuality have been represented and understood throughout the years..." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 2.) Similarly, Perriam (Perriam, *Spanish Queer*, 3) writes about "application of the term 'queer' to Spanish film culture." Mennel opens her *Queer Cinema* with a reminiscence of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) followed by this statement of intent for her inquiry: "The tragic and monstrous queer forerunners of their contemporary well-adjusted gay and lesbian counterparts populate the history of queer cinema and allow us to trace its different incarnations. This book brings together important moments, periods and turning points that add up to a history of queer film." (Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, Introduction.)

¹¹⁵ Ellis, Hanson, "Introduction," in *Out Takes. Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.

¹¹⁶ Michael Bronski, "From The Celluloid Closet to Brokeback Mountain: The Changing Nature of Queer Film Criticism," *Cineaste* vol. 33 no. 2 (2008): 22-26, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/changing-nature-of-queer-film-criticism.htm>.

¹¹⁷ See Hanson, "Introduction;" Bronski, "Queer Film Criticism." See also Tyler reflecting in 1973 on how "these taboos nowadays are being so rapidly relaxed and lifted that it is hard for print to keep up..." (Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes. Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), xix.)

¹¹⁸ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, vii.

¹¹⁹ The two blend together in these texts so that it would be reductive to appoint either of the disciplines only, in both we can describe them as critical essays that, as they were published together, form a historical survey of homosexuality in film.

¹²⁰ Tyler was a critic for *Film Culture*, and he reflected on (implied) homosexuality in films as early as in 1947, as Dyer reflects: "In a much more complex argument, first published in 1947, Parker Tyler suggests that homosexuality may also explain the actions of Neff and Keyes in *Double Indemnity* (1944)." (Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 110.) For a more complex look on Tyler as critic and a member of the gay-avantgarde scene, see David

published in 1972) and Vito Russo with *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (which came out in 1982). Tyler's project is introduced by the author as a book "about an idea of sexuality; an idea of sexuality as mirrored in wide variety in a given specimen of a certain medium."¹²¹ His stance on sexuality and gender, twenty years before queer theory, exclaims that "true *erotic liberalism* renders absurd the sexual categories as determined statutorily by the organic male and female."¹²² Tyler builds his inquiry around the invented, conceptual "god of homosexuality" Homeros¹²³ and analyzes patterns and films in thematic chapters, while the whole text is infused by a strong activist appeal.¹²⁴ Russo's book is more conservatively structured, as it traces how the characters that we now identify as queer (Russo, writing in 1981, of course uses *gay* and *lesbian*) were portrayed since the 1920's, primarily in Hollywood films. Russo's writing tightly joins this exploration of film history with an activist appeal - linking the depiction of queer characters on screen with the societal attitude towards queer people. In the introduction he writes: "In her book on women in film, *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell says that "the big lie" is that women are inferior. The big lie about lesbians and gay men is that we do not exist. The story of the ways in which gayness has been defined in American film is the story of the ways in which we have been defined in America."¹²⁵ *The Celluloid Closet* offers an opinionated survey of depictions of homosexuality on screen (and to some extent television), describing and (for the most part) criticizing the way queer characters and their relationships are shown, taking great interest in instances where homosexuality is ridiculed and (semi-)censored, using detailed descriptions of particular scenes combined with quoting period reviews and interviews with filmmakers. Russo's text, while valuable as a time-capsule of criticism from a "gay

Bordwell, "Parker Tyler: A suave and wary guest," *Observations on film art*, April 2, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/04/02/parker-tyler-a-suave-and-wary-guest/>.

¹²¹ Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, xix.

¹²² *Ibid.*, xx.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

¹²⁴ The period review of the book reads: "Ostensibly a work of film criticism, being after all an investigation of homosexuality in the movies, the book is nonetheless concerned primarily with establishing the moral and physical naturalness of homosexuality." (Foster Hirsch, "Review," review of *Screening the Sexes. Homosexuality in the Movies*, by Parker Tyler, *Film Quarterly* Vol. 26. No. 2 (1972-1973): 47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211323>.)

¹²⁵ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet. Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York, Cambridge and Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1995), xii.

liberationist”¹²⁶ point of view, is problematic in the way it jumps to conclusions, presents opinions as fact, and the political message is also questionable.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, Russo’s legacy as an angry voice unmasking the treatment of homosexuals in mainstream cinema remains strong - *The Celluloid Closet* was turned into a 1995 eponymous documentary film by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (Academy Award winners for *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984)) he was a founding member of the influential American organization GLAAD,¹²⁸ he presents The Vito Russo Award¹²⁹ annually and uses The Vito Russo Test (“set of criteria to analyze how LGBT characters are included within a film”)¹³⁰ to evaluate the films produced by major Hollywood studios concerning inclusion and treatment of queer characters in said films.¹³¹

Also working with the notion of invisibility made apparent by informed viewing was the other landmark study, published in 1990 and written by Richard Dyer,¹³² aptly titled *Now You See It: Historical Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*.¹³³ *Now You See It* marks the transition from primarily activist oeuvres to works that, while

¹²⁶ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition, chap. 3.

¹²⁷ See Jonathan Rosenbaum, “The Celluloid Closet. Homosexuality in the Movies,” review of *The Celluloid Closet. Homosexuality in the Movies*, by Vito Russo, *The Soho News*, August 4, 1981, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1981/08/review-of-the-celluloid-closet>; as well as Martha Fleming, “*The Celluloid Closet* Looking for what isn't there,” review of *The Celluloid Closet. Homosexuality in the Movies*, by Vito Russo, *Jump Cut* 28 (1983): 59-61, accessed March 9, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC28folder/CellulCloset.html>. For further critique of both Parker's and Russo's work as prevalently activist and concerned with the "right" representation while disregarding more nuanced political and especially aesthetic criteria, see Hanson, “Introduction.”

¹²⁸ The “Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation” (GLAAD) founded in 1985 in order to “to put pressure on media organizations to end homophobic reporting.” (“GLAAD History and Highlights, 1985-Present,” GLAAD, accessed May 4 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/about/history>.)

¹²⁹ GLAAD’s statement says: “The Vito Russo Award is presented annually to LGBT media professionals who make a significant difference promoting equality.” (“Video: Bernadette Peters presents the Vito Russo Award to Craig Zadan & Neil Meron at the #glaadawards in NYC,” GLAAD, accessed May 4 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/blog/video-bernadette-peters-presents-vito-russo-award-craig-zadan-neil-meron-glaadawards-nyc>.)

¹³⁰ “The Vito Russo Test,” GLAAD, accessed May 4 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/sri/2015/vitorusso>.

¹³¹ See the most recent report of the *GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index* - “2015 Studio Responsibility Index,” GLAAD, accessed May 4 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/sri/2015>

¹³² Dyer also edited the early anthology on the subject, first published already in 1977 - see Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984).

¹³³ *Now You See It* was published again in 2003, “revised and expanded throughout,” and adding a new chapter by Julianne Pidduck on film past 1980 - see Dyer, *Now You See*, Introduction to the Second Edition.

carrying on activist torch forward,¹³⁴ stand their ground as proper academic texts.¹³⁵ The move into the 1990's also carries the ongoing trend of queer film history and reflection as a field where film studies meet queer theory, including a portion of the queer activist ethos of subverting the 'official record' of history from which queerness has been erased for the most part.¹³⁶ This academic trend was established early on by the aforementioned 1989 conference held in New York City, the papers and discussions from which were published together as *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*.¹³⁷

It is important to point out and also illustrative the nature of the territory in which we can encapsulate as *queer cinema studies*,¹³⁸ which a major portion of the published books on the subject, while carrying wide-ranging titles, is anthological in nature - and their included studies feature a diverse range of subject matters (from classical Hollywood to independent video) and methodologies (auteur theory, queer reading, reception studies...). There are guides, listing queer films across many criteria in an attempt to cover the ground in an ultimate encyclopedic manner;¹³⁹ monographs focusing on national queer cinemas¹⁴⁰ as well as studies and anthologies

¹³⁴ As Dyer writes in the new introduction to the new edition of his book: "*Now You See It* was from the outset a gay liberation project." (Dyer, *Now You See*, Introduction to the Second Edition.)

¹³⁵ A brief look at Russo and Dyer's texts makes this statement's validity apparent. See also the review of Dyer's book - Chris Straayer, "Review," review of *Now You See It*, by Richard Dyer, *Film Quarterly* Vol. 45 No. 4 (1992): 54-56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212884>. Also, Dyer is an academic (and has been at the time); he currently serves as professor of Film Studies at King's College London. See his biography - "Professor Richard Dyer," King's College London, accessed May 9 2015, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/filmstudies/people/acad/dyer/index.aspx>.)

¹³⁶ See Hanson, "Introduction."

¹³⁷ Bad Object-Choices, *How Do I*.

¹³⁸ Griffiths, "Introduction."

¹³⁹ See Raymond Murray, *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video* (Philadelphia: TLA Publications, 1994); Jenni Olsen, *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996); Lisa Daniel and Claire Jackson, *The Bent Lens, 2nd edition. A world guide to gay and lesbian film* (Crow Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

¹⁴⁰ Apart from the above quoted Benschoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, which focuses on American queer cinema, Perriam's *Spanish Queer* and Griffiths's anthology (Griffiths, *Europe*) that is encapsulated under Europe, see also Alice Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Andrew Grossman, ed., *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001); Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh. Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004); David William Foster, *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), Kindle edition; Gary P. Cestaro, ed., *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

selecting a specific perspective, for instance lesbian visibility¹⁴¹ or a Deleuzian interpretative reading.¹⁴² What unites them is that they are projects of archeology in the foucaultian sense,¹⁴³ as Barbara Mennel caps it: “project of queer Film Studies: an archeology of an alternative cinematic aesthetics organized around non-normative desires.”¹⁴⁴ The crucial disclaimer we need to keep in mind is that, like in any attempts to write a history of homosexuality,¹⁴⁵ this archeology produces non-linear, multi-focal and arguably conflicting models. To provide a functional ‘working version’ that highlights the chief patterns, courses of evolution, parallel lines and independent ‘island of positive deviation,’ means imposing a structure on a body that is fundamentally amorphous. The next section attempts to do that.

2.2 Old Queer Cinema

As will be apparent further on, queer cinema pervades the vast body of cinema's history, regardless of period, geography, mode of production or genre. The following text lays out the main approaches of accessing it that produce a sphere of branches of queer film that aggregate the “old queer cinema”¹⁴⁶ which precedes New Queer Cinema, the origin point of which is situated again in the watershed year of 1990.¹⁴⁷ Two notes are due regarding the use of the word queer: first, using the label *queer* for the *old queer cinema* before 1990 is ahistorical, similarly to labeling Alexander the Great a bisexual (or *queer*) man. Not that it did not exist before 1990 - but it is reconstructed as *queer cinema* from our vantage point. Second, *queer* is used here in a wide sense of the term, encompassing all that is not heteronormative (the narrow

¹⁴¹ Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁴² Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Kindle edition.

¹⁴³ The approach, interpreting Foucault, is summarized thus: “Archaeology is about examining the discursive traces and orders left by the past in order to write a 'history of the present'. In other words archaeology is about looking at history as a way of understanding the processes that have led to what we are today.” (Clare O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: SAGE, 2005), Kindle edition.)

¹⁴⁴ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, Introduction.

¹⁴⁵ See David Halperin, “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 87-123.

¹⁴⁶ I borrow this expression from Michele Aaron, who uses Old Queer Cinema as an antonym to New Queer Cinema, without elaborating further, mainly as a figure of speech. (Aaron, “New Queer,” 5.)

¹⁴⁷ There are many disputes about the status of New Queer Cinema (and merit of the term), explored in the next chapter; it is sufficient to state here that there is universal agreement that the year 1990 marks the acknowledged 'origin point.' (See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap.4.)

specific use oppositional to gay/lesbian is highlighted when needed), while keeping homosexuality at the center of the inquiry - from which it "spins outwards."¹⁴⁸ The other set of preliminary remarks concern the division of approaches, and with them, the simultaneously running chapters of queer cinema: under the queer umbrella, gay and lesbian cinema is gathered together, while it has been argued that it should be examined separately.¹⁴⁹ Also, as will be obvious, the methods of inquiry do overlap - the ambition is that in untangling them into the chief patterns, the array of individual strategies becomes clearer. Lastly, as this entwined methodological and historical excursion seeks to prepare the grounds for examining New Queer Cinema, the primary focus will be on the live-action narrative cinema of the United States. It is needed to stipulate again that the following overview does not aim to present a full condensed history of queer cinema - a task that would be unachievable in the available space even if it consisted only of an annotated listing of relevant titles and filmmakers. The goal is to illuminate the available and currently employed analytical methods of constructing such a history and highlight the dominant patterns of queer cinema using relevant examples of individual films and filmmakers, while maintaining that those mentioned do not provide the full-scale picture of 'old queer cinema.'

2.2.1 Queer characters: Representations

The prevalent criterion¹⁵⁰ for and, it is safe to say, the most palpable trait of a queer film is the presence of queer characters in it. But how is queerness (in the broad sense) of characters expressed in the films and attributed by scholars as well as audiences? Alexander Doty makes a powerful argument with his proposition that the ideal way to deal with queerness of a character is on a "case by case basis,"¹⁵¹ however there are several chief patterns that will be laid out, and through them emerges a

¹⁴⁸ Homosexuality is not synonymic with queerness, but anchors its paradigm: "Like Butler, Sedgwick provisionally retains homosexuality as queerness's definitional center, but understands the analytical purchase of queerness as requiring a spinning-outward of the term to collapse all categories of identity." (Savoy, 1999, in Hanson (ed.), 1999)

¹⁴⁹ See Dyer, *Culture*; it is worth noting how it echoes Sedgwick's sentiments regarding accessing gay/lesbian homosociality in literature.

¹⁵⁰ See Dyer, *Now You See*, Introduction to the first edition; Benschoff and Griffin offer this option as the first answer to the "What is queer film?" question. (Benschoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 9.)

¹⁵¹ Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 8.

sketch of queer cinema's history guided by its most prominent queer characters. Wishing to introduce the key modes of how queer characters are present in the dominant line of film production and thus overtly visible to the public, this section concentrates for the most part on studio titles that had wide distribution, marking the relevant historical events that influenced the attitude toward depicting homosexuality in film. This attitude to queer cinema has strong sociological grounding and is very much informed by an evaluative assessment - asking how (problematically) is queerness *represented*.

There are three key paradigms that inform this inquiry: the first is an extension of what Adrienne Rich summed up as *compulsory heterosexuality*.¹⁵² Alexander Doty admits, in the introduction to his book on queer reading (while recalling Rich's insights): "I realised that I had fallen into one of those heterocentric traps this book attempts to point out: assuming that all characters in a film are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise obviously proven to be queer."¹⁵³ Put bluntly, heterosexuality being the general norm, every character (or even person we meet in real life) is presumed to be heterosexual unless it is confirmed, by his or her statement or non-heterosexual behavior, otherwise. And as presented in the section concerning queer as identity, the designation tends to be strictly binary (homo- or heterosexual) and fixed.

The second set of analytical tools operates with the terms of *stereotypes* and *well-rounded, or wholesome, characters*.¹⁵⁴ The assessment of queer character depicted in a film questions whether he or she has any other significant characteristics except their sexual orientation and whether their narrative arch revolves solely around it. Related to that is the question of how the character adheres to a presumed set of clichés attached to gay men or lesbian women.

¹⁵² Rich A., 1980 Rich focuses her influential paper on societal norms but the expansion of her analysis is inevitable.

¹⁵³ Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ See Richard Dyer, "Stereotyping," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (New York: Zoetrope, 1984), 27-39; and

Richard Dyer, "Gays in film," *Jump Cut* 18 (1978): 15-16, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC18folder/GaysinFilmDyer.html>. In both texts, Dyer presents a comprehensive overview of the discussion and arguments regarding stereotyping; interestingly he assumes the rather controversial position of dismissing the voices calling for 'wholesome characters' and highlights the politically grounded function of stereotypes.

The third paradigm, alluded to in the quote from Doty as one of the possibilities, is *coded* or *connotative homosexuality*¹⁵⁵ - where the queerness of the character is not distinctly confirmed, but it is intentionally hinted at. The way connoting homosexuality dominantly worked was rooted in the far-reaching presumption that blurred the line between *sexual orientation* (what gender(s) a person is primarily attracted to) and *gender identity* (what gender a person perceives he or she is, regardless of the biological sex assigned at birth) - as Cohan writes, "American culture during the first half of the century did not follow "the now-conventional division of men into 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals' based on the sex of their sexual partners but instead categorized men according to their gender behavior."¹⁵⁶ Thus, what we can today regard as attempts at representations of homosexuality is expressed through the tropes of "gender inversion."¹⁵⁷ It is an extension of the heteronormative imposition in which all relationships have to be explained only as somehow conforming to the heterosexual paradigm - so queerness (as attraction to the *wrong* gender) implicates a fundamental problem with the person's gender identity also not conforming to the *proper* man/woman dichotomy.¹⁵⁸ Also, as Dyer notes, it is the only way how to connote homosexuality without stating it directly, as sexual orientation is an invisible trait,¹⁵⁹ unlike for example race or disability. Thus the cliches of the effeminate man (the *pansy*¹⁶⁰ or *the fairy*)¹⁶¹ and *the mannish*

¹⁵⁵ A set of implications that "a character might be queer, through subtle mannerisms, costuming, or speech patterns." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 9.) Cohan makes a further distinction, describing "a shift in register from a denotative encoding of queerness (the well-known fairy character) to a more complex, because more covert, one of connotation (sexual innuendo and camp) that, in the postwar era, was crucial in reshaping gay culture in all modes of its representation." (Steve Cohan, "Queering The Deal. On the Road with Hope and Crosby," in *Out Takes. Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.)

¹⁵⁶ Cohan, "Queering."

¹⁵⁷ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 24.

¹⁵⁸ Dyer elaborates on the point: "...notions of homosexuality as gender in-betweenism, inversion and androgyny, notions found not only in homophobic (religious, psychiatric, sociological) discourses but in subcultural practices, sympathetic sexology and such homosexual rights activism as there was. In this understanding, queer has something to do with not being properly masculine or feminine. That 'properly' is grounded in heterosexuality, but it is held together with the assumption that if a person does not have the sexual responses appropriate to his or her sex (to wit, heterosexual ones), then he or she will not have fully the other attributes of his or her sex. This is how signs of effeminacy and mannishness, that have nothing directly to do with sexual preference but with gender, nonetheless come to indicate homosexuality. Moreover, they are a visible indicator of homosexuality, something which, short of showing acts, can't otherwise be seen." (Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 96-97.)

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 24.

woman¹⁶² are an unfortunate but logical consequence of such a discourse. The inversion is firmly set in the binary of masculinity and femininity as polar opposites and preferably uses the most cliched traits associated with either gender.

The figure of the pansy served primarily for comical relief.¹⁶³ Along this line, there is the vehicle of cross-dressing in comedy, where the (strictly determined so) heterosexual protagonists or their romantic interests spend some screen time in drag, posing as their opposite gender - thus bringing the possibility of same-sex affection onto the screen, only to use it as means to humor and banish it quickly.¹⁶⁴ We can find many examples, from Charlie Chaplin's *Behind the Screen* (1916), where Chaplin's character kisses a woman dressed as a boy, to classics like *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982) where the storyline hinges on the male protagonist(s)' adopting fictional female identity, out of necessity (fear for their lives as witnesses to murders and furthering one's acting career, respectively), which complicates their love lives. And while the notorious last line of *Some Like It Hot*, "Nobody's perfect." (as Jack Lemmon's character reveals his true identity to his millionaire fiancé), has a refreshing touch, *Tootsie*'s Les, father of the actual love interest, who is so smitten by Dustin Hoffman's character in drag that he also proposes, is only able to forgive and not physically attack Michael/Dorothy because Michael confirms he is heterosexual and they had not kissed. Butler comments on these two films and their use of cross-dressing, which form a wider pattern and are tightly embedded in heteronormativity, interpreting them as

forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself...where the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected within the narrative trajectory of the films. These are films which produce and contain the homosexual excess of any given drag performance, the fear that an apparently heterosexual contact might be made before the discovery of a nonapparent homosexuality. This is drag as high het entertainment, and though these films are surely important to read as cultural texts in which homophobia and homosexual

¹⁶¹ Cohan, "Queering."

¹⁶² See Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 24; Savoy, 1999

¹⁶³ "...pansy figures proliferated in supporting roles and in simple incidental jokes." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 25.)

¹⁶⁴ "cross-dressing comedies raise issues of sexual orientation by means of their narratives. For example, when a man in drag romances a woman or is chased lustfully by another man, the specter of same-sex desire is always raised, if only to be laughed away..." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 22.)

panic are negotiated, I would be reticent to call them subversive. Indeed, one might argue that such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task.¹⁶⁵

Butler's remark establishes the underlying aspect of the majority of presumably *queer representations* as produced *for* the heterosexual consumption and actually adhering to the heteronormative discourse which confirms its dominance by exploiting queerness as the threatening or laughable perversion of itself, thus confirming its superiority.

Another aspect that it is important to note is the queer figures' actual desexualization - as Griffin and Beshoff point out writing about pre-Code Hollywood production, "since pansies tended to express more enthusiasm over a new silk kimono than another man, their actual homosexuality was still open to question."¹⁶⁶ Similarly, the mannish women "rarely enact any sign of same-sex desire, and some of them are romantically partnered with men by the end of their films."¹⁶⁷ A possible interpretation of the mannish woman also includes the allusion to the era's "New Woman",¹⁶⁸ challenging the traditional role of the woman in society while not necessarily diverging from the heterosexual paradigm.¹⁶⁹ Two Hollywood films of the early 1930's feature a female protagonist, played by a major star, that carries the characteristics of gender inversion and expresses same-sex affection on-screen (even though the main romantic narrative is heterosexual in both cases) - *Morocco* (1930) and *Queen Christina* (1933), starring Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, respectively. As Mennel notes, sexual ambiguity in the early star system (of both Weimar Republic and Hollywood) was not only "not detrimental to star power", but the provocative

¹⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 126.

¹⁶⁶ Beshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 27.

¹⁶⁷ Beshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 28.

¹⁶⁸ Mennel, writing about the Weimar Republic, adds a similar observation: "The New Woman was flat-chested, cropped her hair and smoked in coffee houses and bars. The modern woman and the modern man were androgynous creatures." (Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 1.) See also the first chapter, focused on Weimar, in Kuzniar, *German Queer*.

¹⁶⁹ "As women gained the right to vote in 1920 and moved further into the public workforce, these films may have been expressing worries that all women (and not just lesbians) were on the verge of becoming like men." (Beshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 27.)

ambivalence of the star persona, apparent in the case of Dietrich both on- and off-screen, was a crucial part of the evoked attraction.¹⁷⁰

The two films, along with Cecille B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), mark the shift where the gender inversion stereotype was expanding both in terms of the nuance of such characters as well as in the actual pronounced references to their same-sex desire on-screen.¹⁷¹ How the evolution would continue is up to speculation, as the 1934 application of Hollywood Production Code¹⁷² effectively banned all "sex perversion" (meaning homosexuality),¹⁷³ along with *indecent*¹⁷⁴ depictions of heterosexual desire. As pointedly summed up by Mennel: "When in 1934 an agreement among the major studios in Hollywood to a system of self-censorship – the production code – went into effect, it formalized the verdict that homosexuality could not be represented in acts or words on the screen."¹⁷⁵ Since 1934, through the weakening of the Code in the 1960's (the protests of the filmmakers during the 1950's) and its dismantlement in 1968, when it was replaced by the rating system,¹⁷⁶ even the suggestively coded homosexuality almost disappeared from mainstream American cinema: the queer characters we would be looking for are reduced to occasional "slips"¹⁷⁷ under the radar and to the realm of *queer reading* (which I discuss separately further on), while the pansies and mannish women are further neutralized sexually.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁰ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 1.

¹⁷¹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 28.

¹⁷² Written in 1930, sometimes called the Hays Code after its author Will H. Hays. See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2; also see the chapter "Reading the Code(s)" in White, *Uninvited*, 1-28.

¹⁷³ Even in the censoring guidelines, queerness was only connotated: "While the phrase "sex perversion" could be taken to mean a variety of things, the Production Code Administration's use of the term in the ensuing years made it quite clear that what was being forbidden was homosexuality." (Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 30.)

¹⁷⁴ Specifically, "the production code circumscribed notions of decency and taste as heterosexuality without nudity, adultery, illicit sex, miscegenation and physical expression of passion, including kissing and sex acts." (Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.)

¹⁷⁵ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2; Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 136.

¹⁷⁷ For example "the celebrated moment in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) when Cary Grant's character is discovered wearing a frilly woman's negligee and jumps into the air exclaiming that "I've just gone gay all of a sudden!" Historian George Chauncey has suggested that Grant's next line, "I'm sitting in the middle of Forty-Second Street, waiting for a bus," is a reference to a popular gay-male cruising spot." (Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 30.)

¹⁷⁸ "One of the most common methods of "de-gaying" the pansy during this era was to establish that he was hetero- sexually married, thus providing a defense against any accusations of "sex perversion." A different but common strategy was to paint the pansy as completely asexual: he might not be interested in the opposite sex, but he did not seem to be interested in any sex at all. ...the sexualized mannish women of the pre-Code era were

One sub-group of queer characters which in variations is present throughout queer cinema history was, however scarcely, allowed to exist even during the hardest implementations of the Code: "A few war films seem to indicate that the Production Code Administration would allow intimations of "sex perversion" if they were used to characterize the enemy."¹⁷⁹ The enemy is just one possibility in the numerous family of the infamous trope, which is *the queer villain*. Even more than in the case of the cross-dressing comedies, there is a whole genre representing this kind of queer character - the horror (or rather, the monster film), notably since the classic *Nosferatu* (1922), whose eponymous protagonist "exudes an eroticism that is non-normative, non-procreative, bisexual and lethal."¹⁸⁰ Harry Benshoff devotes his elaborated study *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* to the inherently close relationship of the figure of the dangerous monster and the notion of dissent sexuality in film, writing in the introduction: "To create a broad analogy, monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual."¹⁸¹ And the queerness of monsters is not limited to the literal monsters: Richard Dyer explores¹⁸² the queer traits as an integral part of many *film noir*'s characters,¹⁸³ both for the male anti-heroes and the genre's *femmes fatales* and Michael Saunders expands¹⁸⁴ the symbiosis of homosexuality and monstrosity beyond the horror genre. The universal term of this prolific type of character is *the killer queer*¹⁸⁵ or *queer psycho-killer*¹⁸⁶ - homosexuality (or at least articulated queerness, even if we cannot justify attributing

transformed into asexual tomboys or cold maiden aunts." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 31-32.) One particular variant of the of the desexualized pansy is the "queer aesthete" figure. See also the chapter "The Queer Aesthete, the Diva, and *The Red Shoes*" in Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 105-130.

¹⁷⁹ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 35. Ibid. they cite these highly illustrative examples: "a Nazi spy in *Saboteur* (1942) is portrayed as effeminate—we are even told that as a child he had long hair like a girl—a device meant to show how "unmanly" and "perverted" the Germans were. Similarly, the chief Nazi agent in *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) is revealed to be a butch woman in male drag. Even the Italian import *Rome: Open City* (1945) featured a quasi-lesbian fascist pitted against stalwart men and traditionally feminine heroines."

¹⁸⁰ Menkel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 1.

¹⁸¹ Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 2.

¹⁸² See the chapter "Queer Noir" in Dyer, *Culture*, 90-115.

¹⁸³ It is important to mention here again, together with Dyer (ibid., 90), that queerness, unless stated and/or shown explicitly, is always subject to debate and interpretation.

¹⁸⁴ Michael W. Saunders, *Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film*, (Westport: Praeger, 1998).

¹⁸⁵ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, eds., *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

the homosexual label) going hand in hand with mental illness¹⁸⁷ that manifests itself in sadistic¹⁸⁸ tendencies that lead to murder. In the wider context it is significant that it was only in 1973 (in effect in 1974) that the American Psychiatric Association's Board of Trustees removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual - until then homosexuality itself was viewed by psychiatry as a serious mental illness.¹⁸⁹

We can ask together with Doty "Along with Phillip and Brandon in *Rope* (1948), Bruno [from *Strangers on a Train* (1951)] is Hitchcock's most "out" male homosexual character. Is it just a coincidence that he is also represented as psychopathic?"¹⁹⁰ Menzel directly links "the discursive effects of the prohibition to depict explicit homosexuality"¹⁹¹ to the "homophobic stereotypes of murderous gays and self-hating lesbians."¹⁹² In her discussion of *Rope*, where homosexuality is never directly mentioned and one of the murderous pair is stated to have a girlfriend, she asks "does the unspeakable deed of murder stand in for acts that are even more horrific and unmentionable?"¹⁹³ Still, the epitome of the killer queer is found in another film by Alfred Hitchcock - *Psycho* (1960). The queer pathology of the Norman Bates character goes way beyond implied homosexuality, but we can definitely place him outside of the heteronormative spectrum for a variety of reasons.¹⁹⁴ Notable¹⁹⁵ queer killers are found also in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *The Fan* (1981) and *Cruising* (1980), the gender inversion trope peaking with actual female skin-suit wearing Jame Gumb/Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991).¹⁹⁶ The

¹⁸⁷ See the section *The Changing Status of "Homosexuality" as a Harbinger of the Political Conflict Ahead* in Rick Mayes and Allan W. Horwitz, "DSM-III and the Revolution in the Classification of Mental Illness," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 3 (2005): 249–267, DOI 10.1002 /jhbs.20103.

¹⁸⁸ Dyer lists "the sadistic queer" as one of the key figures in the "line-up" of stereotypes. (Dyer, "Stereotyping," 27.)

¹⁸⁹This instance is often cited as a breakthrough, however we should remember, that homosexuality still remained in the revised Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder "with a much milder description as a 'sexual orientation disturbance.'" (Mayes and Horwitz, 258-259.)

¹⁹⁰ Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 165.

¹⁹¹ Menzel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ For an in-depth exploration of *Psycho* in terms of how Norman Bates's queerness is coded, commented on in the film and by Hitchcock himself as well as its reception and interpretation, see Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 155-187.

¹⁹⁵ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ For a detailed overview and analysis of the film's reception, see Janet Staiger's essay - Staiger, "Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of The Silence of the Lambs," in *Perverse Spectators The Practices of Film Reception*, by Janet Staiger (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 161-178). As for the film's other serial

female queer killer includes a whole sub-genre of the lesbian (or bisexual, but definitely queer for our purposes) vampire,¹⁹⁷ as exemplified in the aptly titled Spanish-German film *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971) and the ambassador of which might be Catherine Deneuve's character in the British horror *The Hunger* (1983), included in critical reflection in the more general figure of *lethal lesbian*.¹⁹⁸

The diverse map of queer character types drawn up in the previous paragraphs is unified by two key features that can be, with just minor generalization, attributed to all of them: first, their queerness is connotative, not explicitly stated, and second, their queerness is only functional, serving the overall purpose of eliciting either humor or terror.¹⁹⁹

A different and much thinner line of queer film history is formed by depictions that transgress the rudimentary functions of serving comedy or posing a threat, forming the solitary incidents of *pronounced* queer representation. Due to the invisibility of sexual orientation per se, they representation translates from expressions of same-sex affection and *desire* or the rarely occurring 'naming' of a character as (a) homosexual. There are individual scenes that queer film historians have dug out and identified, like the lingering kiss on a deathbed between two male soldiers in *Wings* (1927), which is a contender for the historic, first same-sex kiss in a major studio film²⁰⁰ - even though the intention of such understanding on behalf of the filmmakers is of course doubtful and the kiss was most likely intended as an

killer, Glyn Davis covers interpretations of Hannibal Lecter's sexuality so: "Lecter's sexual orientation is never explicitly named as queer in the films and books in which he appears. However, Diana Fuss has outlined the ways in which his characterisation fits neatly with psychoanalytic formulations of homosexuality [citing] Hannibal Lecter's enigmatic sexuality ...the aristocratic psychiatrist as a "gay dandy" and ... a mannered aesthete with a "near-camp delivery. See also Douglas Crimp's comments on Lecter's 'camp, effete intelligence.' In contrast, Richard Tithecott claims that Lecter is 'putatively heterosexual' (or at least presumed heterosexual) by his flirting with Clarice." (Glyn Davis, "New Queer Cinema. The Work of Five Gay Directors in the Context of Queer Culture and its Politics of Representation," DPhil diss., University of Sussex, 2004, 62.)

¹⁹⁷ See Hanson's aptly titled essay Ellis Hanson, "Lesbians Who Bite," in *Out Takes. Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.. For an exploration of male homoerotic vampirism, see Richard Dyer, "It's in his kiss!: vampirism as homosexuality, homosexuality as vampirism," in Dyer, *Culture*, 70-89.

¹⁹⁸ See Ruby Rich's eponymous essay (Ruby B. Rich, "Lethal Lesbians," in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, by Ruby B. Rich (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), Kindle edition.) which builds on Lynda Hart's landmark study - see Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁹⁹ See how Dyer summarizes the patterns, writing: "It is not surprising then that the genres in which gays most often appear are horror films and comedy." (Dyer, "Stereotyping," 30.)

²⁰⁰ Benschhoff and Griffin, eds., *Reader*, 21.

innocent expression of homosocial affection between two straight characters at an extreme emotional moment. Apart from such individual scenes or veiled subplots of minor characters, there are stand-alone films that deal with queer characters and homosexuality head-on, starting as early as 1916 with the Swedish *Vingarne* (*Wings*).²⁰¹ As both Dyer and Mennel point out in chapters focusing on the Weimar Republic in their queer film histories, the generally loose attitude towards sexuality in the Weimar society, especially in big cities, was incomparable to the United States or Great Britain and facilitated the production of a number of queer films,²⁰² out of which ²⁰³ *Anders als die Andern* (*Different from the Others*, 1919) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*, 1931) - “deal with homosexuality centrally, unambiguously and positively,”²⁰⁴ and although not unproblematic, share a unique activist appeal.²⁰⁵

It took till the late 1960’s for films to start coming out of Hollywood that would attempt to, paraphrasing Dyer, *deal with homosexuality centrally, unambiguously and positively*. At the beginning of the decade, still present were both the comical (as “homosexual innuendo”²⁰⁶ like *That Touch of Mink* (1962)) and menacing (as “signifier of ultimate villainy”²⁰⁷ for example in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)) strains of queer influence in mainstream film. *The Children’s Hour* (1961), starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine, is one of the three films that Mennel lists as exemplary in how “narratives reflect the unspeakable nature of homosexuality.”²⁰⁸ As Benschhoff and Griffin sum up: “As has been pointed out by many critics, *The Children’s Hour* is primarily about the evil effects of rumors—in this case the

²⁰¹ For a detailed analysis of the film’s production, reception as well as the legacy of homoerotic imagery within the film, see the chapter “Sweden 1916. Taking Off,” in Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 1.

²⁰² See the chapter “Weimar. Less and more like the others” in Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 2; and Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap 1. *Queer films* is here used for films that also depict homosexuality, while the tone is rather negative towards it (Mennel, *ibid.*) or they work with connotation and implication (notable examples being *Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray* (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1917) and “a rather less homosexually committed remake of *Vingarne*” (Dyer, *ibid.*) *Michael* (1924)), often employing the gender inversion (the *Hosenrolle* films with the female protagonist in drag, like *Viktor und Viktoria* (Victor and Victoria, 1933) - Dyer, *ibid.*). It should be noted, that Russo also includes some of these films in *The Celluloid Closet*.

²⁰³ Both Dyer and Mennel single them out in their respective studies, Mennel going as far as naming as the only two actually gay/lesbian films of the Weimar period - Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 1.

²⁰⁴ Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Reader*, 8.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Along with *Rope* and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959) - see Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.

suggested possibility of homosexuality—rather than homosexuality per se.”²⁰⁹ Homosexuality as a social problem and a cause for blackmail forms the narrative arch of the landmark²¹⁰ British film *The Victim* (1961), regarded as the first mainstream film in the United Kingdom to focus unambiguously on homosexuality, and was set to argue against the status of homosexuality as a prosecutable offence at the time.²¹¹ In the United States, the next stepping stones are two films that “center on (repressed) homosexuality in the military”²¹² and *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), which “because of its exploration of a subject as taboo as homosexuality ... earned an X rating,”²¹³ the highest possible rating under the new system which, as mentioned above, replaced the restrictive Production Code. This change was part of the bigger transformation happening in the Hollywood system in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, which is usually marked as the coming of the New Hollywood generation, that opened the door to bolder depictions of homosexual characters. Simultaneously, with the evolution in the film industry, there was radical development in the situation of queer people off-screen, with the new gay rights movement sparked by the Stonewall Riots following the police raid on the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969.²¹⁴ *The Killing of Sister George* provides an “example of relatively high-budget films that reveal certain aspects of lesbian life, for example, butch/femme relationships and bar culture, that create a titillating voyeuristic gaze, transforming the lesbian characters into spectacles of deviance.”²¹⁵ The ‘spectacle’ depiction with regards to lesbianism

²⁰⁹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 95.

²¹⁰ See Burton, 2010.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² *Reflections in the Golden Eye* (1967) and *The Sergeant* (1968), preceded by *Advise and Consent* (1962). These, along with *The Children’s Hour*, though, all “suggest that homosexual desire leads to tragedy or violence.” (Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 136.)

²¹³ See “The Killing of Sister George,” *The New York Times*, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movies/movie/27343/The-Killing-of-Sister-George/overview>.

²¹⁴ The Stonewall Riots represent a crucial stepping stone in gay liberation history and the origin point of modern gay rights movement in the United States. See LeVay, “Queer Science;” for a critical and complex exploration of the significance of Stonewall as a landmark event in gay history and collective memory, see Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 71 No. 5 (2006): 724-751, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472425>; also the documentary films *After Stonewall* (1999) and *Stonewall Uprising* (2010); Amy Villarejo point to the ‘mythic’ status of Stonewall in queer history and its marking of an epistemic shift: “...the eruption we call “Stonewall,” an event that shorthands a number of translations (themselves fabrications) that found contemporary gay and lesbian politics and culture: from shame to pride, from isolation to community, from silence to activism.” (Amy Villarejo, “*Forbidden Love: Pulp as Lesbian History*,” in *Out Takes. Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.)

²¹⁵ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.

translates to 'male-gaze' based exploitation of female sexuality, exemplified on the French mainstream soft-porn film *Therese and Isabelle* (1968).

The New York Times of *The Killing of Sister George*, which is illustrative on the overall approach to homosexuality, reads:

Susannah York, as Childie, is disturbing, but seems, devoutly and understandably, to be wishing herself in some heterosexual part. Childie and George, for some reason, are not so much made up as oiled, as for a Channel swim. The prolonged, simultaneously serious and mocking treatment of homosexuals, I suppose, inevitably turns vicious and silly—as homosexuality itself inevitably has a degree of parody in it.²¹⁶

Coupled with *Sister George*, *The Boys in the Band* (1970) represent the two “most famous (and least offensive) Hollywood films of the era.”²¹⁷ The latter is a look on contemporary lives of gay men in New York City, based on the work of the gay playwright Mark Cromley, who adapted the screenplay himself.²¹⁸ Both films were directed by heterosexual men,²¹⁹ and “contain self-loathing characters, ... as cautionary morality tales about the empty, sick lives of queers. However, ...both films illuminate the struggle for modern, out-of-the-closet gay or lesbian sensibilities.”²²⁰

The French film *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) was a mainstream box-office hit that for decades remained the top-grossing foreign film in the U.S. distribution,²²¹ and its commercial success is believed to have contributed to acknowledging the potential of queer themed works with general audiences.²²² However, like in *La Cage*, the chief approach to queer characters continues the tendency of “trading in stereotypes,”²²³ adhering to the heteronormative axis of a queer relationship and mostly, using queerness as an attraction in order to produce comedy for heterosexual audiences.

²¹⁶ Adler, Renata. "The Killing of Sister George (1968)." *The New York Times*, December 17, 1968. Accessed May 8, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C00E7D61730E034BC4F52DFB4678383679EDE>.

²¹⁷ Beshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 8.

²¹⁸ Beshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 8.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., for a more nuanced reading of *The Killing of Sister George*, see the corresponding texts in White, *Uninvited*; and Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

²²¹ Beshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 184.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Julianne Pidduck, "After 1980: margins and mainstreams," in *Now You See It* by Richard Dyer (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition.

In a similar vein, in 1982, two American films emerged that had a homosexual relationship at the center, *Personal Best* and *Making Love*. *Personal Best*, written and directed by a straight filmmaker,²²⁴ even though successful with lesbian audiences,²²⁵ exploits female homosexuality as an attraction,²²⁶ while *Making Love's* was created with the main "concern to play to straight viewers"²²⁷ and is problematic with its affirmative stance to heteronormativity.²²⁸ Both films also present homosexuality as the main and only struggle, as well as the dominant *personality trait* for its firmly gay/lesbian characters.

The overall assessment of "out" queer characters in mainstream cinema through the 1970's and in the early 1980's, who are not the villainous antagonists and even when approached with some sympathy by the filmmakers, concludes that these queers are mostly troubled, depraved and headed for a tragic fate,²²⁹ with some exceptions in characters, who are however overshadowed by the main heterosexual storyline (*Cabaret* (1972), Cher's character in *Silkwood* (1983), the transsexual Roberta Muldoon, played by John Lithgow in an Oscar-nominated performance in

²²⁴ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 185.

²²⁵ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 177; The film is pointed out in the very recent British Film Institute's list "10 great lesbian films" and does not make the top ten only due to its lack of availability on DVD or streaming in the UK. It is worth noting, that *The Killing of Sister George* does make the list. ("10 great lesbian films," *British Film Institute*, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-lesbian-films>.)

²²⁶ The voyeuristic lasciviousness of the director's approach to his female athlete characters (and their bodies), was high even for the 1982 standards, as Vincent Canby remarks in his review: "Mr. Towne, the Oscar-winning screenwriter ("Chinatown") who makes his directorial debut with "Personal Best," is a talented man with a certain weakness. You might even call it a guilty pleasure. Like Russ Meyer ("Vixen" and "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls"), he loves women but, unlike Mr. Meyer, whose taste runs to women with gigantic breasts, Mr. Towne seems to go for lean, leggy types with small breasts. He especially loves their pelvic regions, which he photographs as frequently as possible in close-up, sometimes clothed in flimsy little jogging shorts and sometimes in nothing at all, as when the young women are horsing around in the steam room after a hard day on the track." (Vincent Canby, "'Personal Best,' Olympic Love," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1982, accessed May 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C07E7DA103BF936A35751CoA964948260>.) Teresa de Lauretis dismisses the film as a shining example in the line of "obnoxious commercial products... which unabashedly exploited the currently fashionable discourse on lesbianism to the end of an effective deligitimation of the lesbian - and perhaps even the feminist - politics of sexual difference." (Teresa de Lauretis, "Film and the Visible," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 256.) See also the aforementioned 'against the grain' reading of the film - Ellsworth, *Personal Best*.

²²⁷ As expressed by the filmmakers, including the gay screenwriter Barry Sandler; it is also worth mentioning that the film was a box-office fiasco. (Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 186-188.)

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Dyer uses the expression "iconography of the sad young man" (Dyer, *Now You See*) and Russo recalls the "obligatory suicide" (Russo, *Celluloid Closet*) as the prevalent fate of the homosexual character. Director of *Desert Hearts* (1985) Donna Deitch has been quoted "that she wanted to make *Desert Hearts* because American films had failed to show a relationship between women that did not end with some "suicides, murders, or convoluted bisexual triangles" ("Donna Deitch," *Film Directors Site*, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.filmdirectorssite.com/donna-deitch>.)

The World According to Garp (1982)). Acknowledging the progressive impact the depiction of out queer characters brings, Dyer assesses the dominant impression they offer:

The net result is that these films tend to stress gayness as a personality issue, a problem to which there are only individual solutions – suicide (*Mädchen in Uniform*, *The Loudest Whisper* [the alternate title for *The Children's Hour*], bank-robbing (*Dog Day Afternoon*), mature resignation (*Sunday Bloody Sunday*) and so on.²³⁰

The 1980's saw both a general political shift towards conservatism in the United States and the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which affected the treatment of queer characters in the mainstream film industry:

A revival of Christian fundamentalism in the United States helped fuel a backlash to feminism and gay liberation. The shift to the political right and the rise of the "Moral Majority" led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980; his administration and supporters tried to roll back much of what had been accomplished by women and queers (among others) during the previous decades. The Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was defeated in 1982. And, as the 1980s progressed, the New Right would use the growing AIDS crisis to argue that homosexuality was unhealthy as well as immoral and to once again figure queers as social pariahs.²³¹

Apart from reinstating the queer villain trope, the depiction of queer characters saw a rapid decline in the studio-produced film.²³² At the same time, along with the changes in the film industry of the United States, the second half of the 1980's marks the rise of independently produced films with queer characters in them, that also receive occasional recognition of the mainstream industry, notably in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985).²³³ A part of these new independent films received at least limited *art-house* distribution,²³⁴ while trying to tackle contemporary issues of queer lives, focusing on coming out, and the AIDS crisis (*Parting Glances* (1986), *Torch*

²³⁰ Dyer, "Stereotyping," 37.

²³¹ Benhsoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 178.

²³² *Ibid.*, 189.

²³³ For which John Hurt, playing the queer character of Molina, received an Academy Award, "the first ever to go to someone playing an openly homosexual character." (Benhsoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 192.) Still, we should not forget that Molina also deserves a place in Vito Russo list of obituaries of screen queers, as he is killed by the end of the film.

²³⁴ See the chapter "Out of the Closet and into the Art House" in Benhsoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 177-200.

Song Trilogy (1988), *Longtime Companion* (1989)).²³⁵ The late 1980's independent film in the U.S. is the precursor to New Queer Cinema, with a trend of turning towards sympathetic and open portrayals of queer characters, while for the most part remaining formally conventional and quite bland and clichéd²³⁶ in regard to their actual queerness. These films are driven chiefly by the effort of producing 'positive images' - this trend can be enveloped under the wider endeavor of *affirmation politics*, which is expressed both in fiction films, and informs a sub-genre of documentary, while it has to be noted that its U.S. lineage has parallels in Western Europe.²³⁷

This sub-chapter provides an overview of the dominant modes of how queer characters were portrayed and present in mainstream cinema, sketching a timeline of evolution focusing mainly on the region of the United States. According to available literature on the subject, the situation in European national cinemas, with the exception of the Weimar Republic era, was in broad terms, similar to the U.S. – a dominant paradigm of absence, paralleled by connotative queer villainy, cross-dressing humor and lesbian-ish exploitation, with rare singular films like the aforementioned *Victim* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *A un dios descondido* (*To An Unknown God*, 1977) and *Arrebato* (*Rapture*, 1980) in Spain²³⁸ or *Ernesto* (1979) in Italy.²³⁹ Instances can be listed, but it is a disruptive picture up until till the mid-1980's. Then, there are the even rarer, from the queer point of view, European films like Luchino Visconti's opus *Death in Venice* (1971) or the ground-breaking *Taxi zum Klo* (1981), the very first, incredibly rough and authentic AIDS-themed film *L'Homme blessé* (1983) and of course Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982). These films provide the ideal transition to the other crucial perspective of accessing queer cinema.

²³⁵ See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 3.

²³⁶ Ibid.; see also Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 3; and de Lauretis's critique of most of the lesbian-themed films of the era, including *Desert Hearts*. The one film that gets a pass and her approval, is *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) - de Lauretis, "Film."

²³⁷ See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 3.; Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 6.

²³⁸ Perriam, *Spanish Queer*, 51.

²³⁹ Dyer, *Culture*, 218-224.

2.2.2 Queer filmmakers

The second line of inquiry regarding queer cinema turns from the screen towards the space behind the camera and focuses on the queerness of the filmmaker. To do so, this method requires a revised resurrection of the *auteur theory* in film studies, outlining how the ‘author of a film’ as a relevant point of view, was established, dismantled and following the barthesian ‘death of the author’ reconstructed, and finally returned to the relevance of the perspective in view of *queer* authorship: The notion of the film’s director as *auteur* goes back to France of the 1920's²⁴⁰ it earned its gravitas in the 1950’s and 1960’s, with “*la politique des auteurs*, or the policy of looking at films in terms of authors”²⁴¹ pushed by the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics in France, followed by critics in Great Britain grouped around the journal *Movie* as well as *Sequence*, *Screen* and *Sight and Sound*,²⁴² and incorporated by Andrew Sarris’s influential 1962 essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory”²⁴³ which introduced and canonized the approach in America,²⁴⁴ expanding the title of the *auteur* to those directors who would have been previously seen as skilled executioners of “anonymous genre.”²⁴⁵

Auteur criticism, on both sides of the Atlantic, served to elevate and stabilize the film director as an artist with a unique vision,²⁴⁶ including those working within the

²⁴⁰ Virginia Wright Wexman, "Introduction," in *Film and Authorship*, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), Kindle edition.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., see also David A. Gerstner, “The Practices of Authorship,” in *Authorship and Film*, eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition.

²⁴³ See Wexman, “Introduction;” see also the 1976 follow-up essay, Andrew Sarris, “The Auteur Theory Revisited,” in *Film and Authorship*, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), Kindle edition.

²⁴⁴ See Wexman, “Introduction;” Gerstner, “Practices.” On Sarris, see also Warren Buckland, "Auteur Theory," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, eds. Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 50-52. As Janet Staiger writes, Sarris “out-auteured the French” and practiced “a version of authorship-as-personality analysis as early as 1956” - Janet Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” in *Authorship and Film*, eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition.

²⁴⁵ Buckland, “Auteur,” 50.

²⁴⁶ “The purpose of the Cahiers critics was to elevate the films of a few directors to the status of high art. This introduction of popular cinema into a privileged aesthetic realm came after a decade of debate over what was then called mass culture, a phenomenon commonly dismissed with terms such as “entertainment” and “escapism.” Such designations had the effect of excluding movies and other popular diversions from being terms such as “entertainment” and “escapism.” Such designations had the effect of excluding movies and other popular diversions from being considered genuine art forms. ... The auteurists countered this discourse by treating gifted directors as transcendent figures who expressed timeless truths and who therefore merited serious critical scrutiny.” (Wexman, “Introduction.”)

Hollywood studio system.²⁴⁷ Apart from identifying the director as the key author²⁴⁸ of the film, the approach stresses the singularity of the director's body of work, while piecing together a coherent image of that body of work, identifying recurrent motifs and formal choices²⁴⁹ that create a continuity.²⁵⁰

The first wave of auteur theory is dubbed the *romantic auteurism*²⁵¹ and underwent an evolution as well as deconstructive critique. Probably the most notable shift of the auteur theory is *auteur-structuralism*, in the early 1970's Britain, drawing on structuralist approaches and trying to give auteur theory a "firm theoretical grounding."²⁵² As proposed and performed by Peter Wollen in 1972,²⁵³ this approach "focuses only on theme." Wollen sees the stylistic approach by itself as superficial; for him, auteurs are distinguishable in terms of the deep thematic structures at the center of their films."²⁵⁴ Wollen works with thematic, contrasting pairs that he identifies and evaluates across the director's oeuvre.²⁵⁵ Parallel to the scientific upgrade stemming from Levi-Strauss-informed structuralism,²⁵⁶ auteur theory was coming through a different and more brutal kind of treatment in France in the 1970's:

²⁴⁷ Ibid., see also Gerstner, "Practices."

²⁴⁸ A major part of the criticism directed at the auteur theory is the discursive power given to the persona of the director over other contributing *authors* in such a collaborative medium as film is. Sarris replies to some of the critique, especially the neglect of the role of the screenwriter by critics like Pauline Kael in his follow-up essay - see Sarris, "Revisited." Richard Corliss (see Wexman, "Introduction") and Gore Vidal (see Gerstner, "Practices") also highlighted the role of the screenwriter over the director and more recently David Kipen proposed, partly as an intentional "parody" of the auteur theory *the schreiber theory* that casts the screenwriter in the *auteur* role (see an interview with Kipen - "David Kipen Posits New Auteur Theory," *SF 360*, March 6, 2006, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.sf360.org/?pageid=2758>). Of course, other professions are competing for the *most major influence* that is at least at par with director's - the cinematographer, the editor, the art and costume designers, as well as the producers who are the ones recognized with the Academy Award for the best film as a whole. (Wexman, "Introduction") However, with recognition of the importance of these contributors, the lasting agreement is that the director's role in the overall outcome of the film, is dominant. As Wexner concludes: "In most cases, however, directors are taken to be the crucial creative force involved in the filmmaking process, even in Hollywood cinema, because directors manage a movie's production and thus exercise the most control over its overall style." (Ibid.)

²⁴⁹ Gerstner stresses the "emphasis on *mise-en-scène*" as crucial since the *Cahiers* origin of the *auteur* approach and its continuing importance, acknowledged even by the critics of the theory. (Gerstner, "Practices.")

²⁵⁰ See Sarris, "Revisited;" as well as the commentaries on the elements in Buckland, "Auteur Theory;" Gerstner, "Practices;" Wexman, "Introduction."

²⁵¹ Wexman, "Introduction;" Gerstner uses "the romantic auteur regimen" in the same sense. (Gerstner, "Practices.")

²⁵² Buckland, "Auteur Theory," 51.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid; 52-54.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

with the post-structuralist turn²⁵⁷ and the new generation of *Cahiers* critics,²⁵⁸ the *romantic* notion of authorship was dismantled. As Staiger writes: “The author here is still a body, but a body devoid of agency *and continuity* and potential of significance.”²⁵⁹ The basis of authorship’s relevance was attacked as “the impulse to personalize artistic creation is closely related to the importance of individualism within Western culture and has become a concept anchoring modern understandings of aesthetic value.”²⁶⁰ The ideological critique of our *desire*²⁶¹ for an author, a personalized one, dismisses him (and her) and installs “authorship-as-site-of-discourses.”²⁶² This development represents “the death of the author problem”²⁶³ for authorship studies, recalling the title of Roland Barthes’s majorly influential essay.²⁶⁴ In this line of thought, the receiver (the *reader*) of the work is re-cast as the actual author²⁶⁵ and/or the author, disclosed as a construct, is cast away as irrelevant.²⁶⁶

The position of the author (and *auteur*), as a personal concrete presence, thus weakened and deconstructed, was critiqued and re-instated again. As Wexner writes:

The neglect of authorship that characterized the early years of ciné-structuralism during the seventies and eighties led some of those committed to feminist or multicultural agendas to indulge in dark speculations about why this issue had dissolved into a vast sea of textuality just at the moment when the previously marginalized voices of women and people of color were beginning to be heard.²⁶⁷

²⁵⁷ Staiger, “Authorship.”

²⁵⁸ Wexman, “Introduction.”

²⁵⁹ Staiger, “Authorship.”

²⁶⁰ Wexman, 2003 (Introduction), drawing on Foucault. See Foucault’s essay, where he brings front his concept of the author-function - Michel Foucault. “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113-138.

²⁶¹ See the original 1968 essay - Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author.” In *Image - Music - Text*, by Roland Barthes, 142-148. London: Fontana Press, 1993; as well as the elaboration in Staiger, “Authorship.”

²⁶² Staiger, “Authorship.”

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ See Barthes, “Death.”

²⁶⁵ The extreme interpretation working with the catchy and strong title is often, but as Gerstner notes “the author position was not necessarily removed here; its position was reconsidered albeit with varying theoretical implications.” (Gerstner, “Practices.”)

²⁶⁶ See Staiger, “Authorship;” as well as Gerstner, “Practices.”

²⁶⁷ Wexman, “Introduction.”

Similar sentiments are expressed by David Gerstner²⁶⁸ and Janet Staiger,²⁶⁹ as the latter resolutely declares: "Yet authorship does matter."²⁷⁰ And it matters in a political sense regarding the personal identity of the auteurs in question, rising at the dawn of the 1990's with queer theory (and at the time of NQC's origins):

In 1990, Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*) critiqued essentialist presumptions about gender and paved the way for queer theorist to deconstruct issues of canon, authority and corporeality. Authorship again reemerged with a new set of political objectives and agendas."²⁷¹

Thus the dismissal of authorship is rebuffed by turning the focus to the specifics of minority authorship,²⁷² works authored by women, people of color and queer auteurs. The relevance of the personal sexual identity of the filmmaker is expressed so: "[With] the rise of gay and lesbian independent filmmaking (and later New Queer Cinema), filmgoers could be assured that queer stories and issues were being expressed from some kind of queer subject position."²⁷³ The crux of the issue for queer content relayed by authors, who themselves do not identify as queer (in the broad sense as not heterosexual) is neatly expressed for example in the introduction to the symptomatic popular article "10 Great Queer Films Made By Straight Directors:"

My gut reaction is to say, "I don't think a straight director should make a queer film." There's a specificity of the experience of being queer, of living that life and lifestyle, which a straight person will never truly understand. It's not their fault, by

²⁶⁸ For example, Gerstner writes about the "feminist intervention [that] quickly and vitally put the breaks on the other androcentric project of declaring auteur and authorship studies dead - fait accompli." (Gerstner, "Practices.")

²⁶⁹ Illuminating commentaries on the mis-interpretation and problem of the 'death of the author problem' are expressed by both Staiger and Walter Metz: "So even as people are misreading Roland Barthes's 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" to mean that producers of texts do not count, when his point is to give power to the reader but not to write off authoring acts, feminists and other groups face the task of understanding agency in a poststructural era." (Janet Staiger, "Authorship studies and Gus Van Sant," *Film Criticism* XXIX 1 (2004): 1-22, accessed via the FIAF database.) Similarly, Metz writes, recalling the theoretical work of Kaja Silverman that "the political problematic of declaring the author dead at precisely the same time as marginalized authors— women, people of color, and sexual minorities— were beginning to be studied seriously within academia." (Walter Metz, "John Waters goes to Hollywood: A Poststructural Authorship Study," in *Authorship and Film*, eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition.)

²⁷⁰ Staiger, "Authorship."

²⁷¹ Gerstner, "Practices."

²⁷² See Staiger's theoretical framework in her case study of Gus Van Sant's authorship - Staiger, "Van Sant."

²⁷³ Benshoff and Griffin, *Reader*, 17.

any means, but it makes the depiction of queerness on screen a tricky task unless one has lived it themselves, not unlike portraying the life and experiences of any other marginalized group that the filmmaker doesn't belong to.²⁷⁴

The introduction of the queer variable into the (still evolving) auteur theory highlights the validity of the authorship approach, and it combines the informed post-structuralist discursive to the ideologically constructed *queer* author with the *romantic* interpretation of known facts from the actual filmmaker's personal life,²⁷⁵ in the form of how do these auteurs fashion the public discourses about themselves,²⁷⁶ as well as in Wollen-like thematic vein – how do queer authors deal with queer themes?

One major point that needs to be addressed and that concerns not only queer authorship but all *minority authorship* is the slippery slope of *essentialism*²⁷⁷ in identity (and identity politics), tackled also by the schism between traditional gay/lesbian identity and the queer subversion²⁷⁸ of the concept of a fixed identity. It is raised again in regard to authorship, as it is substantial to remember that while it is productive and liberating to express oneself openly as queer (in personal life and in art), it comes with the aforementioned risk of a reductive 'universally queer' label for all queer individuals.²⁷⁹

Richard Dyer opens *Now You See It* in 1990 marking of his inquiry's territory as the intersection of personal identity and theme (content) in that person's work:

There have been hundreds of films with homosexual characters in them and hundreds of lesbians and gay men have worked before and behind the film camera,

²⁷⁴ Kyle Turner, "10 Great Queer Films Made By Straight Directors," */bent*, September 23, 2014, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/bent/10-great-queer-films-made-by-straight-directors-20140921>.

²⁷⁵ See Alexander Doty, "Whose Text Is It Anyway? Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs and Queer Authorship" (in Doty, *Flaming*, 17-38) and Staiger, "Van Sant;" as their respective essays on queer studio directors (Arzner and Cukor) and Gus Van Sant illustrate this blend very well. See also Staiger's evaluation, in the sub-section *authorship as personality*, of Lotte Eisner's reading of Murnau's films through the prism of his (repressed) homosexuality (Staiger, "Authorship.")

²⁷⁶ Again, see Staiger, "Van Sant," and her illustrative analysis of the self-presentation of Van Sant.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ See Heyes, "Identity."

²⁷⁹ As Staiger puts it: "Essentialism also is possible. Andy Medhurst states the problem well: for example, a presumption exists in "gay male subcultures that the homosexuality of an individual will reveal itself primarily through matters of taste— not good or bad taste but particular taste" (198). And it is way too easy to assume that one aspect of an individual is all of which the individual speaks. Because someone is Asian American, that is not all that individual is. Such a fallacy produces a monoglossic subject. Finally, at least for this list, membership in a particular minority-self grouping by no means ensures any political membership (e.g., conservative or progressive)." (Staiger, "Authorship.")

but there have been very few films made by lesbians and gay men with lesbian and gay subject-matter. This book is about some of them.²⁸⁰

Dyer's archeological project ties together two criteria for queer films that I am here presenting separately - he is looking at films, that (centrally and openly) include queer characters *and* were made by queer (again, in the broad sense) filmmakers. The latter is the second line of how queer film history can be structured. It may be argued that sexuality of filmmakers (directors, screenwriters, actors, producers, set designers...) is a matter suitable for gossip columns and not a serious exploration of cinema on academic soil. The practice may also reek of the infamous and controversial fashion of forceful "outing,"²⁸¹ especially if queerness is attributed post-mortem. The counter-argument has two layers: First, we do not discuss filmmakers' *heterosexuality* because, heterosexuality is the presumed norm (and neutrality is not an option, thus if for example James Whale's homosexuality is silenced from the discussion, he is by default positioned as heterosexual).²⁸² The second, more nuanced in its application, is the claim that the filmmaker's queerness does influence his or her work profoundly, and therefore, is relevant for the film's critical and audience reception.²⁸³

Still, it needs to be acknowledged that retroactively attributing queerness to the first group of persons listed further is a tricky operation as it is done mostly from outside, regardless of the person's self-identification (and we should bear in mind that the concept of modern gay/lesbian identity dates to the time of Stonewall riots),²⁸⁴ by means of interpreting behavior (presumed or documented) and what we regard as expressions of queerness (such as homoerotic imagery).

²⁸⁰ Dyer, *Now You See*, Introduction to the first edition.

²⁸¹ "Outing' is the recent [late 1980's to early 1990's] practice by some people to declare publicly that certain individuals are homosexual or bisexual even though those people have not chosen to make their sexual preferences known. The argument for doing this is that it is hypocritical for famous people to remain private about such preferences if they participate in public activities which perpetuate homophobia." (Janet Staiger, "Taboos," 161.)

²⁸² See the short sub-section on Whale - Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 56.

²⁸³ On Eisenstein's "mischievous homoeroticism," see for example Ronald Bergan, "The Battleship Potemkin Comes Out of the Closet," *theartsdesk.com*, April 23, 2011, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/film/battleship-potemkin-comes-out-closet>.

²⁸⁴ Dyer, *Culture*, 1-3.

Seeing the way male bodies are displayed in *Tabu* (1931) earns a new level of understanding, once we possess the information of F.W. Murnau's homosexuality.²⁸⁵ Similarly with the works of Sergei Eisenstein, the married "self-confessed phallic obsessive"²⁸⁶ director, to name two titans of cinema's history, who are claimed as figures in the mostly closeted part of *queer* film history. In the Hollywood studio system, the cases of three queer directors reveal the diverse ways how both the *celluloid closet* and the incorporation into the queer canon operated: George Cukor, "one of the most well-known and successful directors of classical Hollywood cinema"²⁸⁷ lived a discreet (or double) life, though never denying his homosexuality, keeping the queer instances in his films mostly discreet as well.²⁸⁸ James Whale, nastily nicknamed "the Queen of Hollywood"²⁸⁹ lived openly in a homosexual relationship (with a studio producer)²⁹⁰ and his "refusal to be discreet may have helped end his Hollywood career."²⁹¹ Dorothy Arzner, whose "case is crucial for a history of lesbian desire and film practice"²⁹² was the self-stylized epitome of the on-screen *mannish woman*. Though she lived with a female partner, she "never came out as a lesbian, and in the 1970s she tried to argue against lesbian readings of her films."²⁹³ The different takes on their own sexuality coincide with the difference of how queerness is included in their films, produced within the studio system - symbolically yet overtly in Whale's horror films,²⁹⁴ in the connotative bonds between

²⁸⁵ See Staiger, "Authorship." See also Michael Atkinson, "A bloody disgrace," *The Guardian*, January 26, 2001, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/jan/26/culture.features2>.

²⁸⁶ Ronald Bergan, "The Battleship Potemkin Comes Out of the Closet," *theartsdesk.com*, April 23, 2011, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/film/battleship-potemkin-comes-out-closet>.

On Eisenstein, see also the recent Peter Greenaway film *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* (2015) and its coverage.

²⁸⁷ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 55.

²⁸⁸ See the sub-chapter on Cukor in Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 50-55.

²⁸⁹ Lugowski, "Whale."

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 56.

²⁹² See Judith Mayne's article and the adjacent transcript of the discussion for a thorough survey of Arzner's place in feminist film theory writing (which largely refused to include lesbianism as a part of the picture) – Judith Mayne, "Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) 103-144.

²⁹³ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 49-50.

²⁹⁴ Lugowski, "Whale."

Arzner's female characters,²⁹⁵ in a veiled yet present manner in Cukor's *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935).²⁹⁶

Included in the history of the closet and queerness on screen that needs to be dug out and identified as such, runs a parallel²⁹⁷ lineage of underground, avant-garde and for a big part experimental queer cinema made by queer filmmakers, for the most part self-produced low- to no-budget works that explore same-sex desire within a wider context, and derive from personal experience of their authors, and a universal reflection of such desire:²⁹⁸ Kenneth Anger's short film *Fireworks* (1947) conveys the young gay boy's fantasy of sailors, Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950, *A Song of Love*, though the title usually remains untranslated) is a 26-minute silent exploration of desire and sex between inmates in a prison. "Elements of evil, criminality and homosexuality are inextricably entwined,"²⁹⁹ in this film, as well as Genet's literary works and public persona. Barbara Hammer consciously decided to "construct a lesbian cinema"³⁰⁰ with films that are radically political while transforming her own experience as a lesbian to images, hoping to merge that experience with the one of the audience, as Hammer writes in a comment on *Dyketactics* (1974): "Every frame in the image has an image of touching. ... The audience feels in their bodies what they

²⁹⁵ See Mayne, "Arzner."

²⁹⁶ Again, see Doty's essay "Whose Text;" which examines both Arzner and Cukor as queer auteurs, while providing an excellent insight into the question of queer authorship itself.

²⁹⁷ Here, entering the periphery of the industry (see Dyer, *Culture*) at least an honorary mention is deserved to the production of *physique* films - for an overview, see Waugh, Thomas. "Physique Cinema, 1945-1969: Hard to Imagine." In *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, 35-42. London and New York: Routledge, 2004). They were mostly 8mm or 16mm short films made usually by gay men for the niche gay male audience, building on the practice of magazines devoted to depicting muscular men such as bodybuilders (see Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 117.), with sub-genres devoted to material of men wrestling and infusing violence and desire, the homosexual content for which they were marketed veiled: "[if the models] had been embracing instead of wrestling, every- one involved would have been arrested for pornography and perversion, but since they were trying to kill one another, it was okay," - *ibid.* These homoerotic films often played with queering popular Hollywood genres or even specific films. (*Ibid.*) Lesbian or women bisexual scenes were an eminent part of the *explotation* (Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.) genre aimed at the heterosexual male audience in the 1960's and 1970's. Director and film scholar Michelle Johnson's re-edits such scenes for her pastiche 2007 documentary *Triple X Selects: The Best of Lezsplotation*, with the intent to reframe the scenes "for the viewing pleasure of contemporary lesbian viewer." *Physique* and *sexplotation* films gave way to depicting homosexual desire on the screen but were of course limited to the margins of the industry and audience reception carved for the "naughty" erotic B- and C-movies.

²⁹⁸ See Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 3 and 4.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, chap 3.

³⁰⁰ Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gever et al. (New York and London: Routledge), 71.

see on the screen."³⁰¹ Both Hammer and Anger play with the popular iconography, queering the superhero narrative and costume design in *Superdyke meets Madame X* (1976) and the macho image of a Marlon Brando doppelganger in a biker gang, in Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963).³⁰² A landmark underground film is *Flaming Creatures* (1963), where "fake noses on "females" gesture toward an obvious ironic use of Freudian symbolism, especially in retrospect after "women" lift their skirts to reveal their own penises. Hollywood genres are travestied to exaggeration."³⁰³ Flirting with the "*aboveground*,"³⁰⁴ while toying with mainstream imagery and blatantly putting queerness on-screen, was prominent in the films of Andy Warhol (later together with Paul Morrissey), whose works stretched from an experimental short *Blow Job* (1964) that is a continuous shot of a young man's face while he receives oral stimulation, to the feature-length subversion of the western genre *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968).³⁰⁵

Rooted in underground, and what we could call today DIY filmmaking, are openly queer filmmakers, whose body of work includes feature films that were screened at major festivals and picked up for distribution, blurring the *underground/mainstream* line. What suffices to say in this overview is that they are singular figures whose work consistently and openly depicted (and continue to do so) queer characters and themes: since the 1970's Derek Jarman in United Kingdom and John Waters in the United States, Ulrike Ottinger and Rosa von Praunheim in Germany, and Pedro Almodóvar in Spain; to list the key and influential figures with largest bodies of work who share the underground origins.

The outline here suggest a queer-based mode of production and economic division along the line where openly queer directors shoot provocative openly queer

³⁰¹ Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 67.

³⁰² Which includes a queer interpretation of the Jesus Christ figure, or at least Jesus as portrayed by Howard Gaye in *Intolerance* - see Doty, *Flaming*, 17.

³⁰³ Staiger, *Perverse*, 138. See the whole essay "Finding Community in the Early 1960's. Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics" (in Staiger, *Perverse*, 125-160) for a complex look at the queer underground films as well as their screening and reception practices. For a complex survey of the underground film, see Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996),

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 144, emphasis by the author.

³⁰⁵ See Dyer, *Now You See*, chap. 4. The film won the Best Film Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival, got some "rave" reviews from mainstream press, and on the other hand, "a theater owner in Atlanta, Georgia, was arrested for showing it and an entire audience in London was arrested for watching it." (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 124.)

films (underground with minimum money or distribution) and the closet of the studio system and potential mainstream success (going back to the original schism in auteur theory concerning whether it is possible to be an auteur within “the system,” adding the alienating element of censoring queerness from mainstream cinema). This structure is prevalent both in Europe³⁰⁶ and the U.S., with a short but crucial list of directors who were openly queer; and queerness (in the sense of a subversive attitude to sexuality) did play an important and acknowledged part in their films and were also successful in the, term used with caution, ‘mainstream’ - most notably Pier Paolo Pasolini, Luchino Visconti, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

2.2.3 Queer (film) reading

As is apparent from the previous two sub-sections, constructing both the assemblage of queer characters and the diverse body of queer filmmakers, there is a necessary implementation, to a different extent, of *interpretation* of that queerness - in many cases it has to be *pointed out, attributed, translated or seen*, whether it is the queerness of *Nosferatu*'s vampire or the its director F.W. Murnau.

It is most clear in the realms of connotative queerness of characters and concealed queer themes or imagery in the works of closeted queer filmmakers - it is where we enter the territory of *queer reading*, which can be quickly attacked and dismissed as resulting from ‘wishful thinking,’³⁰⁷ (we are finding queer content because we are set on finding it), ‘reading into things’³⁰⁸ (attacked as over-interpretation) and a ‘presentist gesture’³⁰⁹ - imposing our contemporary, queerly informed perspective, outside of the historical context of what we are seeing. To highlight this temporal distance, Patricia White proposed the term *retrospectatorship*.³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ For example, Rees-Roberts marks the rough history of queer filmmaking in France with Jean Cocteau, “whose homoerotic imagery was embedded in heterosexual narratives ... the popular films of closeted directors such as Marcel Carné,” through the radically queer (and unique) persona of Genet and to the rise of the queer auters (Rees-Roberst, *French Queer*, 7.)

³⁰⁷ Doty, *Flaming*, 4.

³⁰⁸ Doty, *Flaming*, 1-2; see also White, *Uninvited*, 15.

³⁰⁹ To this possible objection, Patricia White (see also next footnote) responds that “although I don’t think all women’s pictures can be converted to lesbian meanings today, I do believe that lesbianism was a horizon of experience shaping film reception for some spectators and the production of some films of that period [era of the Production Code in Hollywood].” (White, *Uninvited*, 15.)

³¹⁰ See Patricia White, “On Retrospectatorship.” in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, by Patricia White (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 194-215. Dana Luciano summarizes White’s approach thus: “conceptualize the temporality of queer relations to classic Hollywood film;

In the instances cited in the previous sub-sections, there was always some *hard proof* offered and argued to justify the *now you see it* moment of recognition. But queer reading does not limit itself³¹¹ to decoding subtexts embedded intentionally or unintentionally into films by the filmmakers - it emancipates the spectator to view any film queerly, whether there is *objective* grounds to do so or not.³¹² As Doty, an out queer spectator, says: “for me, any text is always already potentially queer.”³¹³

Still, this is not meant to imply the other extreme of *wishful thinking* which would be a rigid re-coding of meanings so that the queer reading is the only possibility. To illustrate the position, Peele states in his analysis of *Fight Club* (1998): “My claim here is not that Durden and Jack are *really* gay. ... The homoerotic element, however, simply will not go away (until the end of the film when Durden, and therefore the homoerotic element, is eliminated).”³¹⁴

A strong paradigm of queer reading operates with the notions of *gay/lesbian sensibility* (on the sides of both the filmmakers³¹⁵ and the audience), which is usually enveloped as *camp* (reading),³¹⁶ the “historically queer aesthetic”³¹⁷ or even, as Mennel argues, “a defining feature of queer aesthetics.”³¹⁸ Camp is, similarly to *queer*, next to impossible to define³¹⁹ - Susan Sontag, credited as the first to explore it

retrospectatorship takes seriously the après-coup by which the immediacy of a film’s affective impact and a belated reading of that impact in terms of cultural codes of sexuality may be linked.” (Dana Luciano, “Coming Around Again. The Queer Momentum of Far from Heaven,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13:2-3 (2007): 251.)

³¹¹ As Doty argues, this is just ground level of queer reading and its subordinate position to “mainstream” reading is unacceptable. (Ibid.)

³¹² “According to this model, a queer film is one that is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators. In other words, all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality.” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 10.) See also White, as quoted about the “horizon of experience” for a segment of the spectatorship - White, *Uninvited*, 15)

³¹³ Doty, *Flaming*, 2.

³¹⁴ Thomas Peele, “*Fight Club*’s Queer Representations,” *JAC* 4 (2001): 864, emphasis by the author.

³¹⁵ While *camp* is currently mostly equated with *reading*, the division is not strict - see for example the attribution of Cukor’s “uses of camp” in Doty, *Flaming*, 86.

³¹⁶ See the seminal essay - Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘camp,’” in *Against interpretation and other essays*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Delta Book, 1966), 275-292; as well as Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 121-137. Benshoff and Griffin equal *camp* with queer kind of “reading against the grain.” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 10.)

³¹⁷ Hanson, “Introduction.”

³¹⁸ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 2.

³¹⁹ For an overview, see Davis, “New Queer,” 205 – 210; also Babuscio “Camp.”

seriously,³²⁰ writes that “to talk about Camp... is to betray it.”³²¹ Keeping in mind this definition resistance and the factors that *camp* is not static³²² and can be stretched to be both politically radical³²³ and rejected as obsolete,³²⁴ the key elements of camp can be, somewhat vaguely, rehashed as “irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humor”,³²⁵ which are “expressed or created ... by a gay sensibility.”³²⁶ Camp is considered crucial to the reception (or rather “gay negotiational reading practices”)³²⁷ of whole “genres that are popular with queer audiences even when there are no ostensibly gay characters (classic melodrama, the buddy film, the musical)”,³²⁸ and “is often associated with gay men’s idolization (and imitation) of classical Hollywood stars whose acting styles were rather melodramatic”³²⁹ - while the decision of what is considered camp is at the same time individual by the spectator, as Dyer says: “camp is far more a question of how you respond to things rather than qualities actually inherent in those things.”³³⁰ A landmark example of the personal queer reception, meeting a widespread camp appropriation,³³¹ is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), as seen in the notorious essay by Doty titled “‘My Beautiful Wickedness:’ The Wizard of Oz as Lesbian Fantasy.”³³²

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Sontag, “Notes,” 275.

³²² “Our understanding of Camp changes with the evolving history of gay subculture. The conditions and contexts for Camp differ in pre-Stonewall, post-Stonewall, post-AIDS, and contemporary Queer moments.” (Kleinhans, quoted in Davis, “New Queer,” 232.) See also the examination of “camp evolving” in Dyer, *Culture*, 59.

³²³ Necessarily dismissing the notion of the *inferior* (to the paradigmatic heterosexual) *sensibility*.

³²⁴ See Davis, “New Queer,” the sub-chapter ‘Death of Camp;’ and Doty, *Flaming*, 83.

³²⁵ Babuscio, “Camp,” 122.

³²⁶ Ibid., Doty’s summary goes: “Camp’s central interests are taste/style/aesthetics, sexuality, and gender—or, rather, sexuality as related to gender role-playing (via style codes). Camp’s mode is excess and exaggeration. Camp’s tone is a mixture of irony, affection, seriousness, playfulness, and angry laughter.” (Doty, *Flaming*, 82.)

³²⁷ Brett Farmer, Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical, in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 79. In the essay Farmer explores the practices of queer audiences in reading the Hollywood musical as an “excessive text.”

³²⁸ Hanson, “Introduction,” emphasis mine. Similarly, “musicals, horror films, and cartoons all flaunt their lack of realism and their disdain for the ‘normal.’” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 71.)

³²⁹ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 69.

³³⁰ Dyer, *Culture*, 52.

³³¹ “It’s no wonder that gay men have referred to one another as “Friends of Dorothy” for three quarters of a century.” Daniel Reynolds comments on the film, in *The Advocate*’s list where the film scored at rank #23 - “The Top 175 Essential Films of All Time for LGBT Viewers,” *The Advocate*, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2014/06/23/top-175-essential-films-all-time-lgbt-viewers?page=0,1>.

³³² Doty, *Flaming*, 49-78.

A slightly diverse line of queer reading that is not so concerned with excess and *style*³³³ concentrates on queer *subtext* of heterosexual narratives and images in terms of reading relationships and sexuality of characters *against the grain*, including the valid option of such *subtext* even if it exists “only in the eyes of the beholder.”³³⁴ The prominent instances of this kind of queer reading represent reading of homosociality, for example *queering* the dynamics of the central duo (Bing Crosby and Bob Hope) in the popular *Road to...* series of films.³³⁵ Queer reading of characters and pushing their relationship much further is practiced widely also outside academia and mere spectatorship, in the space of writing fan fiction, namely the sub-genre *slash fiction* – as Henry Jenkins explains the basics, “the colorful term, “slash,” refers to the convention of employing a stroke or “slash” to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists.”³³⁶ *Slash* is the queer reading taken into action, disregarding and subverting the compulsory heterosexuality of ‘canon’ and actively rewriting from the perspective and around *queer desire*.

The practice of queer reading, if we accept its premise along with respected academics like Alexander Doty, teenage slash writers hiding under pseudonyms at fanfiction.net and archivesofourown.org and any queer spectators³³⁷ in the audience and allow it to activate its potential, makes the entirety of cinema’s history a queer cinema.

2.2.4 Radically/actually queer film

In the preceding applications that were introduced, queer film’s *queer* denominator received a stretching treatment - from encompassing traditional

³³³ See Sontag, “Notes.”

³³⁴ Doty, *Flaming*.

³³⁵ Cohan, “Queering,”

³³⁶ Henry Jenkins, “Welcome to Bisexuality, Captain Kirk’: Slash and the Fan-Writing Community,” *Textual Poachers*, by Henry Jenkins, (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), Adobe e-book, 192. See Jenkins’s whole essay, which offers a comprehensive historical survey of early slash and scholarly discussion of the theme, interpretation of Eve Sedgwick’s lineage of homosociality interpreted as homoerotic desire and a thorough examination of *slash* in the fan community of the *Star Trek* franchise.

³³⁷ Although not going into a proper inquiry, I would like to mention that the act of spectatorship in itself (regardless of the individuals sexuality or gender) can be considered fundamentally queer. See Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 10; where they posit queer spectatorship as one of the answers to “what is a queer film” and further, Patricia MacCormack’s study, which transposes the very experience of a spectator as queer - Patricia MacCormack, *Cinesexuality* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), Adobe e-book.

homosexual identities to labeling everything (at least potentially) *not straight*. For all that, we should rewind a little and recall the politically charged and radical ethos of queer that has its equivalent in evaluating queer film. Many scholars writing about *queer cinema* point out that a small portion of the films they are covering are actually “‘radical’ [and] politically ‘queer’.”³³⁸

Carrying the term’s political legacy, *queer films* then should be subversive and make a stance against normativity - both in terms of content and depiction of its characters (unlike *Making Love*, where the dynamic of the central couple is a mock appropriation of a clichéd take on heterosexual marriage,³³⁹ and the more fundamental problem of approaching sexual orientation as a binary)³⁴⁰ as well as formally - as Barbara Hammer succinctly puts it: “I don’t think one can make a lesbian film using a patriarchal and heterosexist mode such as the conventional narrative.”³⁴¹ This of course echoes the attitude that Laura Mulvey³⁴² proposes in her notorious 1973/1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”³⁴³ that as the patriarchal dominance of the male gaze is embedded deeply in the very way narrative cinema is formally coded; the only way to break through is to invent a new, liberated film form.

Taken to the extreme, the *queer* in queer film denotes formal criteria. An anecdotal example of application is the 2012 nomination for the Queer Palm in Cannes³⁴⁴ for Leos Carax’s film *Holy Motors* (2012), which does not fit the above listed nominal criteria for accessing queerness apart from a radical approach to form and structure, and a strong, though not formulated as specifically queer, subversive rhetoric.

³³⁸ Perriam, *Spanish Queer*, 4; see also de Lauretis, “Film.”

³³⁹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 186.

³⁴⁰ de Lauretis, “Film.”

³⁴¹ Hammer, “Politics,” 71.

³⁴² Critical approach to queer film carries an acknowledged debt to Mulvey’s seminal essay, while it was, along with the core of 1970’s and 1980’s feminist film theory, criticized profoundly from a queer perspective for being heteronormative. As Hanson sums this up: “Queer theorists have already discovered that the heterocentric and exceedingly rigid structure of the look in Mulvey’s analysis—patriarchal masculinity leering at objectified femininity— writes homosexuality out of existence. How do women desire women in and through film? How do men desire men? Is a lesbian gaze a male gaze in drag?” (Hanson, “Introduction.”) See also de Lauretis, “Film.”

³⁴³ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

³⁴⁴ “The Queer Palm is an independently sponsored prize for selected LGBT-relevant films entered into the Cannes Film Festival.” (Source: “Cannes 2015: Queer Palm Announced with an All-female Jury,” *AwardsWatch.com*, April 15, 2015, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://awardswatch.com/news/cannes-2015-queer-palm-films-announced-with-an-all-female-jury>.)

This radical employment of *queer* in queer film, taken in extremis, can have two divergent outcomes: first, shrinking the area of what queer film is to openly queer works by queer filmmakers that are dissenting to heteronormativity and convention in both content and aesthetics, and second, expanding it to all films that defy the dominant mode of filmmaking.

On the other hand, we could argue that making an openly homosexual film is political enough (especially if made by queer filmmakers (as Dyer³⁴⁵ demands)), because “any characterization is seen as progressive and radical as long as it strengthens a group of people one can designate as oppressed or neglected in some way.”³⁴⁶ In the words of Menel: “By representing defamed desires and allowing audiences an affective engagement with them, queer film is inherently political.”³⁴⁷

Conclusion

The paradigm of *queer cinema* is established by applying the analytical perspective of *queerness* to the diverse body of cinema, cutting across the available geographical, chronological, genre or mode of production segmentations. Early texts of queer criticism and proposals of a queer film history bore a strong activist appeal in lieu of presenting how problematic the treatment of queer and queer-coded characters in fiction film had been. The interest in academia has been on the up-rise since the early 1990’s, intersecting with the entry of queer theory, and the scholarly works range widely in focus and methodology. The common ground they share is the endeavor to critically lay foundation to a discourse of sexual difference in cinema’s history, a discourse that had been historically suppressed. The persistence of more or less overt activism infused in the scholarship on queer cinema needs to be acknowledged. The political dimension of queerness is inherently present in the discourse of the films, the critical and academic reception, as well as the audience’s approach.

The dominant method of attributing queerness to a film is by evaluating the film’s characters. One axis of the evaluation stretches from connoted (implied) queerness to homo- or bisexual sexual orientation of a character confirmed in the diegesis of the

³⁴⁵ Dyer, *Now You See*, Introduction.

³⁴⁶ Hanson, “Introduction.”

³⁴⁷ Menel, *Queer Cinema*, Introduction. See also Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 307-329.

film. The other axis spans from using queerness as a function, usually in an exploitative manner, to a complex treatment of queer characters. The consensus of scholars agrees in the observation that in an overwhelming majority of cases, connotative queerness expands from designating a character's non-normative sexuality to inclusion of traits that are implicitly tied to their sexuality and exploited for either comic or sinister effect. Consequently, it is safe to state that queerness has a long tradition in mainstream imagery of being tied with moral depravity and outright villainy of the fictional characters, signifying danger and denoting sadism, sociopathy, and inclination to murder. Another lineage of queer characters adheres to the trope of the *tragic* queer character, usually impassive and tormented by his or her sexuality, which is either something to overcome or to succumb to, and then face the dooming consequences. The persistent approach is one of *evaluation* of (whether) and how queerness is represented. The key terms are *connotative queerness* versus the pronouncement of *queer desire*.

A different angle of enquiry emphasizes the sexuality of the filmmakers, primarily the directors, and analyzes how their queerness influenced their creative decisions in matters of both content and form. The width of the field covers directors whose homosexuality was not acknowledged during their lifetime (and who most likely would not have identified as queer themselves), as well as those who publicly confirmed their homosexuality and include the subject prominently in their work. The queer authorship angle balances on the axis between affirming minority authorship and the danger of essentialism. An important section of accessing queer cinema is the practice of queer reading, interpreting films from a queer viewpoint regardless of their intended and dominant heteronormative coding. The practice empowers the viewer and claims the legitimacy of the queer perspective. Queer reading informs a body of academic texts, as well as illuminates the position of sexually dissident audiences. It can be transposed as a productive practice that transfers the 'spectator position' to one actively and productively re-writing the (supposedly heterosexual) texts. The last approach is stretched between the attitude that all queer representation is transgressive by default, and the politically as well as aesthetically motivated stance that queer content require queer form and a subversive position, separating queer film from the assimilationist gay/lesbian cinema.

The first two methods of queer film studies provided a basic historical overview, with an undercurrent of linearity and evolution as to establish the landscape of ‘old queer cinema’ – and thus a basis to understanding what was (deemed) *new* about *New Queer Cinema*. The other two offer more specific angles that are entwined with matters of aesthetics, reception and politics, forming a set of tools for further analysis.

"It was on the tip of everyone's tongue,
Tyler and I just gave it a name"
Fight Club

"After Poison and Swoon,
I was dubbed 'the Queen of Queer Cinema,'
an appellation I loathe."
Christine Vachon

3. New Queer Cinema

Following in the footsteps of *queer* and *queer cinema*, *New Queer Cinema* is a controversial and problematic appellation. The previous chapters outlined the spectrum of what the *queer* part of the title can mean and the possibilities of assembling a queer cinema, that also provided a sketch of 'old queer cinema,' against which it is implicitly positioned as 'new.'

The *new queer cinema* that was welcomed, "hailed"³⁴⁸ and "coined"³⁴⁹ as a term by film critic Ruby B. Rich in 1992,³⁵⁰ was basically an assemblage of recent, thus *new*, and LGBT-themed, made by openly gay and lesbian filmmakers, perceived as adhering to the recent theoretical-activist hot paradigm of queer in form and content, thus *queer*, films.³⁵¹ However, it soon became *New Queer Cinema*, capitalized because of its proper name status³⁵² (not to be confused with announcements of post-millennial waves of *new queer film*).³⁵³ Guynn comments on the naming and its

³⁴⁸ JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones, eds., *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), ix.

³⁴⁹ James Morrison, "Still New, Still Queer, Still Cinema?" review of *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron and *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.1 (2006): 135.

³⁵⁰ Ruby B. Rich, "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut," in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, by Ruby B. Rich. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), Kindle edition. Note – I refer to the 'ultimate' version of the article, as it was published in Rich's anthology in its full version (according to Rich). It contains interesting footnotes from the vantage point of twenty years of its re-issue; otherwise it is, apart from a section elaborating on one of the visited festival's, verbatim to the *Sight & Sound* version with insignificant additions.

³⁵¹ See Michele Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); "Nick Davis, "The View from the Shortbus, or All Those Fucking Movies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14.4 (2008): 623-637; Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, ix-xii.

³⁵² See Aaron, "New Queer."

³⁵³ The use of the *new queer* monicker prevails, see for example: Dimitris Papanikolaou, "New queer Greece: thinking identity through Constantine Giannaris's *From the Edge of the City* and Ana Kokkinos's *Head On*," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* Vol. 6 Nr. 3 (2008): 183-196, doi: 10.1386/ncin.6.3.183/1; Vinodh

discursive function : "Rich's invocation of the phrase thus attempted to bring some necessary cohesion to what was, in reality, a fairly amorphous series of very different films that had appeared, to much critical acclaim, at the turn of the 1990s."³⁵⁴

Rich's 'invocation' and the seminal article lauding the title "New Queer Cinema," represent the inception point of New Queer Cinema as New Queer Cinema - and the commissioned 2000 follow-up, "A Queer and Present Danger," subtitled "The Death of New Queer Cinema?"³⁵⁵ declares it dead. As Rich's texts are universally taken as the anchors of understanding New Queer Cinema (even the harshest critics and detractors of 'New Queer Cinema according to Ruby Rich' use her texts as points of departure, thus legitimizing their status), the following two sub-sections summarize the two respective articles, providing commentary and a larger context. The third section provides a succinct overview of the key New Queer Cinema filmmakers' (as singled out by Rich a revised by successive critical reflections) subsequent career paths, and sketches out the possible expansions of what New Queer Cinema is. The concluding part sums up the possible approaches to New Queer Cinema from the critical vantage point of twenty-plus years later and lays out the one selected in this thesis.

3.1 The birth of New Queer Cinema

"New Queer Cinema" was the new title for the September 1992 *Sight & Sound* reprint³⁵⁶ of Rich's article, which was originally published as "A Queer Sensation" in *The Village Voice* on March 24, 1992. Rich recalls the update in the title so:

The phrase originated in a conversation I had with Philip Dodd, then the editor in chief [of *Sight & Sound*], about how I viewed developments since the *Voice* piece

Venkatesh, "Outing Javier Fuentes-León's *Contracorriente* and the case for a New Queer Cinema in Latin America," *Journal of Popular Roman Studies* 4.1 (2014): 1-18, <http://jprstudies.org/2014/02/outing-javier-fuentes-leons-contracorriente-and-the-case-for-a-new-queer-cinema-in-latin-america> by vinodh-venkatesh; Ben Walters, "New-wave queer cinema: 'Gay experience in all its complexity,'" *The Guardian*, October 4, 2012, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/oct/04/new-wave-gay-cinema>. Ruby Rich says in 2013 that the new New Queer Cinema of our time is trans* themed cinema. (Rich, *Director's Cut*, Conclusion.) Davis also comments on the "continued influence of the "New Queer" locution." (Davis, *Desiring-Image*, Notes.)

³⁵⁴ Guynn, "Queer."

³⁵⁵ Rich, "Queer Danger."

³⁵⁶ Rich, "New Queer."

had been published. It is to that conversation that I owe the serendipity of my term's immortalisation as a title and, later, movement.³⁵⁷

The term, as Rich recognizes, eventually carried more weight than the actual text itself - as the short-hand for the 'epistemic shift'³⁵⁸ brought on by the films and their critical reception; and at the same time, the critical voices that protested the designation put more weight on it than what the original ambition and content of Rich's piece was, as the New Queer Cinema appellation quickly took on a life of its own.

The text is structured as Rich's diary of a festival tour, complete with sub-headings identifying the place and time as 'datelines.' For the most part it accounts for a coverage of film festivals she attended between 1991 and 1992 in the form of a first-hand report. She considers the films that were highlighted at the festivals, the accompanying festival events and the debates that had sparked and flourished there, both officially and backstage. She begins with the New Directors / New Films Festival premiering four new "queer"³⁵⁹ films, returns to the *Barbed Wired Kisses* panel in Sundance 1992³⁶⁰ where she was one of the panelists, goes back to cover the 1991 Toronto International Film Festival (then named Toronto Festival of Festivals) and Amsterdam Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and comes full circle back to Sundance. In the introductory part and the conclusion, as well as scattered throughout these 'festival postcards,' she is posing questions, predictions for the future, and inductive remarks towards a complex picture of what she identifies as a *watershed moment*.³⁶¹

She devotes a big part of the text to Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), recalls Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991), Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) and Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991), introduces Christopher Münch's *Hours and Times* (1991) as well as the short by Laurie Lynd *R.S.V.P.* (1992), comments on Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), inserting updates about the current state of work for Isaac Julien, John Greyson and Gregg Araki, singling out *The Living End* (1992) and highlighting its ties to *Swoon*. Also present in the panorama are, rather as passing

³⁵⁷ Rich, "New Queer," footnote.

³⁵⁸ Guynn, "Queer."

³⁵⁹ Ibid., quotation marks by Rich.

³⁶⁰ See "Barbed-Wire Kisses: Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Cinema," Sunday Institute, accessed May 5, <http://history.sundance.org/panels/93>.

³⁶¹ Rich, "New Queer."

remarks, Su Friedrich and Monika Treut, along the up-and-coming women directors with mostly short and rather more experimental works, like the two Cecílias - Dougherty and Barriga - and Cheryl Dunye. The *watershed moment* Rich identifies and from which the title stems, in its slightly pompous marking of a new era, is the emergence of these films and filmmakers along with the spotlight they took at festivals and in the press and the intra-generational meeting of Derek Jarman and 18-year-old video-maker Sadie Benning at the Sundance panel, which, according to Rich, illustrates how the world has changed - an optimistic rhetoric that both opens and concludes the article.

There are several, intertwined but essentially separate, notions that are crucial to both Rich's text and the later reflection of New Queer Cinema. As the free form of personal diary entries imply, Rich's "arguments for a new queer cinema"³⁶² are rather scattered across the coverage, being more impressions of the moment than a thoroughly built and argued line of reasoning. For clarity, the key points are broken down and reconstructed, with a commentary:

Firstly, the major point of the *new era* is the breakthrough of the unprecedented multiplicity of queer-themed films by openly queer filmmakers into major *straight* festivals,³⁶³ gaining critical acclaim and thus wide-spread attention, Rich points out the importance that the queer films are programmed and awarded at big-name festivals via the persona of Derek Jarman:

Derek Jarman, the grand old man in his fourth decade of queer activity beamed. He'd never been on a panel of queers at a mainstream festival. Try to imagine the scene in Park City. Robert Redford holds a press conference and is asked, on camera, why there are all these gay films at his festival. Redford finesses: it is all part of the spectrum of independent films that Sundance is meant to serve. ... He could just as easily have said: these are simply the best films being made.³⁶⁴

The panel Rich refers to was held a year after two films won major prizes at the festival - Todd Haynes' *Poison* and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*.³⁶⁵ Rich does

³⁶² Perex of the article as it appeared in *Sight & Sound*.

³⁶³ *Straight* used as opposed to specialized film festivals devoted to programming gay and lesbian content, like Frameline, which Rich also mentions, then under the name San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

³⁶⁴ Rich, "New Queer."

³⁶⁵ The films were awarded the Grand Jury Prize Documentary and Grand Jury Prize Dramatic, respectively; see "1991 Sundance Film Festival," Sunday Institute, accessed May 5, <http://history.sundance.org/events/26>.

not omit to warn that along the (deserved) praise and attention the films and filmmakers received, there comes a shift in production, distribution and reception for the works - she cautions against what might happen after, as she puts it, "the ghetto goes mainstream",³⁶⁶ (the slightly scornful sentiment that shows itself in Rich's attitude towards the casting choices of two Hollywood's rising stars, Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix, in *My Own Private Idaho* becomes full-blown rebuttal of mainstream mingling eight years later in the essay written as a follow-up.)³⁶⁷ The implications of this point invoke the principal division in the old queer cinema between mainstream, dominantly 'straight,' cinema and the relative obscurity of the (radically) queer underground and avant-garde films, the direct descendants of which NQC films are.³⁶⁸

Rich stresses the importance of the fact that these queer films are made by openly queer filmmakers. This echoes the importance of *minority authorship*, Dyer's emphasis on the sexuality of the filmmaker making queer-themed films and the perspective, essentialist but necessary, of recognizing queer voices *as* queer - out of the closet.

Meanwhile, within the diverse group of queer filmmaker, there is not a parity of how the queer voices are heard - Rich notes how most of the critical (and commercial) attention is centred on white homosexual men (Derek Jarman, Todd Haynes, Tom Kalin) whose films' protagonists are predominantly white men too. Still, in Rich's text are present the Asian-American Gregg Araki, the black Brit Isaac Julien whose *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) depict a clash of sub-cultures in the 1970's UK with protagonists of color and *Looking for Langston* (1989), a portrayal of an icon of the Harlem Resistance, and there are lesbian filmmakers who crossover the issues of a "dyke-identity" with racial themes - such as African-American Cheryl Dunye who went on to make *Watermelon Woman* (1996) a few years later.³⁶⁹ And the crucial documentary *Paris is Burning* is the portrait of the mainly black and Hispanic drag scene in New York City. Rich mentions these works prominently, and the

³⁶⁶ Rich, "New Queer."

³⁶⁷ Rich, "Queer Danger."

³⁶⁸ See Mennel, *Queer*, chap. 4; Pidduck, "After 1980." Loist links also pornography, in its sexual explicitness as a precursor of NQC (Loist, "New Queer," 26.)

³⁶⁹ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

original full version of her article³⁷⁰ gives even more space to experimental short films by women filmmakers. However, the racial and gender discrepancies remain the major point of critical backlash against the article: instantly, in the filmmaker reactions that were published in *Sight & Sound* next to Rich's article,³⁷¹ with Pratibha Parmar stating that "queer cinema has been going on for decades, although not in its current manifestation— that is, a marketable, collective commodity produced by white gay men in the U.S.,"³⁷² as well as in the ongoing critical reflection of the NQC phenomena, condemning the neglect of women filmmakers and the *whiteness* of NQC.³⁷³ In the interest of fairness, Rich *does* foreshadow this backlash in the article itself, asking, "but will lesbians ever get the attention for their work that men get for theirs? Will queers of color ever get equal time?"³⁷⁴ - thus the (grounded) critique of a lack of real diversity and disparate attention generated by the films is in fact aimed rather at the wider implications of NQC as a paradigm than at the article which ignited it. At the same time, while the objections regarding inclusivity and attention are valid, we have to note that unlike the *white boys'* new queer films, the works by and about lesbians and people of color, were at the time almost exclusively short to medium length, often shot on video and far more experimental.³⁷⁵ Taking that into regard, Amy Taubin remarks: "As long as that [queer] desire remains exclusively male, however, it's only queer by half."³⁷⁶ Here, we can recall the overlap in de Lauretis and Queer Nation's cautioning, that firstly women, as well as ethnic and social minorities within the queer minority, are being added as an afterthought, and

³⁷⁰ Published in Rich's anthology of essays *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Rich, 2013

³⁷¹ Cherry Smyth, "Queer Questions," interview responses by Derek Jarman, Pratibha Parmar, Isaac Julien and Constantine Giannaris, *Sight & Sound* 2.5 (1992): 34-35.

³⁷² Smyth, "Questions," 35.

³⁷³ See Rich's 2013 note on the article about the backlash she received from Theresa de Lauretis, Jennie Livingston and Su Friedrich. (Rich, "New Queer," footnote.) See also the aptly titled essay - José Esteban Muñoz, "Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.1 (1998): 127-138.

³⁷⁴ Rich, "New Queer."

³⁷⁵ See Aaron, "New Queer; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. Benshoff and Griffin acknowledge "a structural bias in the funding and distribution of New Queer Cinema (one that mirrors a similar bias in dominant American filmmaking). In fact, New Queer works by women and people of color were much more likely to be shorter than feature length or shot on video and therefore less likely to earn theatrical releases." (Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 237.) On an even stronger note: "At first glance, the new queer cinema might seem to be primarily a 'bad boy' Anglo-American phenomenon. The lesbian work that coincided with this first wave was primarily short, experimental video." (Pidduck, "After 1980.")

³⁷⁶ Amy Taubin, "Beyond the Sons of Scorcese," *Sight & Sound* 2.5 (1992): 37.

the central role is of f white gay men in the discourse of both activism and academia, with regard to non-normative sexuality.

Rich also attempts to give collective characteristics of the films: "a flock of films that were doing something new, re-negotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image."³⁷⁷ At the same time, she recognises the inherent divergence and essential difference inside the group of films she singles out:

Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet there are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitely breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them.³⁷⁸

Rich simultaneously acknowledges the inherent heterogeneity and seeks to put down what these films *do* have in common, but, in the space of the article, has to resort to often vaguely superficial and contradictory epithets. However, we can take from her commentary that the films in question share a political and aesthetic awareness as well as an edge in bringing it on the screen. "Homo Pomo" is another neologism invented by Rich, in an attempt to cover the variety of the films she saw at these festivals, marking both the importance of pronounced homosexuality (in the films and of the filmmakers themselves) as well as the postmodern paradigm strongly present at the time, intersected with queer theory, in Rich's pertinent highlighting of the role of dealing with history, identity and cinematic conventions. This hints back to the inseparability of queer content and queer form of the 'actually' queer films.

Given the further importance of the label, and the problematic status of what New Queer Cinema entails, discussed in the next paragraphs, it is worth noting that also Rich uses *Queer New Wave* towards the end of her article, as a logical alternative to *New Queer Cinema*.

³⁷⁷ Rich, "New Queer."

³⁷⁸ Rich, "New Queer."

The *New Queer Cinema* (I will be using NQC further on) label caught on and has since been used by scholars³⁷⁹ as well as outside academia,³⁸⁰ with Rich's article as a crucial point of reference;³⁸¹ while Rich remains a called upon authority on the subject.³⁸² NQC is often defined as *movement*³⁸³ (or 'movement' with a disclaimer), sometimes even as a "particularly slippery '*genre*'"³⁸⁴ (quotation marks around *genre* might or might not be present)³⁸⁵ or, what I deem most accurate, a *wave*.³⁸⁶ Rich's article, apart from being part of any introduction of NQC,³⁸⁷ is even cast as NQC's *manifesto*³⁸⁸ - which brings us to the heart of the slippery nature of NQC: unlike for example Dogme95,³⁸⁹ NQC was a heterogenous group of individual filmmakers whose films broke out at the same time and which shared several common denominators - there was no pronounced shared agenda. There is a parallel to the distinction pointed out in section 1. between being labelled gay from the outsider's perspective and self-identifying as queer, as well as with other famous chapters in film history when a new generation of filmmakers is covered by a blanket term that is coined by critics and/or film scholars, like *La Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave) in France

³⁷⁹ See Aaron, "New Queer;" Morrison, "Still New;" Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, ix-xii.

³⁸⁰ For an example of the continual function of the denomination and grouping these films together, see the 2012 NQC retrospective at the BAMcinématek in New York City - "Born in Flames: New Queer Cinema," BAM, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.bam.org/film/2012-born-in-flames-new-queer-cinema>.

³⁸¹ The 1992 article is reprinted in both the important anthologies - Michele Aaron, ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) and Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, eds., *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). See also Guynn, "Queer;" Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, ix-xii; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4 as well as Pidduck, "After 1980."

³⁸² After *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* was published, as series of lectures and panels headed by Rich followed, on academic soil (see "Foundational Moments of New Queer Cinema with B. Ruby Rich," Columbia University event page, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://arts.columbia.edu/events/fall-2013/new-queer-cinema>) and at festivals (see the website of the conference organized by the Hamburg Lesbian and Gay Film Festival - <http://queerfilmculture.org/> at their). Rich is an active critic as well as Professor of Film and Digital Media at the University of California Santa Cruz - see http://film.ucsc.edu/faculty/b_ruby_rich).

³⁸³ Daniel Mudie Cunningham and Emma Crimmings, "New Queer Gear," *Inside film* (2000): 26; Davis, *Desiring-Image*, Notes.

³⁸⁴ Guynn, "Queer."

³⁸⁵ See Davis, "View."

³⁸⁶ Aaron, "New Queer."

³⁸⁷ See note #27

³⁸⁸ In the 2013 footnote to the article Rich refers to it as "manifesto", while in the JumpCut review of Rich's book, Roxanne Samer titles Rich's article manifesto - without the quotation marks. (Roxanne Samer, "New Queer Cinema," review of *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, by Ruby B. Rich, *Jump Cut* 55 (2013), accessed April 8, 2015, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/SamerNewQueerRev/index.html>.)

³⁸⁹ With an *actual* manifesto - see Richard Kelly, *The Name of this Book is Dogme95* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 4-6, 226-228.

or New Hollywood in the US. In the case of NQC it is important to stress this point - the title and the igniting article which did play a crucial role³⁹⁰ in the reflection along with the joint discourse supported by the continued presence of Ruby B. Rich do not make NQC a self-defined movement with a pronounced collective agenda of the filmmakers that are generally marked as part of it.

Directly connected to that is the precarious question of who and what is (and should be) included as part of the NQC wave:³⁹¹ At its core are those “surprise hits of Sundance 1991 and 1992”³⁹² *Paris is Burning*, *Poison* and *Swoon*, tied together with *Edward II.*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Hours and Times* (1991) and *The Living End*, as well as *Looking for Langston* and *Young Soul Rebels*, Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1989),³⁹³ works by John Greyson, especially *Urinal* (1989) and *Zero Patience* (1993), and the short videos Cecilia Barriga’s *Meeting of Two Queens* (1991)³⁹⁴ and Laurie Lynd’s *R.S.V.P.* Included in the NQC critical overviews, rather as an afterthought, are late 1980’s and early 1990’s films by Sadie Benning³⁹⁵ (*Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *Jollies* (1990)), Cecilia Dougherty, Su Friedrich³⁹⁶ and Monica Treut (*Virgin Machine* (1989), *My Father Is Coming* (1991)). Two later lesbian feature films are usually added into the ‘core canon,’ most notably³⁹⁷ *Go Fish* (1994)³⁹⁸ and the aforementioned *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).³⁹⁹ This

³⁹⁰ See Guynn, “Queer;” Bronski similarly remarks: “The coinage caught on instantly-it pinned down a zeitgeist and made immediate sense - and the term has become not only an integral historical marker but also a cultural and political barometer against which successive films and political trends can be measured.” (Bronski, 2013)

³⁹¹ The list presents the overlapping compromise as laid out in Aaron, “New Queer;” Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Pidduck, “After 1980.”

³⁹² Aaron, “New Queer,” 3.

³⁹³ See the sub-chapter on the film in Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 237-239.

³⁹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the film, see Mary Desjardins, “Meeting two queens. Feminist film-making, identity politics, and the melodramatic fantasy,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. XLVIII Nr. 3 (1995): 26-33, accessed via the FIAF database.

³⁹⁵ See the section on Benning in Anat Pick, “New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Film,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 110-113.

³⁹⁶ See Andrea Weiss, “Transgressive Cinema: Lesbian Independent Film,” in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Harry M. Benschhoff and Sean Griffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 43-52.

³⁹⁷ See sub-section “New Queer Lesbians” in Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 240-242; also Pidduck, “After 1980.”

³⁹⁸ The film was also produced by Christine Vachon, producer of both *Swoon* and *Poison*, who commented, fittingly in the context of the gay versus lesbian outrage regarding NQC: “When I took on the lesbian love story *Go Fish*, some people suggested it was a strategy to prove that my tastes extended beyond boy movies. You can never win.” (Christine Vachon and David Edelstein, *Shooting to Kill: How an Independent Producer Blasts Through the Barriers to Make Movies that Matter*. New York: Harper Collins, 2013. Kindle edition.)

comprised list, however, should be taken with a grain of salt due to the aforementioned discrepancy in attention the films and filmmakers received -the recognition and continued critical interest profoundly affecting the resultant composite picture of New Queer Cinema: The greatest importance being attached to *Paris Is Burning*, *Swoon* and *Edward II*. and most of all to *Poison*, *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho* that launched the careers⁴⁰⁰ of Todd Haynes, Gregg Araki and Gus Van Sant, along with the producer of both *Swoon* and *Poison*, Christine Vachon.⁴⁰¹ While the early lesbian⁴⁰² and people of color contributions , if included in the discussion at all, are often present just as a makeweight.⁴⁰³ The lesbian part of queer in NQC can also argued to be outlined as a continuous and *separate* alternative line.⁴⁰⁴

The fractures of the ‘canon’ heterogeneity extend the feature/short, gay/lesbian, white/color and mainstream/underground⁴⁰⁵ binaries: Most of the films listed are either debuts or works of the earliest stages of the filmmakers’ careers, while both Derek Jarman and Su Friedrich had decades of active filmmaking and extensive filmographies (mostly of shorts in Friedrich’s case) behind them by 1992. The films are dominantly narrative fiction films (pointedly the feature-length ones, some of the shorts mixing documentary elements into combined essay-films), but *Paris Is Burning* is a documentary.

Besides this heterogeneity, there are the unifying aspects, as they were reflected upon in the critical reception of NQC:

Firstly, the implicit factual information needs to be stated: NQC is situated in a restricted temporal (early 1990’s) and geographical (the United States and by extension United Kingdom and Canada, while the centre was the US)⁴⁰⁶ space. There

³⁹⁹ Again, see sub-section “New Queer Lesbians” in Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 240-242; also Pidduck, “After 1980.”

⁴⁰⁰ Aaron, “New Queer,” 8.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.; see also Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 240-242.

⁴⁰² See Pick, “New Queer.”

⁴⁰³ See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴⁰⁴ See Pick, “New Queer.”

⁴⁰⁵ In the exaggerated sense of gaining the possibility of theatrical distribution and wider exposure in the mainstream press and with audiences versus the restricted distribution possibilities of short experimental works.

⁴⁰⁶ See Aaron, “New Queer;” Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. Monika Treut is German, however both *Virgin Machine* and *My Father Is Coming* are set in the U.S.

are further extensions of this placement by arguing additions to the ‘canon’ (see the sub-section 3.3), but the original NQC films were mostly American (and secondly British and Canadian) productions and the epicentre of the recognition of the films was at U.S. festivals, in Sundance and New York.

The ‘new-ness’ of NQC, questioned by Pratihba Parmar, opens the question of lineage of the old queer cinema predecessors and NQC’s relationship to it. Already mentioned was the continuity of NQC in relation to the queer underground films. A directly pronounced, in many of the films and by the filmmakers, connection leads to the works of European queer auteurs, especially Pasolini and Fassbinder,⁴⁰⁷ and in a full-circle to Derek Jarman. There is also the convoluted interrelation to the gay and lesbian themed feature films of the late 1980’s - which are understood both as important immediate precursors to depictions of queerness in mainstream films,⁴⁰⁸ as well as representatives of “the normalising discourse about gays and lesbians in Hollywood films,”⁴⁰⁹ against which NQC films are set.

NQC’s original films of the early 1990’s are also deep-seated in the era’s wider aesthetic, social and academic paradigms of postmodernism,⁴¹⁰ radical queer activism (positioned against traditional gay and lesbian *normative* activism)⁴¹¹ and queer theory⁴¹² itself.

The crucial paradigm of NQC is the AIDS epidemic. As Monica B. Pearl writes, “New Queer Cinema emerged from the AIDS crisis through AIDS activism,”⁴¹³ and

⁴⁰⁷ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap.4.

⁴⁰⁸ For all their ‘blandness’ and ‘sanitizing’ tendencies, the American films *Desert Hearts*, *Torch Song Trilogy* and a few similar others are understood as laying the “groundwork” for NQC. (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 196.) Coming from the UK, Stephen Frears’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) would be a good example of the bolder and queerer direct predecessors of NQC.

⁴⁰⁹ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 3.

⁴¹⁰ Aaron, “New Queer,” 5; for a deeper exploration see also Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; and Pidduck, “After 1980.”

⁴¹¹ Aaron, “New Queer,” 6; “In order to understand NQC fully, one must understand ‘queer’ as critical intervention, cultural product and political strategy - and NQC as an art-full manifestation of the overlap between the three.” (Ibid.)

⁴¹² Guynn, “Queer;” Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. Similarly, Morrison comments that “New Queer Cinema was not the first film movement to find inspiration in theory, but, drawing on a particularly vehement strain of social constructionism, it was the first to make questions of sexual identity its defining influence, and probably for that reason it existed from the start in a relation to dominant culture more fraught than that of most vanguard movements.” (Morrison, “Still New,” 136.)

⁴¹³ Monica B. Pearl, “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 25.

Pearl’s essay explores the context and presence of AIDS in the NQC films in depth.

the underlying theme as well as urgency of the raging ‘plague’ is crucial both to the films branded NQC as well as their critical reception both at the time⁴¹⁴ and in retrospect.⁴¹⁵ NQC was rooted in AIDS activism directly - the activist video works⁴¹⁶ of the late 1980’s are a forthright precursor to many of the films and the core of NQC (male) directors was significantly involved in the activist collectives and making short activist videos, most notably John Greyson,⁴¹⁷ Tom Kalin⁴¹⁸ and of course Derek Jarman.⁴¹⁹ Aaron strongly states that “NQC cannot be removed from the context of AIDS”⁴²⁰ and both her and Pearl tie the films (those made by male directors, Aaron also including *Paris*) together, as being about AIDS explicitly or implicitly and sharing a common strategy of AIDS-based relation to death, in the universal “defiance” of their characters,⁴²¹ and in the film’s structuring of time and its protagonists’ relation to it.⁴²²

To sum up, keeping the discrepancies in mind, the body of NQC films fuelled by the spotlight and rhetoric of a *watershed moment* created an implicit expectation of further continuity of the trend, combining the politically radical queerness and the further inclusivity of it in the mainstream system, an implicit hope of Hollywood’s embracing the radical queer filmmaking.⁴²³

⁴¹⁴ See the seminal essay - José Arroyo, “Death, Desire and Identity: The Political Unconscious of New Queer Cinema,” in *Activating Theory*, eds. Joseph Wilson and Angelia R. Wilson (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 70-96.

⁴¹⁵ Aaron writes about the NQC films that they “in many ways defy death. ... But the key way in which death is defied is in terms of AIDS.” (Aaron, “New Queer,” 5) Similarly: “Like the queer political movement of the time, these films were energetic, irreverent and full of fun, but also deadly serious. How could they not be, when death and dying were a daily part of the gay experience? Though few films spoke of Aids [sic] directly, they were all shaped by it.” (Burston, “In from the cold.”)

⁴¹⁶ See the sub-section “AIDS Activist Video” in Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 211-215; as well as “Activist/art video” in Pidduck, “After 1980” for an overview.

⁴¹⁷ See the section on Greyson in Pidduck, “After 1980.”

⁴¹⁸ See the thorough interview with Kalin - Tom Kalin, “ACT UP Oral History Project - Interview nr. 042,” interview by Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, February 4, 2004, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/kalin.pdf>.

⁴¹⁹ Jarman was also an active member of OutRage, a radical queer British group similar to U.S. Queer Nation. See Jim Ellis, “Queer Period. Derek Jarman’s Renaissance,” in *Out Takes. Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.

⁴²⁰ Aaron, “New Queer,” 6.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Pick, “AIDS.”

⁴²³ Summed up by Aaron: “Perhaps the most irreparable charge of charges against NQC is that the promise indicated by the films of the early 1990’s was never fully realised. Despite the initial furore on the Indie scene, and

3.2 The Obituary

Eight years after the seminal article celebrating how the world (and with it film) is changing, *Sight and Sound* commissioned a follow-up, which Ruby Rich wrote and titled "A Queer and Present Danger",⁴²⁴ the extended title of which, not included in the 2000 publication, but implicitly present in the text, lauds "A Queer and Present Danger. The Death of New Queer Cinema?"⁴²⁵ There, Rich takes a broad look at the then scenery of queer-themed film and, rather controversially, scans it for fidelity to the New Queer Cinema legacy as she sees it. The three films she primarily addresses are *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Being John Malkovich* (all 1999), but also includes *Gods and Monsters* (1998), *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), *Happy Together* (1997) and *High Art* (1998). The picture she paints is not pleasant, and the only film deemed to be a true successor to NQC is, rather surprisingly, *Being John Malkovich*. Overall, she decrees New Queer Cinema dead, as pointed out by the sub-title added to the original article. Rich writes: "...when it's all over, there's never an adequate reason for why it had to end so soon. So it was with New Queer Cinema and its short sweet climb from radical to niche market."⁴²⁶

There are two problems with Rich's argumentation here that directly contradict her 1992 text: First, the unsubstantiated distaste for "flirting with the enemy," whom Rich vaguely see in the perceived Hollywood mainstream and "A-list" actors. She writes "In the old days of NQC, films and videos tended to be filled with friends or lovers of the director or the occasional sympathetic actor who wanted to help put the picture over. Now it's turned out that starring in an LGBT film can be good for one's career!"⁴²⁷ This attitude was present already in her 1992 article, problematising the involvement of actors Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*. But, one of the key points in her own *New Queer Wave* evaluation was the breakthrough from the margins of distribution channels for experimental work

the dramatic increase in the production of, and audience for, queer films during the 1990's, a new *and enduring* sector of radical work failed to materialise." (Aaron, "New Queer," 8; emphasis by the author.) Similar sentiment, from a vantage point, is expressed also in Morrison, "View;" Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*; Davis, "View;" Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, ix-xii.

⁴²⁴ Rich, "Queer Danger."

⁴²⁵ The full title – see *ibid.*, footnote.

⁴²⁶ Rich, "Queer Danger."

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

and/or gay & lesbian festivals into the general cinema spotlight. Second, the hard and unforgiving imposition of New Queer Cinema as a firm *category* on the films she reflects upon. She writes about a "film that would seem most fit to qualify for category inclusion"⁴²⁸ and asks "Is either one a New Queer Cinema product?"⁴²⁹ while ignoring both her own original statement that there is no inner coherence to the New Queer Cinema body of films as well as the fact that the filmmakers themselves were mostly strongly disapproving⁴³⁰ of the whole package-deal Rich put on them with her 1992 article.

James Morrison mockingly calls Rich's 2000 essay a "cranky elegy"⁴³¹ and Nick Davis accurately points out that

Rich is often misread as delimiting a category instead of heralding an abruptly widening horizon, respondents often forget that she always described the aims, templates, and political reach of queer cinema as unfixed, uneven, and purposely heterogeneous. Unfortunately, Rich herself narrowed the breadth of her earlier essays and added pessimistic fuel to the would-be funeral pyre of queer cinema with her article 'Queer and Present Danger.'⁴³²

As Rich's writing is inseparably tied to NQC, her two essays from 1992 and 2000 are usually quoted as the bounds defining the scope of NQC. However, her own usage of the term cannot be taken canonically, especially in the claim of *NQC* as "category" and "movement" for something that never actually was a category or self-proclaimed movement to begin with. It is understandable that Rich keeps coming back to the spark she herself started by providing an umbrella label - but omitting the inherently problematic and accidental nature of the label she gave to *something in the air* (or rather, on the screens) turns the characteristic fluidity into a rigid scheme.

There are two more general issues with Rich's writing that need to be addressed at this point, as her texts, for all the criticism, do form the primary paradigm for accessing New Queer Cinema. (It is important to note that both are addressed by Rich herself.)

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ See Moran, "Araki." 1996; Vachon and Edelstein, *Shooting*; Smyth, "Questions." Both Todd Haynes and Tom Kalin recalled their initial discomfort with being hailed under the NQC umbrella. (Todd Haynes, interview with the author, Prague, November 13, 2010; Tom Kalin, interview with the author, Prague, November 14, 2011.)

⁴³¹ Morrison, "View," 136.

⁴³² Davis, "View," 636.

Firstly, while critically reporting and contextualizing the films, events and socio-economical and cultural trends, Rich is always writing very much from the perspective of a concerned insider. She openly admits and even reflects it but her personal involvement with the subject goes as far as to warp her perspective. She recalls the ‘good old days’ she is missing, over-imposes her reception of a film in favor of her experience as a singular lesbian audience member over the critique/analysis and goes into a self-reporting psychoanalysis of sorts while figuring out her disappointment over *Milk* (2008).⁴³³ Rich in her texts is often, more importantly, a first-hand witness (and an invaluable one) than a critic and/or scholar. She openly supports this position with the overall style of her essays - already the 1992 article was framed as a personal diary from a festival tour. Secondly, in a related matter, Rich's texts are written at the moment. As she herself, sometimes almost apologetically, points out - a lot of what she is reflecting on can be wholly understood only in retrospect. That said, Rich's writing is quick and insightful in naming trends as they are just emerging and some of her passing remarks point to questions that are raised over and over again, taking on new weight in critical thinking about queer cinema up to this day.

Thus, we can acknowledge, without Rich's jeer, that NQC, strictly speaking, was more of a *moment* than movement⁴³⁴ (keeping in mind that the ‘movement’ characteristic is problematic, verging on absurd, as shown in section 3.2), so the NQC canon ‘envelope’ contains the films listed in the previous section and that was the end of it. But it does not necessarily mean that the moment tragically ended and NQC is a brief, closed chapter of (queer) cinema's history- instead we can assume the position Nick Davis proposes above and take the moment as the origin point of a *widening horizon*.

⁴³³ Ruby B. Rich, “Got Milk? Gus Van Sant’s Encounter with History,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, by Ruby B. Rich (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), Kindle edition.

⁴³⁴ The original phrasing is Rich, “Queer Danger;” the “New Queer Cinema moment” is also used by Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; and Hart in his monograph on Araki - Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *Images for a Generation Doomed: The Films and Career of Gregg Araki* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), Kindle edition, chap. 1.

3.3 Expanding the horizon

The first trace of this widening of what NQC entails follows the filmmakers who were singled out as the “vanguard.”⁴³⁵ Barbara Mennel writes pointedly in her chapter on NQC: “For a significant number of filmmakers... the making of their first films coincided with ‘the moment’ of New Queer Cinema. Even though this was not the case for all the filmmakers whose films fit the political and aesthetic characteristic of New Queer Cinema, it nevertheless created a perception of a new generation.”⁴³⁶ The further careers of filmmakers of this ‘new generation’ took very differing paths and the following text provides a sketch of the directions, as it is illustrative to the further fracturing of any attempt at a coherent NQC narrative: Jennie Livingston did not make another feature film in the quarter century since *Paris*, just two short films, one of which (*Who’s the Top?*, 2005) was intended as a feature when the project started in 1994 but was unable to raise enough funds.⁴³⁷ Her Kickstarter funded, personal documentary *Earth Camp One* is currently stated to be in post-production.⁴³⁸ Briton Isaac Julien, whose poetic essay-film *Looking for Langston* and the critically,⁴³⁹ as well as in its distribution release,⁴⁴⁰ successful feature *Young Soul Rebels*, both dealt with the black male gay experience, and he continues to explore these themes as a visual artist who also employs film and video, but his work is primarily part of the visual arts world (Julien was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2001),⁴⁴¹ occasionally combined with documentary filmmaking, notably his theatrically released 2008 biographical documentary of Derek Jarman titled simply *Derek*. Jarman died in 1994 of AIDS-related complications, and worked till his death, making the self-reflective autobiographical opus *Wittgenstein*, released in 1993 and the experimental film *Blue* (1993), which consists of the voice-over narration by

⁴³⁵ Gynn, “Queer.”

⁴³⁶ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴³⁷ Eugene Hernandez, “5 Questions for Jennie Livingston, Director of ‘Paris Is Burning’ and ‘Who’s The Top?’” *Indiewire*, August 6, 2015, accessed May 3, 2015, http://www.indiewire.com/article/5_questions_for_jennie_livingston_director_of_paris_is_burning_and_who_s_the.

⁴³⁸ “Earth Camp One,” Kickstarter, last updated February 6, 2015, accessed July 20, 2015, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/802151454/earth-camp-one>. See also the film’s website - <http://chickeneggpics.org/film/earth-camp-one>.

⁴³⁹ Receiving the Semaine de la Critique Prize at the IFF Cannes in 1991.

⁴⁴⁰ Rich, “New Queer.”

⁴⁴¹ See “About Isaac Julien,” Isaac Julian website, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.isaacjulien.com/about>.

Jarman and others over a single shot of blue color, reflecting Jarman's gradual loss of sight.⁴⁴² Marlon Riggs also passed away in 1994, and his documentaries continued on the topic of black homosexuality.⁴⁴³ Tom Kalin made only one feature following *Swoon*, again a reconstruction of a true criminal story though very different in style, the 2006 *Savage Grace*. Kalin worked as executive producer on the lesbian addition to the NQC canon, Rose Troche's *Go Fish*, and had a key, although uncredited, role in the film adaptation of John Cameron Mitchell's queer musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001).⁴⁴⁴ He continues to make short video films, primarily activist pieces meant as video installations, currently in collaboration with the artist Doveman.⁴⁴⁵ Greyson made his feature debut with *Urinal*, in which figures of queer history (the fictional Dorian Gray, painter Frida Kahlo and Sergei Eisenstein among them) rally to resistance against the police raids and closures of venues known as cruising spots. In 1993 *Zero Patience* was released, his musical that challenges the narrative of how the HIV epidemic was spread and interpreted.⁴⁴⁶ Greyson continues to make short films as well as features, which prominently deal with homophobia entangled with exploration of historical events and penal system structures and employ performance techniques in the films (theatre in *Lilies* (1996) and opera in *Fig Trees* (2009)).⁴⁴⁷ Cheryl Dunye, the promising video filmmaker, claimed critical attention with *The Watermelon Woman* a fictional film that stars Dunye as the protagonist Cheryl, who is researching her documentary about a black actress in 1930's Hollywood.⁴⁴⁸ The film is concerned with black lesbian identity as well as with the image of the butch lesbian. Even more layered as a meta-film is her 2010 feature

⁴⁴² Paul Burston, in his overview of NQC, writes: "Jarman died in 1994, leaving behind a body of work that encapsulated everything New Queer Cinema stood for, and a final film, *Blue*, that was literally "lost to vision altogether" - describing as it did his descent into blindness." (Paul Burston. "In from the cold," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2007, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/nov/09/3>).

⁴⁴³ Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 239.

⁴⁴⁴ Kalin recalls that John Cameron Mitchell offered him (at Sundance Festival nonetheless) to direct the film version - he urged him to direct the film himself. Kalin played a role in preparing the film and brought it to Christine Vachon, who produced it. (Kalin, New York.)

⁴⁴⁵ See "An Evening with Tom Kalin and Doveman @MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/film_screenings/14500.

⁴⁴⁶ See the dedicated study of the film, which also provides information on Greyson's further career - Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson, *Zero Patience. A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), Kindle edition.

⁴⁴⁷ The film won the Teddy Award in 2009, see "Fig Trees," Teddy Award, accessed May 3, 2015, http://news.teddyaward.tv/en/video/?a-z=1&select=F&id_film=180.

⁴⁴⁸ See the section on the film in Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. and Pidduck, "After 1980."

The Owls (an anagram for ‘older wiser lesbians’) in which prominent lesbian artists (filmmaker Lisa Gornick, actress Guinevere Turner) star as characters and also themselves, addressing the camera directly and discussing a range of political issues, accompanied by queer theorist Judith Halberstam.⁴⁴⁹

Gregg Araki⁴⁵⁰ and Todd Haynes are the two most prolific of NQC directors, whose films remain identified as part of its continuum⁴⁵¹ (unlike the similarly busy Gus Van Sant,⁴⁵² whose *Mala Noche* (1989) is interpreted both as an early NQC film and an important predecessor).⁴⁵³ Araki⁴⁵⁴ made 5 feature films in the 1990’s, followed by 5 more up to 2014’s *White Bird in a Blizzard*; Haynes⁴⁵⁵ directed three features and the 30 minutes long TV film *Dottie Gets Spanked* in the last 20th century’s decade, then shot *Far From Heaven* (2002), *I’m Not There* (2007) and the HBO mini-series *Mildred Pierce* (2011). Most recently his Patricia Highsmiths adaptation (a story about the relationship of two women, set in the 1950’s) premiered in May 2015 Cannes IFF in the Main Competition under the title *Carol*. The highly anticipated film, starring Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, is co-produced by Killer Films - the production company founded by Christine Vachon (she is now co-president), who despite her contempt for such labels⁴⁵⁶ is dubbed the icon of

⁴⁴⁹ The film also received the Teddy Award following its Berlinale premiere, see Dunye’s director’s note for the film: “The Owls,” *The Owls Movie*, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://www.theowlsmovie.com/about.html>.

⁴⁵⁰ Who at the time insisted on having his name spelled as “gregg araki.” (James M. Moran, “Gregg Araki: Guerrilla Film-Maker for a Queer Generation,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 50 No. 1 (1996): 18-26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213324>.)

⁴⁵¹ See Aaron, “New Queer;” Guynn, “Queer.”

⁴⁵² Van Sant’s career is probably the most difficult to pin down, as “while he has made Hollywood films aimed at broad audiences (films that are mostly devoid of queer content and style), he has also continued to make smaller, independent films (*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003)) that queerly challenge mainstream assumptions about form and content.” (Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 230.) On a similar note: “What Van Sant’s career suggests about the fate of queer filmmaking in the straight mainstream is perhaps just what we already knew: that the mainstream isn’t always so straight, while queer cinema isn’t always as queer as some might wish, or isn’t queer at all in the manner that others might like it to be, and the center and the margins, highly permeable constructs themselves, exist only in constantly shifting relations to one another.” (Morrison, “Still New,” 141.) See also Janet Staiger’s essay on Van Sant’s authorship - Staiger, “Van Sant.”

⁴⁵³ See Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 230 and Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴⁵⁴ See the monograph on Araki – Hart, *Araki*.

⁴⁵⁵ See Julia Leyda’s sections “introduction,” “filmography” and “chronology” in her anthology of interviews with Haynes - Julia Leyda, ed. *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), Kindle edition.

⁴⁵⁶ Caroline Bernière-Gaillac, “The Godmother of Independent Cinema,” *Cine-Fils*, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.cine-fils.com/essays/christine-vachon.html>.

independent film producing, along with the “iconic”⁴⁵⁷ “indie powerhouse”⁴⁵⁸ Killer. Vachon⁴⁵⁹ is a key figure who needs to be mentioned alongside the directors for her involvement as producer (or executive producer) in many of the NQC films and those which came afterwards and are relevant to the topic: she produced all of Todd Haynes's films starting with *Poison*, both Tom Kalin's features, as well as *Go Fish*, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. To add to the scope and continued achievements of Vachon's work, we have to list also Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995), Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998) and *Storytelling* (2001) and the most recent successes *Still Alice* (2014, Academy Award for Julianne Moore) and *Nasty Baby* (2015, included in both Sundance and Berlinale official selection and awarded the Teddy Award at the latter). Vachon as a producer is usually singled out as the most visible driving force and enduring presence of the post-1992 queer cinema in the U.S., but at least two other names deserve a mention - James Schamus⁴⁶⁰ and Marcus Hu.⁴⁶¹

This factual overview focused on the original ‘core’ of NQC filmmakers, following the linear branching of their work past 1992. The proposed possible expansions of what could and should be included in NQC, either as unjustly omitted in the original formulation of the wave or as continuing the (differently defined) NQC legacy, runs along several different axes:

As mentioned in the previous sub-section, *lesbian new queer cinema* is sometimes negotiated as a distinction, stemming from the epistemic shift following the announcement of NQC, and arranged differently by various scholars - for example highlighting the parallel evolution of *avant-garde* and *popular*, as both

⁴⁵⁷ See <http://www.indiewire.com/article/sxsw-the-8-best-things-christine-vachon-said-at-her-keynote-20150317>

⁴⁵⁸ See the description of the event with Vachon – “Christine Vachon Keynote,” SWSX, accessed May 6, 2015, http://schedule.sxsw.com/2015/events/event_FP991693.

⁴⁵⁹ See the profile piece on Vachon “The Godmother of Independent Cinema” (Bernière-Gaillac, “Godmother.”) and the interview with her and her partner (and co-founder of Killer Films) Pamela Koffler at Indiewire - <http://www.indiewire.com/article/sundance-2013-killer-films-christine-vachon-and-pamela-koffler-dish-on-their-sundance-slate-and-discuss-how-the-festival-has-changed>.

⁴⁶⁰ See the announcement for Schamus receiving an achievement award from the Los Angeles LGBT film festival Outfest - “James Schamus to Receive 2014 Outfest Achievement Award,” Outfest, accessed July 17, 2015, <http://www.outfest.org/james-schamus-to-receive-2014-outfest-achievement-award>.

⁴⁶¹ Hu produced Araki's *The Living End* and co-founded the (still active) company Strand Releasing, which is a recognized influential distributor focused on releasing independent, arthouse foreign-language and queer films theatrically in the U.S. See the company's website - <http://strandreleasing.com>.

divergent and intersecting where Monika Treut and Sadie Benning meet the early experiments of Chantal Akerman and Su Friedrich as well as romance-centred films as different as Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* (1998), the sugarcoated *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995) by Maria Maggenti and Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* (1997);⁴⁶² or taking the "lesbians who kill"⁴⁶³ sub-genre represented by films such as *Bound* (1996),⁴⁶⁴ *Sister My Sister* (1994) and *Heavenly Creatures* (1994)⁴⁶⁵ as the new and transgressive lesbian cinema⁴⁶⁶ - while Andrea Weiss reserves the transgressive epitome for Su Friedrich and Barbara Hammer.⁴⁶⁷

Independently to the gay/lesbian proposed division of queer in NQC, the expansion of what are and were NQC films bursts in a multiplicity of possible angles of assembling cinema: *geographically*;⁴⁶⁸ in France - adding Cyril Collard's semi-autobiography *Savage Nights* (1992),⁴⁶⁹ as well as the oeuvre of Patrice Chéreau,⁴⁷⁰ in Spain, embracing Pedro Almodóvar as the local maverick NQC ambassador,⁴⁷¹ in Australia, expanding the anglophone territories, highlighting especially Ana Kokkinos's *Head On* (1997)⁴⁷² and Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994),⁴⁷³ beyond the Western space⁴⁷⁴ with Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* (1997)⁴⁷⁵ and casting Mexican (Julian Hernández)⁴⁷⁶ or Thai

⁴⁶² Pidduck, "New Queer."

⁴⁶³ Aaron, "New Queer," 9.

⁴⁶⁴ See Hanson, "Introduction;" See also Kelly's analysis of the film, which illustrates the transgressive embrace of these films by lesbians asserted by Pidduck (Pidduck, "After 1980."); Kelly writes: "I do not deny that it provides images to titillate heterosexual men, but at the same time I believe that it creates much needed empowering and erotic images for lesbians." (Kelly Kessler, "Bound together: lesbian film that's family fun for everyone," *Film Quarterly* LVI 4 (2003): 13-22, accessed via the FIAF database.)

⁴⁶⁵ See Aaron, "New Queer," 9; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Pidduck, "After 1980;" essay "Art Cinema and Murderous Lesbians" (Smelik, 2004; in Aaron (ed.), 2004, pp. 68-79)

⁴⁶⁶ Pidduck highlights the affirmative acceptance of these films by reading them as transgressive by audiences as well as scholars. (Pidduck, "After 1980.")

⁴⁶⁷ Weiss, "Transgressive."

⁴⁶⁸ As Piddick writes: "If American (and to a lesser extent, British) cultural politics of the 1980s and 1990s have largely set the terms 'queer' and 'new queer cinema', parallel projects have appeared elsewhere." (Pidduck, "After 1980.")

⁴⁶⁹ Pidduck, "After 1980."

⁴⁷⁰ See for example Wood's analysis of *Son frère* (Wood, 2006).

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² See Pidduck, "After 1980;" as well as Jennings-Lominé, 2004

⁴⁷³ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴⁷⁴ See Leung, 2004;

⁴⁷⁵ Kuhn-Westwell, 2012

⁴⁷⁶ Rich, *Director's Cut*, Introduction. See also Venkatesh, "Outing."

(Apichatpong Weerasethakul)⁴⁷⁷ directors as honorable late-coming members of the NQC directors' club); *retroactively* with films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, especially *Querelle* (1982),⁴⁷⁸ and the whole body of work of Derek Jarman, whose first feature *Sebastiane*, premiered in 1976, and to add to the confusion, ticks all the NQC's imaginary required boxes apart from the year it was completed - as do the films of Fassbinder's contemporary Ulrike Ottinger (sadly rarely explored in the context of NQC); also in terms of the timeline *after the year 2000* - adding the above mentioned Hernández and Weerasethakul, arguing how *still new queer*⁴⁷⁹ are the new films of the NQC canon directors and naming their descendants - most notably Lisa Cholodenko, John Cameron Mitchell with *Hedwig*⁴⁸⁰ and *Shortbus* (2011)⁴⁸¹ and Jonathan Caouette's unique autobiographical documentary *Tarnation* (2003), executive produced by Mitchell and Gus Van Sant.⁴⁸²

There are also the contradictory tendencies to purify the NQC's ongoing lineage by proclaiming short experimental works as the true successors of NQC's principles (as understood by scholars making those proclamations);⁴⁸³ and on the other hand, incorporating gay- and lesbian-themed mainstream films (Hollywood and *non-Hollywood*), such as the Julia Roberts-vehicle *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997),⁴⁸⁴ as involved with NQC-like aspirations and following its *legacy*⁴⁸⁵ - this seemingly two-way oppositional directions adhere to the equation of adversarial binaries of mainstream/independent (and underground) paralleling the heteronormative (and assimilationist gay and lesbian)/(radical) queer.⁴⁸⁶ The oppositional binaries are

⁴⁷⁷ Rich, *Director's Cut*, Introduction. See also Rosalind Galt, "Default cinema: queering economic crisis in Argentina and beyond," *Screen* 54:1 (2013): 62.

⁴⁷⁸ Menzel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴⁷⁹ See for example Morrison, "View;" as well as the case studies of Haynes and Araki in Aaron, *New Queer*.

⁴⁸⁰ See Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 12-15

⁴⁸¹ Davis, "View."

⁴⁸² See Foundas's detailed article on the film - Scott Foundas, "What in *Tarnation*," *L.A. Weekly*, October 14, 2014, accessed May 1, 2015.

⁴⁸³ See Julianne, Pidduck. "New Queer Cinema and Experimental Video," In *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 80-97.

⁴⁸⁴ Aaron, "New Queer," 9.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁶ The parallel binaries are implicit in the queer rhetoric; they are similarly pointed out as the basic structures used when applying queer theory to media such as film by McKee, who also reflects the rigidity of the division and the fact that it is "accepted without challenge." (Alan McKee, "Queer Theory," in *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and Philip Simpson (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group), 500.

analytically functional but, in my opinion, reductively strict and should be transgressed - in accordance with the first chief point of NQC as a new wave, shattering the closet of marginality in the shadow of the mainstream. Drawing on Aaron's assessment, Juett and Jones lay out NQC's legacy thus, highlighting and positively acknowledging how queer has gone mainstream:

1. Hollywood now portrays gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters more than ever before, more openly and more centrally, although stereotypes are "revised rather than rejected." At the same time, however, independent "queer experiment" films periodically emerge, focusing on characters exploring multiple—and even shifting—possible sexual orientations.
2. More straight actors are able and willing to take on prominent gay roles, and to achieve success in doing so, while gay actors are slowly but surely gaining wider acceptance in playing straight roles.
3. Scholarship engaged with gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-and- queer film, past and present, in multiple forms and styles, from multiple institutional and cultural sources, has steadily expanded. Queer cinema studies has become commonplace.
4. Expanded visibility of gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-and queer lives, communities, (sub)cultural practices, and social-political struggles has contributed to more frequent, open discussion of issues of identification, sympathy, and indeed commonality and empathy, with "others" seemingly different from one's "self," not only in terms of differences of gender and sexuality, and not only in relation to experience of film spectatorship.⁴⁸⁷

This assessment works primarily in a 'gay liberationist' perspective of representation and mainstreaming; certainly the evolution of how queerness is present in mainstream (and festival circuit not exclusively dedicated to queer content) film over the last twenty years presents a tumultuous and intriguing narrative. However, it is taking the (legitimate) position of examining what happened post-NQC (in the strictly historical sense).

Surveying NQC itself from the quarter-of-a-century later perspective, it can be assessed as a short, closed chapter in (queer) cinema's history, saying that "by many accounts, however, the NQC movement of the 1990s ended nearly as soon as it

⁴⁸⁷ Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, ix-xii.

began."⁴⁸⁸ Here, we employ the temporal and geographical limitations, and a rigid interpretation of Ruby B. Rich's originally given characteristics as gospel, however haphazard and contradictory they are. The other avenue is one of deconstruction. As Amy Villarejo says: Some, including B. Ruby Rich, have called this the "new queer cinema," and others have rightly, I think, been hesitant to celebrate a repertoire of images that are mainly white, highly commodifiable to mainstream audiences, and anchored in rights-based discourses of political activism.⁴⁸⁹ The inherent heterogeneity and problematic characteristic of a *movement* can, argued further, dismiss NQC as a bubble that was actually just a journalistic figure of speech.

The third option, and the one I choose to pursue in this thesis, is to take NQC as a "widening horizon"⁴⁹⁰ rooted in "films which set a precedent."⁴⁹¹ Thus, to explore closely the original 'canon' (with a disclaimer of possible expansions) of NQC films from the perspective of their *queer*-ness – not interpreting them according to a pre-set analytical perspective, but access them from within, through the wide-open unbiased methodology of former-content analysis in order to explore the one attribute they share, for all their differences – asking *how* queer they are. The question is two-fold, simultaneously asking how cinema produces queerness and how do we access it *as* queerness, thus starting at the very basis of New *Queer* Cinema,⁴⁹² while the chosen methodology of formal-content analysis also reflects the assertion that queerness is produced at the intersection of both form *and* content for *actually* queer films.

⁴⁸⁸Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*, x.

⁴⁸⁹ Villarejo, "Forbidden Love."

⁴⁹⁰ Both Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4 and Davis, "View."

⁴⁹¹ Gynn, "Queer."

⁴⁹² In doing so, I perform a temporary *epoché* on two often paradigms in interpreting NQC – firstly AIDS, which is its crucial root and backdrop, however explored thoroughly and I wish to relax the historical and sociological framework to see how cinematic queerness functions when not interpreted strictly in its temporal setting; and postmodernism - thrown as a caveat already by Rich, and certainly the postmodernist tools of *intertextuality* and Linda Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction* would seem as appropriate tools to the analysis I perform in the subsequent chapters, they would, in my opinion lead only to a neat analytical tautology.

“Straight people have *Romeo and Juliet*,
us gays have *Leopold and Loeb*.”

Comment on *Swoon*'s page at mubi.com

4. Case study: *Swoon* (1992)

Tom Kalin's *Swoon* was chosen as a case study film as it is an example par excellence of the discourse that came forward so strongly with NQC. It is also the widely agreed upon 'prototype' of NQC filmmaking⁴⁹³ and presented as such today, like when the restored print of the film was presented for the 20th anniversary of its release at the Berlinale⁴⁹⁴ and it is cited from a vantage point that "more than anything, it has to be one of the most alluring depictions of queer sexuality ever achieved on screen."⁴⁹⁵ Also, at its core is a paradigmatical and horrific historical event, that turned private queerness into a public spectacle. The last remark to support the choice of *Swoon* as the representative of NQC for the purposes of this thesis asserts that while it is universally lauded as a paramount component of NQC's 'epistemic shift,' it has not received a thorough exploration in queer film scholarship, unlike *Poison* or *Edward II*.

The opening sequence of *Swoon* shows a group of lavishly clad actors reciting lines from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* against a backdrop screen with a rear projection. With a close-up of the screen's edge fluttering in the wind and a zoom out into a wide shot, the outdoor film set is revealed as one of the performers (Richard Loeb, as we will soon find out) is walking away after a young man (Nathan Leopold Jr.) came to pick him up. The duo of young men, clothed in impeccable suits and coats, is then followed with a camera pan through glimpses of the industrial suburbia as they playfully throw debris around and run into a ramshackle shed. There, bright beams of sunshine pervade the shed's pot-holed wall, as the men exchange a kiss and wedding bands taken out of Loeb's mouth. The wordless 'marriage ceremony' is followed by their vows, or rather a mutual confirmation of a contract between them, exchanged as they walked out back into the open, arm in

⁴⁹³ Rich, "New Queer;" Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 226; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁴⁹⁴ See the Berlinale release claiming *Swoon* as "one of the best examples of the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s." ("Berlin's Forum looks back," *Variety*, January 26, 2012, accessed July 5, 2015, <http://variety.com/2012/film/markets-festivals/berlin-s-forum-looks-back-1118049284>.)

⁴⁹⁵ Cunningham and Crimmings, "New Queer," 27.

arm: "I'll do what you want." The head-shot image of the two is obscured with a quick fade-to-black; the black screen filled by white letters spelling out the film's title, accompanied by dissonant music telegraphing the highly disturbing tale that is about to be told, as *Swoon* is based on the notorious murder of a teenage boy by these two young men and the subsequent, highly publicized trial.

As the historical event is germane to the following analysis, a brief recapitulation of the case⁴⁹⁶ is in order: In Chicago, Illinois, in May 1924 the teenage boy Bobby Franks was kidnapped and murdered by Richard "Dick" Loeb and Nathan "Babe" Leopold Jr., at the time 19 and 18 years old, respectively, both exceptionally intelligent and successful university students from wealthy Jewish families. The two had had a sexual relationship. The murder was preceded by a string of lesser crimes that they were not held accountable for (vandalism, setting fires, burglary). The murder and blackmail for ransom was premeditated, however they chose their actual victim at the last moment. They were apprehended just days after the murder due to the crucial piece of physical evidence which were Leopold's glasses, inadvertently left

⁴⁹⁶ The recapitulation provided here is the consensus of confirmed facts of the case. The available sources consulted and recommended for further inquiry are: Already in 1926 the report titled *The Leopold-Loeb Case* was published and it provides an insight into the investigation and trial with lengthy transcripts of witness statements, speeches by both the prosecutor and the defense. It also offers a first-hand historical perspective of how various aspects of the case were interpreted, in this official and factual document - see Alvin V. Sellers, *The Leopold-Loeb Case* (Brunswick: Classic Pub. Co., 1926), a digital scan of the book is accessible under public domain copyright, accessed June 30 2015, <https://archive.org/details/loebleopoldcasewooloeb>. An online project by University of Missouri-Kansas School of Law lists many materials with commentary by law scholar Douglas O. Linder - see "Illinois v. Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb," Douglas O. Linder, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/leopold.htm>. The Clarence Darrow Digital Collection provides access to original materials from the trial ("The Clarence Darrow Digital Collection," University of Minnesota, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://darrow.law.umn.edu>), as well as a detailed and sourced, though slightly melodramatic in language, 2010 study of the case - see Michael Hannon, "Leopold and Loeb Case (1924)" (academic paper, University of Minnesota, 2010), accessed July 2 2015, http://darrow.law.umn.edu/trialpdfs/LEOPOLD_LOEB.pdf. Succinct and well sourced recapitulations are given in the following analytical essays: Paula S. Fass, "The Leopold and Loeb Case in American Culture," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 80 No. 3 (1993): 919-951, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2080409>; Edward J. Larson, "An American Tragedy: Retelling the Leopold-Loeb Story in Popular Culture," *The American Journal of Legal History* Vol. 50 No. 2 (2008-2010): 119-156, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25664498>; Paul B. Franklin, "Jew Boys, Queer Boys: Rhetorics of Antisemitism and Homophobia in the Trial of Nathan "Babe" Leopold Jr. and Richard "Dickie" Loeb," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Kindle edition. Additionally, it should be mentioned that a respected account in the true-crime genre is given in books by Hal Hidgon, first published in 1976 (Hal Hidgon, *Leopold and Loeb: The Crime of the Century* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and Simon Baatz (Simon Baatz, *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Chicago* (New York: Harper, 2008); see also Baatz's article on the case - Simon Baatz, "Leopold and Loeb's Criminal Minds," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 2008, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/history/leopold-and-loeb-criminal-minds-996498>; and the review of his book - John Steele Gordon, "Murder Most Rational and Confounding," review of *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Chicago*, by Simon Baatz, *The New York Times*, August 17, 2008, accessed July 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/books/18gordon.html?_r=0.

at the swamp where they dumped the body. Further development of the investigation was set off by a statement in good faith by the Leopold family chauffeur, claiming that they did not use the car they claimed, thus poking a pivotal hole in their alibi. Another important piece of evidence was the stolen typewriter they used to type the ransom note. Loeb confessed, blaming the execution of the murder on Leopold, who then also admitted to the crime when presented with facts of Loeb's testimony, but maintaining that it was Loeb who actually killed Franks. Public outrage and a media frenzy surrounded the investigation and the subsequent trial (they were tried together). The defense counsel for the two was the famous attorney Clarence Darrow, who submitted a guilty plea on their behalf thus ensuring that the case was heard and decided by a single judge, not a jury (which technically made the trial a 'hearing'). Despite the media and the prosecution's call for the death penalty, which was expected, the judge sentenced Leopold and Loeb to life imprisonment for murder and an additional 99 years for kidnapping - it is believed that it was due to Darrow's hours long legendary closing argument that they were not sentenced to death by hanging. An important part of his reasoning dwelled on the mental instability and immaturity of the two, grounded in the psychiatrists' (then called 'alienists') testimonies that supported this argument by dwelling on the defendants' sexual relationship (homosexual behavior in young men being at the time understood as a malfunction of proper gender identification and a sign of arrested development - this infantilization was highlighted at the trial by referring to Leopold and Loeb by their nicknames 'Babe' and 'Dickie').

Loeb was killed in a shower brawl with another prisoner at the age of thirty and Leopold was paroled after serving 33 years and died of natural causes in 1971. The incomprehensible nature of the thrill killing of a child and the media attention made the Leopold-Loeb case the 'crime of the century'. There were several factors that propelled the scandal - the youth of the offenders, their background of their prominent and wealthy families that were also Jewish, their academic status and attested intelligence, the cited influence of Nietzsche's philosophy, and their sexual relationship. At the heart of the matter is the lack of a discernible motive for the murder, apart from that they wanted to do it. The fascination with the case did not wane in the 91 years since the trial and it remains of interest in academia as well as popular culture.

The notoriety of the Leopold and Loeb case intersected with the fact that the two murderers were in a relationship (which played a role in the reception of the case as well as at the trial), making it an important and infamously dark (from the perspective of affirmative gay activism) moment of queer history.

4.1 The three films on a queer murder: a rope, a pair of glasses and matching wedding bands

Swoon is a narrative film based on this historical event and at the same time, it serves to illustrate the relation of NQC to 'old queer cinema' specifically, underlining and subverting the paradigms of connotative queerness and the figure of the queer villain in 'old queer cinema,' as *Swoon* was already the third feature film treatment of the Leopold and Loeb case. The two feature films based on the case that preceded *Swoon* were Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1949) and Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1959).⁴⁹⁷ It is important to point out that Tom Kalin was not only well aware of the two previous films but lists them as an essential part of his motivation to do the film,⁴⁹⁸ thus they represent a direct factor in the film's *causality*.⁴⁹⁹

I will not perform a detailed comparative analysis of the three films but I wish to highlight several points from the perspective of the queer discourse, based on how the films treat the precipitating historical event, in which the homosexual relationship of the murderers played a crucial part. All three films tell the 'same' story of two young men who together murdered another, but in terms of their narrative structure and emphasis of that story, the three differ eminently.

Firstly it has to be noted, even though the production background is not the focus of the analysis, that both *Rope* and *Compulsion* were studio productions by well-established directors,⁵⁰⁰ while *Swoon* was a debut independent feature produced

⁴⁹⁷ See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 226; Seun Okewole, "Tom Kalin," *Sight and Sound* 2.5 (1992): 36.

⁴⁹⁸ When asked why make another adaptation of the case, Kalin replied: "To state publicly, one and for all, in an unabashed and direct fashion the facts of the case." (Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.) At a recent event, *Rope* and *Swoon* were screened as a double-bill - in Kalin's words "as it should be." (Tom Kalin's personal Facebook account, Facebook, accessed June 10th 2015.)

⁴⁹⁹ Janet Staiger's term, crucial in the discourse of film authorship, see Janet Staiger, "Authorship Approaches," in *Authorship and Film*, eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), Kindle edition.

⁵⁰⁰ Several authors dub the films 'the Hollywood versions' of the events (Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Armond White, "Outing the past," *Film Comment* Vol. XXVIII, Nr. 4 (1992): 21-25,

with a great amount of struggle for finances and co-produced by the director himself, together with Christine Vachon.⁵⁰¹

Both previous films are based on pre-existing material which admittedly draws on the case. *Rope* is an adaptation of the eponymous 1929 play by Patrick Hamilton; in the film's credits it is listed as adapted by Hume Cronyn, while the author of the film's screenplay was Arthur Laurents.⁵⁰² Laurents recalled how he was forced to remove and downplay the much more blatant references to homosexuality of the characters in the original play,⁵⁰³ in which the teacher (played by James Stewart in the film) used to have an affair with one of the murderers. Though downplayed, homosexuality as the dreaded unspeakable "it"⁵⁰⁴ is said to be the reason the intended cast did not want to risk being associated with the film and passed on the offered roles - Cary Grant as the teacher and Montgomery Clift as his former student and lover.⁵⁰⁵ *Compulsion* is an adaptation of the 1956 book by the same name by journalist Meyer Levin, who as a college student covered the trial and even claimed to have known Leopold personally during high school.⁵⁰⁶ Levin was unsuccessfully sued⁵⁰⁷ by Leopold after the publication, which is a fictionalized account of the case that became a best-seller,⁵⁰⁸ citing the subsequent film, and the fact that it is based on publicity from the Leopold-Loeb case.⁵⁰⁹ *Swoon* is the only one of the three films that uses real names for its characters, not only the murderous duo but also their victim and defense attorney Clarence Darrow. Kalin's original script extensively uses available source materials, not only from the trial (as both the literary and film

accessed via the FIAF database.

⁵⁰¹ Vachon recounts the slow process of producing the film in detail in Vachon and Edelstein, "Shooting;" also Okewole details the production background of the film - Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵⁰² Who was a homosexual and was at the time of the filming in a relationship with actor Farley Granger, who played the Leopold-inspired character Phillip in the film - see Lesley L. Coffin, *Hitchcock's Stars: Alfred Hitchcock and the Hollywood Studio System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 71.

⁵⁰³ See Alexander Doty, "Queer Hitchcock," in *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, ed. Thomas Leitch and Leland Poague (Malden and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 473-489; also Coffin, *Hitchcock's Stars*, 70-73.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ Coffin, *Hitchcock's Stars*, 70-71.

⁵⁰⁶ Larson, "American Tragedy."

⁵⁰⁷ For an overview of the case, placed in the wider context of the continued publicity regarding the murder and the legal implications, see Edward J. Larson, "Murder Will Out: Rethinking the Right of Publicity Through One Classic Case," *Rutgers Law Review* Vol. 26 No. 1 (2009): 131-161. The verdict set a precedent thanks to which the case became legally 'public property' and the events as well as Leopold and Loeb were free to be depicted in fiction and non-fiction without any risk of liability by the authors - *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁸ Larson, "Murder." p. 139.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

version of *Compulsion* do)⁵¹⁰ but also from the investigation, available papers of Loeb and Leopold, including the latter's autobiography and the historical media coverage.⁵¹¹ Both the Phillip and Brandon of *Rope* and *Compulsion*'s Judd and Artie pairs remain safely in the realms of *inspired by* Leopold and Loeb. The distinction here is two-fold, as the two preceding films maintain a distance from the historical events by being adaptations of already fictionalized takes on the material that function, while keeping the connection, primarily as works of fiction by removing the most obvious links by changing the names of its characters. *Swoon* bluntly declares its claim to the source material directly.⁵¹²

Rope adheres to the setting of a stage play, in order to appear as the film was executed as a one-shot take.⁵¹³ After the opening credits run over the static image of a New York City apartment building's facade, the film opens with the scene of the murder. A young man is being strangled by a piece of rope, with the duo of murderers holding him at his sides. The body is then placed in a chest that is on prominent display in the living room. The rest of the film unfolds in the enclosed space of the apartment over a single evening following a dinner party, ending with a guest, the former teacher of the murderers, discovering the body and after a struggle, opening the window and firing shots to attract the authorities. The film ends with the off-camera sound of police cars with blaring sirens arriving.

⁵¹⁰ See Larson, "American Tragedy;" as well as Meyer Levin, introduction to *Compulsion*, by Meyer Levin (New York: RosettaBooks, 2000), Adobe e-book, 7-8.

⁵¹¹ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36; Roy, Grundmann, "The fantasies we live by: bad boys in *Swoon* & *The Living End*," *Cineaste* Vol. XIX Nr. 4 (1993): 25-29, accessed via the FIAF database.

⁵¹² It is worth noting that it remains the only feature narrative film to do so up to date. There are two notable examples of more recent films that draw inspiration from the case, without directly acknowledging the connection: First, there is *Murder by Numbers* (2002) – Susan King recaps the case and the three feature film versions presented here, writing that "the grisly plot of the new Sandra Bullock film "Murder by Numbers" is torn from the pages of both American and cinema history." (Susan King, "Numbers' Joins List of Dramas Based on Loeb-Leopold Murder Case," *Los Angeles Times* April 19, 2002, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/19/entertainment/et-king19>.) Secondly, both the 1997 and the 2007 version of Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, are also loosely inspired by the case, taking on the template of a duo of highly intelligent young men who commit murder and other violent crimes with the motive of proving their superiority. A.O. Scott's, in his damning review of the latter, writes poignantly: "These fellows [the film's protagonists] variously address each other as Peter and Paul, Tom and Jerry and Beavis and Butt-Head (Leopold and Loeb would have given the game away)." (A.O. Scott, "Funny Games (2007)," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2008, accessed June 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/14/movies/14funn.html?_r=0.)

⁵¹³ It is documented that Hitchcock was inspired to take this route after seeing the British TV version of the play. It is also worth noting that *Rope* was his first film shot in color and he retrospectively expressed doubts about the decision to create a formal 'gimmick.' (See Doty, "Queer Hitchcock;" Coffin, *Hitchcock's Stars*, 70-71; D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Representations* 32 (1990): 114-133.)

Compulsion is structurally split, as the first part of the film focuses on Artie and Judd, without showing the murder - it is confirmed that they committed the act indirectly. In the 103 minutes long film, an hour and six minutes in, the character of Jonathan Wilk (representing Clarence Darrow and played by Orson Welles) is introduced and the film becomes a courtroom drama.

Swoon remains focused throughout on Leopold and Loeb and covers the most extended period of time. It devotes its first half of the 92 minutes length to the preparation and execution of Bobby Frank's murder (the event occurs after 20 minutes of the film) with the immediate aftermath of concealing the evidence ; and at the 46th minute mark the interrogation begins. One hour into the movie, the trial starts and eleven minutes of screen time later, Leopold and Loeb are hauled away to prison. The last twenty minutes of the film represents their time there followed by a brief 3-minute coda of Leopold's life after he was paroled.

Although they are very different in their structure, genre and treatment of the events, it is grounded to state that both *Rope* and *Compulsion* perform a significant shift in terms of the protagonist of their respective narratives, away from the pair of murderers: *Rope's* finale focuses on the teacher's discovery of how his influence has been misinterpreted by his former pupils, mainly Brandon, and he is the one to go through a revelation and make the choice to call in the police in the end. The transfer of the focal point is even more apparent in *Compulsion* where, since the arrival of the Jonathan Wilk character, the drama centers on whether Wilk can succeed in his effort to spare the murderers the death penalty, while Judd and Artie are pushed to the sidelines as mere observers. In *Swoon*, Leopold and Loeb are the protagonists throughout, with Leopold being the more prominent of the two. These storytelling strategies in regards to the protagonists highlight the fundamental difference among the three films with regards to the wider context of the period when they were produced and their theme. Nicole Rafter compares the three films from the perspective of dominant *ideological assumptions* they present, according to her concise analysis, in approaching the criminal behavior in relation to society:

In the aftermath of World War II, neither *Rope* nor *Compulsion* dares address the fact that Leopold and Loeb were Jews who had embraced the superman theory that inspired the Holocaust. Nor, at a time widespread ignorance and fear of homosexuality, could they portray the young men's love relationship. *Rope*, drawing on then-modish psychoanalytic concepts, emphasizes guilt, self-

destruction and intergenerational complexities. *Compulsion*, positioning itself among the classic law films of the 1950's, concentrates on courtroom drama and heroic lawyering, while *Swoon* roots in the identity-politics of postmodernist theory [that] enables it to be more frank about the men's ethnicity and sexuality.⁵¹⁴

These distinct strategies and emphasis in their treatment of the common subject employed by the three films are exemplified in the accentuated use of a principal prop in each of them. The respective choice is illustrative: in *Rope* it is the titular piece of rope used to perform the murder; in *Compulsion* the accent lies on Judd's glasses that are also embedded graphically in the transition into the closing credits of the film as well as in the posters for the film, linking the key piece of evidence to the procedural character of the film, and finally *Swoon*'s narrative arch is marked by the wedding bands - exchanged in the opening sequence, worn by both Leopold and Loeb throughout the film and in the end, the one worn by Loeb is pried from his finger and returned into his mouth by Leopold after Loeb is declared dead on the operating table in prison.

While the unbalanced power dynamic of the central duo is both historically accurate and represented in all three films, the possible romantic and sexual nature of the relationship resides in the realm of *connotation* in both *Rope* and *Compulsion* and thus open to a spectrum of interpretations, as for example Barbara Mennel judges the treatment of the central duo's queerness in both films as "a homophobic coding,"⁵¹⁵ while Armond White covers it as "cultural misrepresentation of homosexuality"⁵¹⁶ and Seun Okewole claims that "neither film addresses the certain existence of the pair's homosexual relationship."⁵¹⁷ The general problem of connotative queerness is, as Doty succinctly states, that "...the concept of connotation allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it."⁵¹⁸ The unstated but implied queerness plays out as an undercurrent in *Rope* and *Compulsion*, adding a possible extra layer to the

⁵¹⁴ Nicole Hahn Raftar, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 80-81.

⁵¹⁵ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁵¹⁶ White, "Outing."

⁵¹⁷ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵¹⁸ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xi-xii.

motivation which revolves around the pair's dedication to commit 'a perfect crime' to prove their intellectual superiority, though primarily underlining their decadent and perverse characters in line with the trope of queerness as a signifier for villainy.⁵¹⁹ Beyond that, as Miller points out in his analysis of *Rope*, the double-edged treatment of homosexuality as simultaneously implied and dismissed brings on the rendering of same-sex desire as invalidated while exploiting it:

Rope exploits the particular aptitude of connotation for allowing homosexual meaning to be elided even as it is also being elaborated. . . . In this sense, the cultural work performed by *Rope*, toiling alongside other films . . . and other cultural productions . . . consists in helping construct a homosexuality held definitionally in suspense on no less than a question of its own existence —and in helping to produce in the process homosexual subjects doubtful of the validity and even the reality of their desire, which *may only be, does not necessarily mean* and all the rest.⁵²⁰

Swoon affirms and depicts the sexual relationship between Loeb and Leopold explicitly, going as far as framing their relationship symbolically as a marriage. Subsequently, the film posits their crimes that escalated into the murder of Bobby Franks at the center of the relationship, as the act that will bind them together forever as Nathan Leopold hopes⁵²¹ - which in a gruesome twist it did,⁵²² well beyond the time of their deaths. It is, in my opinion, the most radical gesture of *Swoon*, in relation to its predecessors . Not the mere straightforward acknowledgment of Leopold and Loeb's romantic and sexual relationship, but the reframing of the couple's motive so that the murder is directly embedded in that relationship. Both *Rope* and *Compulsion* have their 'Loeb' character explicitly state the motive as a desire to commit a perfect crime: Brandon elaborates to Phillip, shortly after the murder, that for him, crime is a surrogate endeavor for a work of art, as he lacks

⁵¹⁹ See Doty, *Flaming*; and remarks concerning the films in Benschhoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*. See also Salamon's essay that offers a complex comparative analysis of *Rope* and *Compulsion*'s depiction of their Leopold and Loeb inspired characters (Linda Bradley Salamon, "Screening Evil in History: *Rope*, *Compulsion*, *Scarface*, *Richard III*," in *The Changing Face of Evil in Film and Television*, ed. Martin F. Norden (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 17-36.)

⁵²⁰ Miller, "Anal Rope," 118-19. Emphasis by the author.

⁵²¹ The character states in the voice-over diary entry in *Swoon*: "Killing Bobby Franks will join me and Richard for life."

⁵²² As Paula Fass comments, they were jointly tried and in the public discourse following their arrest they names and personas remain inseparably connected, always as the Leopold and Loeb case - see Fass, "Leopold and Loeb;" Larson, "American Tragedy."

artistic talent and states: “He was the perfect victim for the perfect murder.” In *Compulsion*, “To the perfect crime!” is the first line of dialogue cried exuberantly by Artie as two young men flee the scene after they have stolen the typewriter. In *Swoon*, it is the prosecutor who claims this motive, which remains a caveat explanation for the crime, of Leopold and Loeb’s actions. Tom Kalin, when asked about his theory regarding the case, said:

The case is murky and tangled. They did kill a boy, they had a sexual relationship, and they were also involved in an exchange of crime for sex. Nathan Leopold was very much in love with Richard Loeb in a ‘homosexual’ way. Richard was a sociopath, able to seduce people to his point of view, but not very sexually motivated. ... I don’t think the crime came directly out of sexuality but it was linked to it.⁵²³

Kalin’s *Swoon* accentuates and makes explicit this link between their crime and the sexual and romantic relationship of Leopold and Loeb, while explicitly making Leopold and Loeb, the historical figures, protagonists of his film. Thus simultaneously, next to offering a (historically justified) queer reading of the historical events, *Swoon* also “rewrites film history”⁵²⁴ in relation to *Rope* and *Compulsion*. The two films are safely distanced on several levels from the historical events that they are based on. As the sexual relationship of their Leopold and Loeb inspired characters remains in the realm of connotation, so does the actual complex case by means of using fictitious names, drawn from the intermediary material of the play and the book. And they both ultimately lead the narrative arch away from the pair of murderers and their ‘perfect crime’, refocusing the emphasis elsewhere. *Swoon* is the Tom Kalin's cinematic endeavor to tell the story of Leopold and Loeb, their relationship and their crime.

⁵²³ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵²⁴ Menzel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.



Figure 1: Nathan Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb during the trial. Photo courtesy of The Chicago Tribune, 1924.



Figure 2: Screenshot from Swoon (1992), Richard Loeb (left) and Nathan Leopold in the courtroom.

4.2 Queering the period (film)

Swoon brings to the foreground the queerness of history and is radically (queerly) subversive towards heteronormative cinematic discourse on the intersection of form and content, in regards to both history (in the manner it tackles the paradigm of a period film) and queerness on screen. With the ambition to return to the historical events in his rendition, *Swoon* stresses the vantage point of its approach to the period. Already in its opening, the acknowledged artificiality of the recital on a film set foregrounds the performative aspect present in the rest of the film. White, in his

critical analysis, writes that the film “constantly begs one’s critical regard of movie artifice.”⁵²⁵



Figure 3: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), Richard Loeb (Daniel Schlachet) at the far left.

It endorses the notion that the film is an interpretative retelling of the events, even though its claim of accuracy is strongly stated, in quoting the original materials and using the real names of the participants. As Kalin said: “... the script is very close to the research: almost all the confession speeches and courtroom material is either literally transcribed or condensed, though obviously it is interpreted.”⁵²⁶ The tension between historical accuracy and the unavoidable interpretative perspective, both in terms of a director’s personal vision and a *retrospectatorship* of events more than 60 years after they occurred, fuels the formal treatment of *Swoon*. The director comments on this ambition: “I was both working within the period and in a Brechtian way I was trying to break the surface of the movie and do something that complicated the idea of a classic period movie.”⁵²⁷

The film is shot in high contrast black and white⁵²⁸ and deliberately evokes the aesthetic techniques of 1920’s cinema, most prominently in its frequent use of extreme close-up shots and in the disrupted editing,⁵²⁹ employing nods to surrealist

⁵²⁵ Armond, “Outing.”

⁵²⁶ Okewole, “Tom Kalin,” 36.

⁵²⁷ Kalin, Prague.

⁵²⁸ A choice both aesthetic and economical - Kalin, Prague; Vachon and Edelstein, *Shooting*.

⁵²⁹ In addition to writing, directing and co-producing the film, Tom Kalin also edited the film himself.

film of the era.⁵³⁰ The individual shots are highly stylized, looking towards the aesthetics of photographer Herbert List and early works of Leni Riefenstahl⁵³¹, especially in capturing the beauty of its protagonists, in their dandy costumes and without clothes. Apart from the mannered imagery, it uses archival documentary footage as well mock-documentary footage (created for this purpose and rendered indistinguishable from the actual 1920's newsreels)⁵³² as punctuation and in lieu of establishing shots. These stylistic choices elicit the sense that the film could have been shot in 1924, while the illusion is simultaneously subverted with thoughtfully planted anachronisms - on a small scale there are props (a TV remote, a modern telephone) as well as more charged and complex ones, such as a black woman in the position of the court stenographer. This use of ostensibly anachronistic components is an acknowledged⁵³³ nod to Derek Jarman's manner of pointedly updating the historical fiction in film, for example having electrical lights or a typewriter⁵³⁴ as part of the setting in the biopic of the 16th-century painter in *Caravaggio* (1986). Together, *Swoon*'s visuals underline the period setting beyond the use of costumes and set design, while undermining the coherency of a traditional period piece in order to bring to front the interpretative practices in reconstructing historical events.

The sound design similarly combines divergent elements - repeated use of a period recording of a then popular tune,⁵³⁵ the minimalistic score composed for the film by James Bennett⁵³⁶ and the non-diegetic sounds of birds' wings flapping and the accentuated crack of a whip, both serving as punctuation in transitions. The archive music accentuates the period setting, the non-diegetic score functions as a tool of dramatization and the sound effects underline the interpretative line, especially as the whip cracks not too subtly resonate with the sado-masochistic framing of the central relationship. As for the spoken word, Kalin uses several

⁵³⁰ Kalin, Prague; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁵³¹ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵³² Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4; Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 226.

⁵³³ Kalin, Prague.

⁵³⁴ The analogy between the two films with regards to anachronistic props using the typewriter as an example is also made by White - White, "Outing."

⁵³⁵ Tom Kalin, interview with the author, September 29, New York City, 2010.

⁵³⁶ The only other two items in Bennett's filmography as a composer are Todd Haynes's films *Poison* and *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), according to the database *Film Indexes Online*.

techniques in *Swoon*. Firstly, there is standard diegetic dialogue between the characters, partly extracted from transcripts of the investigation and partly, of course, written by Kalin.⁵³⁷ It is notable that even as the dialogue is exchanged between the characters, the speaking figures are in many instances positioned and framed as if directly addressing the camera.



Figure 4: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), Nathan Leopold (Craig Chester) during the interrogation.

Then there is the level of commentary, which oscillates between external and internal sound as fragments of non-simultaneous voice-over are attributed to a speaker in the diegesis of the film - for example after Loeb's death the disembodied voice-over delivering the news report is identified with the speaker, a reporter reading the article into a microphone. Scattered quotes from the news coverage sporadically overlap the images. Also, repetitions of the recited quote from Sacher-Masoch ("Now I know you.") echo back, both synchronized with the image of the actress delivering the line and as external voice-over. The most prominent portion of the voice-over represent the respective scripted 'diary entries'⁵³⁸ by Leopold and Loeb, used throughout the duration of the film. Formally, they use the technique of external sound and are non-simultaneous with respect to the images. Every fragment is meticulously prefaced by stating the exact date, thus identifying it as a diary entry. They provide crucial information in regard to the timeline and factual causality,

⁵³⁷ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵³⁸ The 'diary entries' are written by Kalin, based on the source materials (Grundmann, "bad boys;" Kalin, New York), although they were thought to be authentic by some critics, for example, see "Review: 'Swoon'," *Variety*, December 31, 1991, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://variety.com/1991/film/reviews/swoon-1200429232>.

available neither in the visuals nor the dialogue, and support the impression of historical authenticity. Most importantly, the diary fragments serve to offer insight into the mindset of the protagonists. As a narrative strategy, the technique gives the viewer superior knowledge over other characters in the film in lieu of both dramatic tension and audience's empathy with their reasoning and emotions.

Employing these techniques, *Swoon* brings to the fore the emphasis on desire, using newsreel footage framed as dreams of the protagonists, voicing their fantasies and giving prominence to the beauty of the male form in the photography, especially in assuming Leopold's perspective in surveying Loeb's face and body.



Figure 5: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), the panning shot of Loeb's body from Leopold's point of view.

The acknowledged role of homoerotic desire is simultaneously crucial outside the diegesis of the film, in Kalin's own assumed perspective and creative choice to depict and highlight the physical beauty of his protagonists and the sensuous, erotic thrill of their interactions. The *homoerotic gaze* of the queer author unabashedly comes forth in *Swoon*, while giving Leopold and Loeb back their own voices that had been drowned in interpretation by media, investigators, the legal system, psychiatrists and criminologists.

Swoon brings forth the perspective of how Leopold and Loeb were perceived in the interplaying systems of authority. Kalin comments on his ambition in *Swoon*: "There is a political component in choosing to try to tell the story clearly about the

characters but also making the audience aware about the social framework around them in the storytelling."⁵³⁹ Leopold's narration of his erotic fantasies to his therapist is punctuated with details of the therapist's notepad, on which he transforms the fantasy into former keywords of psychology. The aforementioned sensationalist (and authentic)⁵⁴⁰ media report in voice-over that follows Loeb's death (stating how he was killed in self-defense after he tried to rape a young black inmate) overlaps black frames with article headlines and the preceding interrogation of James Day, Loeb's (white) killer who was previously punished for making sexual advances towards Loeb - the charges were dropped as he was decreed to have acted in self-defense against a sexual predator.⁵⁴¹

The inclusion of historical interpretative strategies into the formal treatment of *Swoon* is most poignant in the sequence which recreates and mocks the use of phrenology in the trial and in the media reporting of the case. In *Swoon* the montage of static head-shots with the written legends (one per picture) is presented as a series of presentation slides in an academic lecture, including the sound effects of the projector shuffling between images, evoking the then believed scientific milieu of phrenology. It is further humorously subverted by using a different human model for each slide, varying in gender, ethnicity and age.

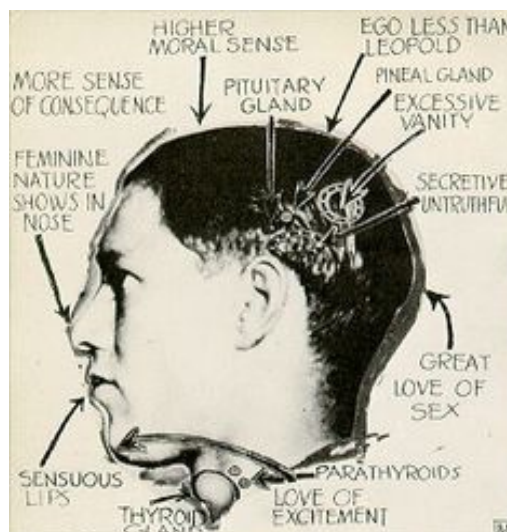


Figure 6: The phrenological analysis of Richard Loeb published in The Chicago Tribune in 1924.

⁵³⁹ Kalin, Prague.

⁵⁴⁰ Franklin, "Queer Boys."

⁵⁴¹ Again, this is historically accurate - see Franklin, "Queer Boys;" Larson, "American Tragedy."



Figure 7: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), uncredited Todd Haynes posing as one of the models for phrenological analysis.

Swoon is a period film, which invokes the aesthetic strategies of the era it is set in (the 1920's) and is infused with notices that we are looking at an interpreted version of historical events. It is both reconstructive, in its claim to a suppressed piece of controversial queer history and deconstructive in laying bare how such a history is manufactured. The function of desire and fantasy is accentuated in the diegesis and in the openly homoerotic way of interpreting the historical narrative.

4.3 Queering Leopold and Loeb: *gay marriage by murder*

The previous sub-sections already analyzed how *Swoon* emphasizes the relationship of Leopold and Loeb, the blatant homoeroticism of its imagery and the intradiegetic nods to the construction of the discourse of homosexuality. The following text builds on these notions and shows, what role 'homosexual desire as queerness' plays in the treatment of *Swoon's* queer murderers in love - continuing to work with the subversion of connotative queerness (historically and cinematically, on the edges separating the private/public and silenced/pronounced binaries) as well as the intertwined notion of queerness and villainy.

Tom Kalin, when asked about *Swoon*, talks about his long fascination with the Leopold/Loeb murder case - experiencing the combination of disgust and erotic thrill, in the time of his youth when *any* images of homosexuality were scarce, thus

appreciating that homosexuality was out in the open, although only suggested and in a gruesome context, but still to some degree acknowledged.⁵⁴² He recalls his grandmother keeping a Leopold and Loeb "scrapbook"⁵⁴³ and being interested in the criminal justice system as his father had worked with juvenile delinquents in Chicago, the site of the Leopold and Loeb murder, where he grew up.⁵⁴⁴ He reflects: "I'd see the photographs of these two beautiful boys from the 20s; there was something in the photographs about the relationship. I could tell, but it was always very hushed."⁵⁴⁵ Directly connected to this *connotative homosexuality* of the case, and crucial to Kalin's interest,⁵⁴⁶ is the placement of the case in the 1920's U.S. - a time before the discursive establishment of modern, post-Stonewall gay identity.

Paula Fuss, analyzing the media reception of the case and the public discourse refers that even though discussed in excruciating detail at the trial, "the murderers' sexual history" was deemed "unprintable matter" even in professional journals.⁵⁴⁷ Franklin critically follows up on Fuss's conclusions and states: "Fuss fails to recognize that while references to homosexuality and Jewishness in the press and in the courtroom often were whispered or shrouded in innuendo, homophobia and antisemitism nevertheless were writ large in the public reception of the crime and the trial. What went unsaid ... did so precisely because it went without unsaying."⁵⁴⁸ Regarding discourses of sexuality, silenced and thus crucial, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* wrote:

Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. ... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴² Kalin, New York.

⁵⁴³ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵⁴⁴ Kalin, New York; see also Kalin, "Oral History."

⁵⁴⁵ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 36.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Fass, "Leopold and Loeb," 939 - 941.

⁵⁴⁸ Franklin, "Queer Boys," 123.

⁵⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York:

What Tom Kalin does in *Swoon*, is bring the discursive silence of homosexuality, 'unprintable' 'hushed' and 'connoted' out in the open, shattering the walls of the closet. Articulated already in the opening sequence, both in terms of the *mise-en-scène* and thematically, is the important division between the private and public sphere: The kiss and the exchange of the rings go down in the shielded location of the shed - though its wall is perforated, thus letting the light of the outside world seep in. The completion of the 'ceremony' takes place out in the open. The highlighted distinction between the private and public zone is highly significant as there is a long history of enclosing displays of same-sex affection away from the public eye and queer people, in turn, creating safe spaces for themselves.⁵⁵⁰ The alarming notion that even one's own home does not necessarily represent a safe, private space is the source of probably the most poignant references⁵⁵¹ to contemporary politics embedded in the film, namely the *Bowers vs. Hardwick* legal case, decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1986⁵⁵². In short, in 1982 Michael Hardwick was discovered by policemen in his own bedroom while engaging in sex with another man and they were both arrested and charged with sodomy. Hardwick sued in return and the court reversed his appeal. Intimacy thus becomes subject of legal proceedings.

Grundmann interprets how, in *Swoon's* rendering of the trial, the discourse of sexuality becomes vocal:

Upon Darrow's intimations of the defendants' homosexuality, the judge decides to send all women in the audience out of the courtroom. It becomes clear that, on the one hand, homosexuality, in the course of the trial, is rendered speakable, if only to serve as an official pathological category. On the other hand, this phenomenon is so threatening to the men present that it needs to be censored by 'protecting' the

Pantheon Books, 1978), 27.

⁵⁵⁰ See Wharton's treatment of the 'gay bar' space in post-1990 film that includes a poignant historical excursion into the topic - Steve Wharton, "Bars to Understanding?: Depictions of the 'Gay Bar' in Film with Specific Reference to *Coming Out*, *Les nuits fauves*, and *Beautiful Thing*," in *Queer Cinema in Europe*, ed. Robin Griffiths (Bristol: Intellect Ltd. 2008), Kindle edition.

⁵⁵¹ Intended as such by the director - Kalin, Prague.

⁵⁵² See the entry at *Encyclopedia Britannica* - "Bowers v. Hardwick," *Britannica*, accessed June 30, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Bowers-v-Hardwick>. The full statements of the justices can be found in the Cornell University online archive - "Bowers v. Hardwick," Cornell University Law School, accessed June 27 2015, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/478/186>. Emily Baseon's article recounts the case and connects it to the bigger picture of legislative progress regarding rights of homosexuals in the U.S. - Emily Baseon, "Why Advancing Gay Rights is All About Good Timing," *Slate*, October 19, 2012, accessed June 28, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/supreme_court_dispatches/2012/10/the_supreme_court_s_terrible_decision_in_bowers_v_hardwick_was_a_product.html.

women from it. ... Since the female court transcriber also has to leave, the law literally mutes itself.⁵⁵³

After the court is cleared, the psychiatrist's testimony details, in a technical and clinical manner, the sexual encounters of Nathan Leopold while he was a teenage boy and with Richard Loeb, including the fantasies of domination he relayed. Juxtaposed to that is a high-angle shot of Leopold and Loeb on a bed, facing each other, exchanging a kiss and playfully removing their clothes. As the camera's angle widens, the bed is revealed to be placed inside the courtroom, with their defense attorney Clarence Darrow standing right there and stating: "We were discussing Dickie and Babe's pathology." The psychiatrist's account on the witness stand is intercut with close-up and extreme close-up shots of Leopold and Loeb kissing (on cue when the psychiatrist quotes "mouth perversions"), of their entwined hands in a position suggestive of sexual intercourse, and the post-coital look into each other's eyes while the dynamic of their relationship is being explained as being based on "blackmail", trading Leopold's silence about their crimes in exchange for Loeb's "submitting to him."



Figure 8: Screenshot from Swoon (1992), as Leopold and Loeb's bed appears in the courtroom, with Clarence Darrow (Robert Read) standing by.

The 'contractual' aspect of the relationship is present throughout *Swoon*, since the "I'll do what you want," exchange through referring to sex by Loeb in word "I suppose you want your payment now." The dominant-submissive framing, underlined by the

⁵⁵³ Grundmann, "bad boys."

literary references as well as by voicing Leopold's king-slave fantasies, is accentuated, but with a pointed twist towards the previous interpretations: both *Rope* and *Compulsion* essentially portray the Leopold character as the weak victim in tow of Loeb's manipulation; the media reception of the trial highlighted Leopold's role as the dominant personality who *corrupted* Loeb⁵⁵⁴ - *Swoon* winks to this when the investigator relays to Leopold that he is thought to be "the aggressor" in relationship and Leopold confirm this. The dynamic of the duo as portrayed in *Swoon* is one of smoothly transferring the dominant/subservient role between the two in time, creating a complex and authentic impression of a complicated love relationship.⁵⁵⁵

Because for all these disturbing elements, *Swoon* is brazenly the love story of Leopold and Loeb. With a disclaimer, Kalin refers to his portrayal of the murderous duo's relationship as 'romantic'⁵⁵⁶ and I personally would second Michael Saunders comment that states: "Just as their sexuality was frankly depicted as having a strongly dark element, however, it was also characterized in the film by unquestionably real tenderness and passion."⁵⁵⁷ Their intimacy transpires in small gestures, as Leopold brushes Loeb's hair from his forehead, the playfulness and joyful mood of their physical encounters, the apparent level of comfort around each other's bodies in scenes in Leopold's room in their domestic arrangement.

⁵⁵⁴ Larson, "American Tragedy."

⁵⁵⁵ This observation is highly subjective and varies from viewer to viewer. The assessment is shared by a number of critics' and scholars' reflection of the film - see Saunders, *Imps*; Grundmann, "bad boys;" Larson, "American Tragedy."

⁵⁵⁶ Jason Wood, "Tom Kalin," in *Last Words: Considering Contemporary Cinema*, Jason Wood (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 51.

⁵⁵⁷ Saunders, *Imps*, 79.



Figure 9: Screenshot from Swoon (1992), Leopold and Loeb in their room in Leopold's apartment.

Swoon slightly favors Leopold's perspective (he would be deemed the 'protagonist' in the narrative analysis approach of drama having only one) and assumes his gaze in surveying Loeb's body. I already elaborated on the interpretative composition that frames the relationship as a marriage, which transcends from a private matter into the public sphere with the trial; afterwards when a prison guard informs Leopold that Loeb is dying after the attack, he refers to the latter as Leopold's "old man." After Leopold returns Loeb's wedding band into his mouth, we are shown Leopold pacing in his cell as his agonized screams echo in the prison's hallways. Then, in a pictorial sequence, the catatonic Leopold is wrapped in wet sheets - as a means of therapy or punishment, while the imagery of the ritual also suggest that his body is being prepared for a burial. The character's distress and pain at the loss of his loved one is conveyed to have a profound emotional impact on the film's audience to emphasize the pathos of doomed love.



Figure 10: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), Nathan Leopold wrapped in a wet sheet by prison guards.

The disturbingly provocative approach of placing the narrative and formal emphasis on love and sexuality was criticized and rejected by many⁵⁵⁸. *Swoon* serves with equal frankness the romance and erotic enticement of Leopold and Loeb and the brutality of the crime they commit together. *Swoon* graphically shows the murder of Bobby Franks in the back seat of the slowly moving rental car - the struggle and the victim's screams, the frenetic stabbing with the chisel, the blood spatter on Loeb's face and Leopold's hand on the driving wheel. The lingering close-up of the back of the dead boy's head with the oozing wound underlines the horror. The film ties the rendering of their mutual affection inseparably with the violence they inflict on their victim and the detailed display of their ensuing actions. In a poignant sequence, as they are burying Bobby Franks' shoes and belt in a shallow hole in the ground, shuffling dirt into the hole, Loeb, his face stained with blood, smiles at Leopold who kisses him, withdraws and leans back in. Loeb pushes him to the ground, then kisses him too.

⁵⁵⁸ See the next sub-section regarding the film's critical reception.



Figure 11: Screenshot from *Swoon* (1992), Leopold and Loeb kissing over the shallow grave.

Also, the film lays out the chilling matter-of-fact tone of their planning; the excitement, the detached and highly functional stance with which both attend to the steps in the execution of the crime, the aftermath of disposing of evidence and the interviews with the investigators. The few instance when either slightly loses control of his cool is when they snap at each other in the course of the interrogation. Leopold, whose Phillip and Judd renditions in the previous films both show at least fright if not remorse at what they have done, maintains the upper hand in the interrogation, capping it with telling Loeb in front of the furious investigators “I’m sorry you were made a fool of, broke down and ruined everything and all that... I’m sorry, but it’s not my fault,” while rolling his eyes in contempt.

The focus for the characters, to which the film adheres, remains on their relationship, with the murder of Bobby Franks embedded at its core as a consequence of Leopold’s and Loeb’s *folie à deux*⁵⁵⁹ and the act that binds them together. In a strong interpretation, Niemi concludes that *Swoon* offers “the notion that killing Bobby Franks was the only way that Leopold and Loeb could sanctify and immortalize their intense love for each other in a society that considered such love an abomination.”⁵⁶⁰ I think Niemi goes too far in this rather melodramatic conclusion, as does Saunders who asserts that *Swoon*'s Leopold and Loeb on trial were

⁵⁵⁹ The loosely used rather outdated psychiatric term for “madness shared by two” used appropriately by Kalin to describe the relationship, see Okewole, “Tom Kalin,” 36; Wood, “Kalin,” 51.

⁵⁶⁰ Robert Niemi, *History in the Media: Film and Television* (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 422.

"victimized by the law's homophobia."⁵⁶¹ *Swoon* does expose the tendencies to pathologize homosexuality at the trial and by the media, most pointedly in the juxtaposed rendering and subsequent interpretation of Loeb's death, but it is a far cry from blaming the society for the murder or painting the protagonists as victims. On the contrary, *Swoon* shows them as in control of their decisions and actions, not shying away from their arrogant glee or the aforementioned brutality of those actions - they are murderers, but not impassive variations of the *sad young men*, haunted and martyred by their homosexuality and/or society's homophobia. They are *defiant*, which is the core caveat trait of NQC films and their characters.⁵⁶² Tom Kalin wrote on his intentions regarding *Swoon*: "[I] wanted to show a homosexual couple who had pathological behaviors [but] not pathologize homosexuality."⁵⁶³ I believe this is the crucial distinction that *Swoon* makes and for which I undertook to present support in this section - the portrayal of the couple displays their affection and desire in an affirmative manner, whilst acknowledging the horrific murder that resulted from the dynamic of the relationship. They are undeniably queer villains, whose queerness *Swoon* dares to portray as beautiful and sexy.

4.4 Negative images and the equality of desire

Swoon was often promoted with the tagline "putting the Homo back in Homicide,"⁵⁶⁴ in the time when *Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* were protested and picketed against for perpetuating the cliché of the queer murderer.⁵⁶⁵ *Swoon* was for a part criticized for doing the same,⁵⁶⁶ blurring the lines in the context that it was made by a director who is openly gay and a known AIDS activist.

Stemming from *Swoon*'s accent on the relationship and the discourses at play, both within the diegesis of the film as well as the emphasis on the NQC envelope and

⁵⁶¹ Saunders, *Imps*, 78.

⁵⁶² Aaron, "New Queer."

⁵⁶³ Kalin quoted in Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 226.

⁵⁶⁴ See Rich, "New Queer;" Wood, "Tom Kalin;" Andrew Chan, "Putting the Homo in Homicide: *Swoon* at 20," *BAM blog*, September 11, 2012, accessed June 28, <http://bam150years.blogspot.cz/2012/09/putting-homo-in-homicide-swoon-at-20.html>.

⁵⁶⁵ Hanson, "Introduction;" Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁵⁶⁶ Benshoff-Griffin, *Queer Images*, 226; Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. Kalin recalls that he received a surprising backlash for the film from the circle of AIDS activists (Kalin, New York).

identifying Kalin as a gay man in *Swoon's* critical reception, there is a tendency of a simplified reading of the film. For example Wood summarizes the trial's outcome in *Swoon* by saying that Leopold and Loeb "escaped the death penalty *only* because their defense was based on the argument that they were insane due to their homosexuality."⁵⁶⁷ Their sexuality certainly was a strong contributing factor in Clarence Darrow's argument that they were both disturbed youths who did not deserve capital punishment⁵⁶⁸, but such a definitive causality is a crude over-interpretation of both the historical facts as well as *Swoon's* version of the events. Niemi describes Kalin as "a gay filmmaker with an ideological ax to grind."⁵⁶⁹ Several of the 1992 reviews in the mainstream press reflect the inability to accept *Swoon's* jarring refusal to side neither with its protagonists nor with the society, whose values they attacked by their deed. Maslin writes in her *The New York Times* review:

'Swoon' is more successful in taking apart this particular chapter in criminal history than in reassembling it with a clear point of view. The film's most unnerving aspect, aside from its utter fearlessness in tackling this subject, is the pitiless calm with which Mr. Kalin surveys his landscape. Although "Swoon" sounds a resounding protest against the homophobic attitudes that influenced Leopold and Loeb's trial, and acknowledges the swift social changes that may have contributed to the kidnapers' behaviour, its true attitude toward this duo is finally elusive. If Mr. Kalin intends a less dispassionate vision, or even a more emphatic one, it doesn't come through.⁵⁷⁰

Willington's mixed review in the *The Los Angeles Times* is in a similar fashion:

Kalin's moral stance may bewilder some audiences, who are, after all, being asked to sympathize with the propagators of a heinous crime. ... Kalin wants to expose the absurdity of '20s prejudice, to link it to today. But the satire and polemic are often less convincing than the dreams and madness. The movie thinks best when it swoons. It can't make us sympathise with murderers, but it can make us see some of the madness of a society that brands all deviance as potentially homicidal.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁷ Wood, "Tom Kalin," 49, my emphasis.

⁵⁶⁸ See Larson, "American Tragedy," and Franklin, "Queer Boys."

⁵⁶⁹ Niemi, "History," 421.

⁵⁷⁰ Janet Maslin, "Swoon (1991)," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1992, accessed June 30, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CEEDB1E3AF934A15750CoA964958260>.

⁵⁷¹ Michael Wilmington, "Lust, Crime Unite Doomed Teen-Age Lovers in 'Swoon' : The story is based on the '20s Loeb-Leopold case involving two Chicago youths who killed a 13-year-old boy," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1992, accessed July 5, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-09-25/entertainment/ca-875_1_richard-loeb.

Both Willington and Maslin are making the implicit assumption that Kalin's activist intent in *Swoon* is a plea for sympathy for the murderers. I oppose this assumption as I regard the strongest activist appeal of the film to be expressed as the right to embrace 'negative images', disrupting the binary of positive/negative representation of queer characters. The stressing of 'positive images'⁵⁷² is entwined with gay and lesbian activism⁵⁷³ calling for sympathetic portrayals of gays and lesbians, resulting in a practice in which the assessment of characters in narrative film is often being reduced to whether said portrayal is deemed *helpful* in regards to the perceived goal of campaigning for equality and against discrimination. The subversiveness of the politically anti-normative queer position comes to light again: "Queer cultural criticism often explicitly differentiates itself from a more traditional politics of lesbian/gay representation that champions 'positive images' within popular culture."⁵⁷⁴ The rather narrow perspective of championing 'positive images' is summed up by Evans thus:

Every film with a queer theme, no matter what the sexuality of its director or the origin of its funding, is still embattled in a highly moralistic debate over the correctness of its politics, as though art were to be valued only as sexual propaganda.⁵⁷⁵

Regarding specifically *Swoon*, Ruby Rich writes in the original "New Queer Cinema" article:

Swoon takes on the whole enterprise of "positive images" for queers, definitively rejecting any such project and turning the system on its head. I doubt that anyone who damned Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* for toxic homophobia will swallow *Swoon* easily, but hopefully the film will force a rethinking of such positions. Claim the heroes, claim the villains...⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷² The assessing of positive/negative images is linked to Vito Russo's campaign and still a dominant line in gay and lesbian cultural criticism - see Hanson, "Introduction;" Alex, Evans, "How homo can Hollywood be?: remaking queer authenticity from *To Wong Foo to Brokeback Mountain*," *Journal of Film and Video* Vol LXI Nr. 4 (2009): 41-54, accessed via the FIAF database.

⁵⁷³ See the corresponding sub-section "Affirmation politics" - Dyer, *Now You See It*, chap 6.

⁵⁷⁴ Pidduck, "After 1980."

⁵⁷⁵ Hanson, "Introduction."

⁵⁷⁶ Rich, "New Queer."

In 1992, Tom Kalin, when pushed to comment on the importance of 'positive representation', said: "It has its place because it represents many lives, but it doesn't represent my desires."⁵⁷⁷

In Roger Ebert's 1992 three out of five stars review, the disregard for a queer perspective is point of departure for the critique, stating about *Swoon*:

It is being reviewed as an example of the new "queer cinema," deliberately gay films by openly gay filmmakers, but I am not sure "Swoon" would have needed to be much different if the killers had been heterosexual lovers."⁵⁷⁸

Paradoxically, Ebert inadvertently hints at an important point of the egalitarian right of queer authors to embrace the 'negative images' as part of formulating their *desire*. Kalin stresses *Swoon's* connection to the lineage of 'straight' *outlaw couple* films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Badlands* (1973)⁵⁷⁹ and points out: "As I have said many times before, I am all for equal opportunity homicide."⁵⁸⁰

Swoon presents a radical political gesture towards both the heteronormative society and the traditional gay and lesbian activism. It shows its queer murderers, embracing and highlighting their queer desire, which was deemed criminal in itself, and provocatively entwining it with the actually criminal act of the thrill murder. It champions the claim of queer authors (and audiences) to find pleasure in 'negative' representation, subverting the assimilationist stance of normalizing queer sexuality by annihilating its 'threatening' aspects. *Swoon* does perform a 'normalization' of queerness – but in a manner of a subversive *chiasmus*: queer desire (Kalin's as well as the protagonists' of his film) is presented head-on as legitimate, unapologetic and sensuous while retaining the thrill of its 'dangerous' potential that is the crux of the relationship between heteronormativity and queerness.

⁵⁷⁷ Okewole, "Tom Kalin," 37.

⁵⁷⁸ Roger Ebert, "Swoon," *RogerEbert.com*, November 13, 1992, accessed July 4, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/swoon-1992>.

⁵⁷⁹ Wood, "Tom Kalin."

⁵⁸⁰ Chan, "Homo in Homicide."

"The curves of your lips rewrite history."

Oscar Wilde

"How do I queer thee?

Let me count the ways."

Alexander Doty

"Not Gay as in Happy;

But Queer as in Fuck You!"

Anonymous

*- "Real artist creates beautiful things
and puts nothing of his own life into them."*

- "Is that what you did?"

- "No. We set out to change the world.

Ended up just changing ourselves."

- "What's wrong with that?"

- "Nothing. If you don't look at the world."

Velvet Goldmine

5. The Discourse of New Queer Cinema

The final chapter of the thesis builds on the analysis of *Swoon*, in order to propose a discursive horizon of New Queer Cinema. As laid out in chapter 3, the question of which films actually constitute NQC is open for debate - the selective focus adheres to the narrow compromise of the canon, with its expansion including earlier and later films of NQC directors: *Looking for Langston*; *Zero Patience*; *The Hours and Times*; *The Watermelon Woman*; *Sebastiane*; *Urinal*, *The Living End*; *Go Fish*; *Poison*; *Velvet Goldmine*; *Meeting of Two Queens*, *Tongues Untied*; *My Own Private Idaho*; *Far From Heaven*; *Paris is Burning*. The selection does not claim to make the argument that these films only represent the 'pure' NQC, nor does it seek to passionately advocate for including, for example, Todd Haynes's 1998 *Velvet Goldmine* into the 'category,' as the position taken here is that NQC should not be reductively understood as a 'category,' but exactly a dynamic horizon. Thus the selection is to be taken as a proposed, indefinite core of NQC from which the discourse spins outward.

Following *Swoon's* analysis, there are four analytical cuts proposed that constitute the layers of NQC's discursive horizon, divided into respective sections. Not all four are elaborated on for all cited films, but the examples chosen seek to illuminate the principal variety of approaches in their differences and similarities.

The structure of each section first shortly recounts the treatment of the proposed discursive feature in *Swoon*, as well as providing a reminder of the relevant theoretical concepts, elaborated on in the previous chapters. The body of each section provides a condensed account of how each said discursive feature is present in selected NQC films that are chosen as expository examples, sketching a micro-analysis combined with references towards existing literature which covers them in-depth.. Each section closes with a postscript, that supplies an anecdotal example of how this analytical cut could be applied after the year 2000, proposing further possible inquiries in line with NQC discourse for contemporary queer cinema.

Each of the films listed could be subject to a lengthy analysis, exceeding the scope not only of the presented analysis of *Swoon*, but the scope of this whole thesis. Using them in a listing aims to show the possibilities of the horizon, as examples to support the argument of each analytical cut across NQC. The objective of the chapter is to introduce a coherent outline of the NQC discourse and its relevance to continued critical approach to queer film.

5.1 Queering history: *Slash fiction* lessons of the past

Swoon tackles the historical case of an infamous murder and subsequent trial, explicitly relating to the events and protagonists by using the names and known facts and quoting original source materials. At the same time, the lines between filmic reconstruction and interpretation are deliberately blurred. The film intertwines several layers of discourses at play regarding the historical case and the actuality from which the case is recounted. A crucial role in *Swoon's* take of the Leopold and Loeb case is attributed to the twofold function of *fantasy* and *desire*, on two separate levels - the film engagingly portrays the fantasies and desires of its protagonists and their sensual portrayal is an acknowledged expression of the director's desires, Tom Kalin's cinematic enunciation of a homoerotic fantasy of the love story starring Leopold and Loeb.

Queer as a theoretical and activist concept is deeply ingrained in the historical etymology and use of the word. The application of the queer perspective to history, in the disciplinary intersection of queer theory and history, performs an archeology of queerness that has been suppressed in the dominant historical discourse.⁵⁸¹ Apart from discovering and formulating what had been silenced, a paramount importance lies in looking at historical notions to understand the present ones.

Several NQC films are unearthing the 'silenced discourses' of queer history. The way they are engaged with historical figures and events surpasses the mere open pronouncement of queerness that had been hushed in the past, so the shared approach has a two-step quality: They vocalize the queerness of the past and also, these films articulate, mock and comment on the processes of accessing queerness, highlighting their own position as critical and based firmly in their time's vantage point. Also, in contrast to the authority of the 'official history,' they are proclamatory in the grey scale between history and fiction. The narrative techniques in terms of content and formal instruments vary, but there are unifying features that can be formulated for all the following films.

Isaac Julien's black and white film-poem *Looking for Langston* (1989) employs formal techniques that are eerily similar to those used in *Swoon*; an important difference being that *Swoon* maintains a clear-cut storyline while *Langston* is a far more impressionist piece, a "barely narrativized collage of images"⁵⁸² that form an interpretative take on the biography of a seminal Harlem Renaissance figure, the titular poet Langston Hughes. The fragments of his life that comprise the 45-minute film blend archival footage and stylized acted sequences that smoothly cross over from the realistic planes to the dream landscapes of articulated homosexual desire.

⁵⁸¹ For a nuanced exploration of the intersecting theoretical approaches in constructing history of queerness, see David Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 87-123.

⁵⁸² Davis, *Desiring Image*, chap. 4



Figure 12: Screenshot from *Looking for Langston* (1989).

Zero Patience is a 1993 feature film and also a period piece, turning to relatively recent events as it is set in the year 1987; it was written and directed by John Greyson, who, like Kalin had an established background as an AIDS activist and video-artist.⁵⁸³ The film takes on the historical narrative of the precipitating event of the AIDS epidemic in North America:

Greyson's *Zero Patience* considers another case of misrepresentation: the American print and electronic media's transformation of an HIV-infected French Canadian, Gaetan Dugas, into a promiscuous gay serial killer, 'Patient Zero,' whom the media claimed infected the North American continent with the AIDS virus.⁵⁸⁴

The film's protagonist is a fictionalized version of 'Patient Zero' named Zero, which accentuates his anonymity, as Dugas ceased to exist as a person in the public discourse and was reduced to the identity of the carrier of the virus, and highlights the absurdity of trying to pinpoint the responsibility of the epidemic on a single person. A young man who comes back to the outraged world as a ghost and is trying to make sense of his last relationship, the media frenzy and his own untimely death. Zero is framed by the film as a modern Shehazade, allowed to 'live' for a little longer in order to "tell the story"⁵⁸⁵ - thus Greyson giving the protagonist -accused of a heinous crime - back his own voice. Zero's journey is traced by mock reconstructions

⁵⁸³ Knabe and Pearson, *Zero Patience*, chap. 2.

⁵⁸⁴ Christopher Gittings, "Zero patience, genre, difference, and ideology: singing and dancing queer nation," *Cinema Journal* XLI (2001): 28-39. Accessed via the FIAF database.

⁵⁸⁵ "Tell the story" is the repeated line in the chorus of the song *Just Like Shehazade* from the film.

of the 'Patient Zero' narrative, using visual, auditory and textual references. The engagement with the discourse of AIDS history prevails in the film:

Zero Patience is a frontal attack on a largely American narrative that creates (homosexual) self-blame and simultaneously displaces blame on to an ethnic/national (and, by implication, sexual) other... [The film] is devoted to the interlinked community, intellectual, and pedagogical projects of unpacking mainstream AIDS discourse.⁵⁸⁶

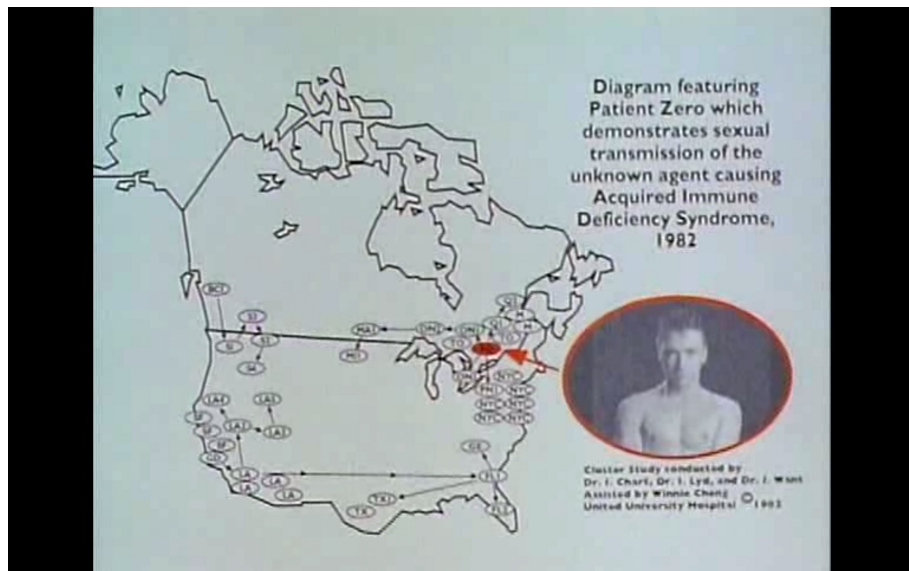


Figure 13: Screenshot from *Zero Patience* (1993).

While taking up the serious endeavor of exploring the multi-faceted discourse of the AIDS epidemic in the story of a dead protagonist, *Zero Patience* is a musical that joyfully celebrates the beauty of the male form - from "actor Norman Fauteux's [Zero] healthy, sexy body"⁵⁸⁷ to the sequences of nude groups of men performing dance choreographies. It is thus set against the imagery of passive, disfigured AIDS victims and by energetically revering in male physical beauty and homosexual desire, it opposes the narratives of sexual shame and self-blame that cast a dark shadow over gay sexuality by equating it with the horrendous epidemic.

⁵⁸⁶ Knabe and Pearson, *Zero Patience*, chap. 3.

⁵⁸⁷ Knabe and Pearson, *Zero Patience*, chap. 1.



Figure 14: Screenshot from *Zero Patience* (1993).

It is documented that John Lennon and The Beatles manager Brian Epstein spent a short vacation together in Barcelona in 1963 and there had been rumors regarding what happened between the two men.⁵⁸⁸ The hour-long *The Hours and Times* (1992) by Christopher Munch, who was the film's sole producer, writer, director, cinematographer and editor,⁵⁸⁹ is an "imaginary chronicle"⁵⁹⁰ of their vacation and offers a possible, admittedly fictional account of this period of the relationship between the two non-fictional men - who are identified by their names in the diegesis, and the link to history is accentuated by the casting of the lead actors, bearing strong physical resemblance to their historical counterparts. The film validates the perspective of the hopelessly infatuated Epstein and explores the entangled emotional and erotic turmoil of his affection towards Lennon. Ruby Rich assessed that the film offers "a simple view of history with the veil of homophobia pulled back."⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "What's Sex Got to Do With It?" *Chicago Reader*, November 6, 1992, accessed July 10 2015, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1992/11/what-s-sex-got-to-do-with-it>.

⁵⁸⁹ According to the record at the database *Film Indexes Online*; "The Hours and Times," *Film Indexes Online*, accessed July 20 2015, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:afi&rft_id=xri:afi:film:59272.

⁵⁹⁰ Rich, "New Queer."

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 15: Promotional still for *The Hours and Times* (1992), Brian Epstein (David Angus), on the left, and John Lennon (Ian Hart) in the hotel bed.

Also entering the territory of popular music history, *Velvet Goldmine* is a chronicle of glam rock, organized from the queer perspective, as Brooks writes, "[Todd] Haynes approaches British glam from an implicitly queer vantage point."⁵⁹² The main narrative arch, assembled in a non-linear fashion in the film, is the career of the fictional Brian Slade, in his stage incarnation of Maxwell Demon (and his band The Venus in Furs), modeled on the Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders From Mars phase of David Bowie's career. The work and love triangle at the heart of the film is completed by Brian's wife Mandy, echoing Angela Bowie, and Curt Wild, the assemblage character of Iggy Pop and Lou Reed (with echoes of Gary Glitter and anachronically, Kurt Cobain). In the very early stages of production of a glam rock film, the possibility of using Bowie's real name was entertained, but Bowie blatantly objected and later refused to license any of his music. Haynes commented on the latter, that "it was crushing at the time, but I think it gives you a slight chance not to read Brian Slade exclusively as Bowie."⁵⁹³ The film quotes, alludes to and interpretatively shifts many confirmed events as well as rumors from Bowie's Ziggy Stardust period, for example recreating the infamous 'guitar fellatio incident,'⁵⁹⁴ and

⁵⁹² Xan Brooks, "Velvet Goldmine," *Sight and Sound* Vol. VIII Nr. 11 (1998): 63-64, accessed via the FIAF database.

⁵⁹³ Nick James, "Todd Haynes (Interview)," in *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. Julia Leyda (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), Kindle edition.

⁵⁹⁴ See Joe Moran, "David Bowie misremembered: when Ziggy played with our minds," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2012, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/06/david-bowie-ziggy-starman>.

exaggerating the moment, when Bowie announced to a sold-out venue that he is ending his career as Ziggy Stardust, into the hoax assassination of Brian Slade on stage.



Figure 16: David Bowie and Mick Ronson at London's Hammersmith Odeon in 1973, photo by Ilpo Musto.



Figure 17: Screenshot from Velvet Goldmine (1998), Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) in concert.

Unlike *The Hours and Times*, the story of Brian Slade, the intertwined drama of his career and his relationships, is rendered as an archeology within the diegesis of the film through the character of Arthur, who is gathering materials for a story on the 10th anniversary of the hoax assassination. Following Arthur's investigation and his

interviews with the key players in Slade's life, the film uses the structure of *Citizen Kane* (1941). Haynes explains his strategy thus:

The only way to approach a film about rock stars is from a great distance, with barriers between the viewer and the stars. It could never have been a behind-closed-doors, what-Iggy-said-to-Bowie kind of movie. So *Citizen Kane's* classic structure of the search for the missing truth to find out what defines a character seemed the best thing to quote from. It had to be about a lost time from the start, about something repressed— and great fears had risen up around whatever this was, which had changed it completely and buried it.⁵⁹⁵

The structure and the fractured point of view highlights the process of reconstructing history and the elusive nature of truth in the history - a repressed queer truth of both glam and Arthur's personal life. In using the significant adjustment of the *Citizen Kane* narrative strategy, making Arthur not only a journalist, but a journalist who 'remembers' the events, as his boss points out - highlights how deeply the Brian Slade story is subconsciously interacted with Arthur's personal history. First as an avid fan of Slade and then someone, who actually "was there," as he reflects in the voice-over. Through Arthur's painfully nostalgic perspective,⁵⁹⁶ the bleak neo-conservative 1984 'present' is the vantage point from which he is assembling pieces of the failed musical-sexual revolution of the past. *Velvet Goldmine* is a queer history that shows on the Brian Slade narrative, how queerness was introduced into the public discourse, exploited and then repressed - and how it is being excavated. The added layer is the embedded perspective of the queer fan - of Haynes, the director of the film,⁵⁹⁷ and Arthur, the protagonist within the film.⁵⁹⁸

All the above examples take actual historical figures and events as their departure points for the respective fictional accounts. Cheryl Dunye pushes the practice of queering history further in *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) as she firstly, makes the archeological quest for a queer past in the dominant narrative arch within the film's

⁵⁹⁵ James, "Haynes."

⁵⁹⁶ See Dana Luciano, "Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come: *Velvet Goldmine's* Queer Archive," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, eds. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 121-155.

⁵⁹⁷ See Haynes's recollections of his own Bowie and glam rock fandom in James, "Haynes."

⁵⁹⁸ For a critical exploration of the theme of queer fandom in the film, see Chad Bennett, "Flaming the fans: shame and the aesthetics of queer fandom in Todd Haynes's *Velvet goldmine*," *Cinema Journal* XLIX 2 (2010): 17-39.

diegesis as the character Cheryl (played by Dunye herself) embarks on discovering the story of the titular character, Fae Richards, a black actress from the classical Hollywood era of the 1930's credited in the film *Plantation Memories* only as 'the watermelon woman', and secondly, Dunye fabricated the whole historical background that is being discovered - *Plantation Memories*, an excerpt from which is shown in the films as well as the figure of Richards, with all the uncovered archival materials are plausible and semi-plausible fabrications with admittedly no precursor in history. Dunye constructs a possible queer history and explores both the desire for such a history and the methods of recovering and creating it, highlighting the ontological tension as well as fundamental similarity between the two practices of archeology and creation. The early critical and audience reception of *The Watermelon Woman* tended to read the film as documentary, not fiction which employs documentary codes,⁵⁹⁹ even though the film ends with a definitive pronouncement of its status as fiction.

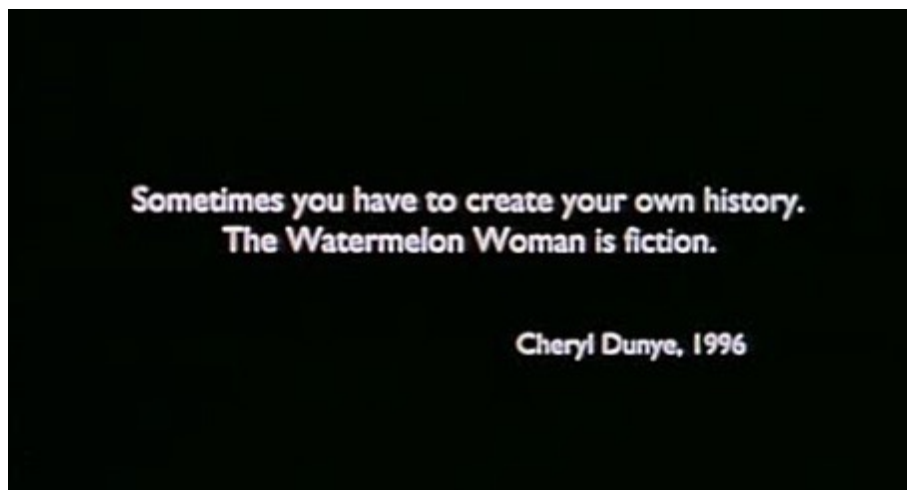


Figure 18: Screenshot from *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).

The Watermelon Woman critically explores the relationship to queer history from its vantage point and the *nostalgic* approach to reconstructing queer history, as exemplified by *Looking for Langston*.⁶⁰⁰ Another poignant link between the past and present is the exploration of interracial lesbian desire - the uncovered relationship between Fae and the (also fictional) white woman director Martha Page and the

⁵⁹⁹ Thelma Wills Foote, "Hoax of the lost ancestor. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*," *Jump Cut* 49 (2007), accessed June 10, 2015, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/WatermelonWoman/text.html>.

⁶⁰⁰ Foote, "Hoax."

blooming romance of Cheryl and her acquaintance Diane, the desire paralleled and contextualized.



Martha Page and Fae Richards, 1931

Figure 19: Promotional still for The Watermelon Woman (1996).



Figure 20: Promotional still for The Watermelon Woman (1996), Diane (Guinevere Turner), left and Cheryl (Cheryl Dunye).

To sum up, these five NQC films explore queerness in a transhistorical perspective, and history from a queer perspective. They highlight their temporal

distance and share their activist appeal in confidently formulating a dissident, possible history in opposition to the heteronormative 'version' of history. The varying levels of blurring fiction with a claim to the historical truth validate the productive approach of the creative queer perspective. Another unifying feature is that they are organized around pronounced narratives of desire - they all are love stories: pairing Langston and his unnamed partner, Zero and his ex-boyfriend, John Lennon and Brian Epstein, the net of relationships in *Velvet Goldmine* (Brian and Mandy, Brian and Curt and Curt and Arthur), the parallel affairs of Martha and Fae and Cheryl and Diane, creating historically subversive slash fictions.

Further inquiry along this analytical line into NQC would cover Derek Jarman's feature films, all of which are deeply engaged with history, its re-construction and re-imagination, including several *queer biographies* (*Carravaggio* (1986), *Edward II.*, *Wittgenstein* (1993)), and which set the precedent for the *new* NQC films. Already in 1976, his first feature film *Sebastiane* is a particularly clear example, as in the biopic of the Christian martyr, "Jarman's Sebastian is the first gay liberationist, as Jarman himself suggested."⁶⁰¹ Jim Ellis's account of *Sebastiane* confirms its links to the above cited NQC films:

Sebastiane cites iconic religious representations in order to foreground the nature of its engagement with the past, to make it clear that it is not offering a reconstruction of the past but rather engaging with the interpretative history of a legend. ... The Latin dialogue, similarly, is not used to promote the illusion of historical authenticity, but rather to dispel it.⁶⁰²

A slightly different vein of inquiry into the engagement of NQC films with history is to examine the depiction of the past without direct links to specific historical events and figures, such as the look at the late 1970's British subcultural scene from the vantage point of 1992 in Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (which uses the week of the Silver Jubilee as its backdrop) and the re-imagination of the 1950's in Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2000).⁶⁰³

⁶⁰¹ Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.

⁶⁰² Ellis, *Jarman*, 36.

⁶⁰³ For an analysis of the film as a "fantasy of the past," see Todd McGowan, "Relocating Our Enjoyment of the 1950's: The Politics of Fantasy in *Far From Heaven*," in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 114-121.

The 21st century coda of how queer history is approached further could also be explored in a comparative examination of two films which tell the life stories of two gay martyrs of the 20th century and were successful in the mainstream industry, gathering several Academy Awards nominations:

Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008) is the narrative biopic of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician elected for a public office in the U.S., who was assassinated by a colleague in 1978. Though far more conventional than the above mentioned films, there are several points that can position *Milk* within the discourse: the use of archival materials in the opening sequence and the visual similarity of the march at the film's end, whether its archival material or reconstruction; the depictions of Milk's relationships with his former partner and his young, unstable lover; the suggestion of the possible motive of the assassin as repressed homosexual desire and the overall structure of the film, where the linear narrative is interrupted with acted scenes of Milk alone, sitting in a room and narrating his life story into a voice recorder device - through these scripted and acted passages, they pronounce a fictionalized version of Milk's own voice.

The Imitation Game (2014), also gathering eight Academy Awards nominations, is a biopic of Alan Turing. Unlike the film *Enigma* (2001),⁶⁰⁴ also focused at the events at Bletchley Park, it claims its link to the historical figure - Alan Turing of the film is supposed to be a historically accurate depiction of Turing. Alan Turing was a mathematician and cryptographer, who was tried and sentenced for homosexual acts under the gross indecency clause⁶⁰⁵ in Britain in 1952, subjected to hormonal treatment and died two years later, in a presumed suicide.⁶⁰⁶ The film is structurally framed by Turing's narration of the events at Bletchley during his interrogation at the police station - the interrogation that eventually led to his sentencing. The obvious

⁶⁰⁴ See the critical review from Andrew Hodges, Turing's biographer, who highlights also the 'heterosexualization' of the fictional Turing in the film, named Tom Jericho: "In particular, Jericho's story is a rip-roaring heterosexual drama with much jealous, violent action and a femme fatale, as different from Turing's world as it is possible to imagine. (Alan Turing was a shy gay man who at this point in 1943 was on the verge of full self-acceptance and a very modern-minded attitude of self-disclosure)." (Andrew Hodges, "A Review of Enigma," *British Society for the History of Mathematics Newsletter* (Autumn 2001), accessed July 25, 2015, <http://www.cryptographic.co.uk/enigmareview.html>.)

⁶⁰⁵ See Hodges's account, which says: "The crime was, in fact, that of 'Gross Indecency contrary to section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885.' It was defined purely in terms of parts of the male body, and applied absolutely... whether the activity was in a public or a private place. Alan's statement left no room for doubt that he was guilty, and he was wrong in imagining that what he had done might soon be 'legalised'." (Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 458.)

⁶⁰⁶ Hodges, *Turing*, 487-490.

similarities to *Milk* and the NQC films, including the wider context of the early 2010's campaign for a royal pardon for Turing and the thousands of men sentenced under the same clause,⁶⁰⁷ come to a halt with a closer look at *The Imitation Game*. The stark contrast from the queer perspective puts the Turing biopic on the *grossly* problematic opposite spectrum of accessing historical queerness in cinema - the bland, tormented and desexualized Turing does at one instance stutteringly proclaim "I am a homosexual," only to have his sexuality dismissed by his fiancée Joan Clarke. The film makes the central relationship a heteronormative coupling between Turing and Clarke - though they were briefly engaged in reality, the film absolutely accents their relationship, while encasing Turing's sexuality into pre-pubescent connotation, displacing desire towards a heavy-handed metaphorical machine, virtually erasing it from the film apart from a few spoken remarks that are only functional in highlighting Turing's social awkwardness. In the critical reception, this *normalization* of Turing was for a part welcomed, for example saying that "*The Imitation Game* promotes the importance of queerness through highly conventional genre filmmaking."⁶⁰⁸ In my opinion, the film and this vein of reception are examples of the lamentable erasure of actual queerness by heteronormative appropriation as well as a product of exploiting queerness, as the attention the film received was largely based in it being a story of the tragic gay hero in a time, when the subject is highly marketable in terms of audiences and awards⁶⁰⁹ - as Catherine Shoard writes, "the biopic makes soft-focus cinematic capital from the prejudice that led to its hero's fate."⁶¹⁰

Citing *Milk* and *The Imitation Game* as examples of the continuous discourse of queer history in cinema, the space of subsequent critical inquiries opens, with regards

⁶⁰⁷ "Royal pardon for codebreaker Alan Turing," *BBC News*, December 24, 2013, accessed July 24, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-25495315>.

⁶⁰⁸ Ben Walters, "The Imitation Game: the queerest thing to hit multiplexes for years?" *The Guardian*, October 9, 2014, accessed July 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/09/the-imitation-game-alan-turing-gay>.

⁶⁰⁹ See Gregg Kilday, "Oscars: 'The Imitation Game' Finally Plays the Gay Card," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 29, 2015, accessed July 26, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/oscar-imitation-game-finally-plays-767466>.

⁶¹⁰ Catherine Shoard, "The Imitation Game is strangely shy about Alan Turing's sexuality," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2014, accessed July 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/17/imitation-game-alan-turing-sexuality-biopic>. See also Armond White, "The Imitation Game's Tsk-Tsk Agenda," *National Review*, November 25, 2014, accessed July 26, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/393500/imitation-games-tsk-tsk-agenda-armond-white>.

to the question of desirability of mainstreaming queer history for straight audiences, the trope of queer martyrdom and the socio-economic aspects of the box-office bankability of queerness in contemporary cinema.

5.2 Recalling queer iconography and queering straight cinema

Swoon alludes to erotically suggestive photography work of the male form and includes the short but poignant sequence of Leopold leafing through his study notes and naming the queer artists Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, E.M. Forster in portraits. Also, the film is actively engaged with history of cinema - its predecessors *Rope* and *Compulsion* on one level, with the lineage of 'straight outlaw couples' as well as the concept of a period film on another, and lastly with the cinematic techniques of the era in which it is set.

The previous sub-section outlined the approach of NQC films to history. The following paragraphs aim to highlight their engagement with past queer iconography and the positioning within the lineage of queer cultural texts which is seminal for many NQC films. There is an undeniable overlap of these two discursive planes, especially apparent in the instances of biographies of queer (or at least queerly interpreted) artists like Caravaggio, Langston Hughes or David Bowie. The examples listed below aim to illuminate how, within the diegesis of the films, a widened horizon of the queer cultural discourse is invoked. As Dyer writes, regarding the role of queer cultural history and heritage, "this role for culture has perhaps a special relevance for gay people, because we are 'hidden' and 'invisible'."⁶¹¹ Recalling this cultural heritage is a subversive act against the monolith of straight culture.

The second part focuses on the reverse side of approaching pre-existing cultural, specifically filmic, tradition - the confrontation of the 'heterosexual' lineage of cinema. The films practice an active *queer reading* - appropriating genres and tropes for constructing a queer cinema.

Firstly are presented examples of how NQC evokes specific moments of past queer iconography, both in terms of 'iconic' queer cultural figures and literal and visual works of art:

⁶¹¹ Dyer, *Culture*, 15.

The characters who come together and form an activist group in John Greyson's first feature-length film *Urinal* are an assemblage of deceased figures from queer cultural history: Sergei Eisenstein, Frida Kahlo, Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, Yukio Mishima, Langston Hughes and the fictional seminal figure of Dorian Gray. They have been assembled to protest a discriminatory statute on sex in public spaces.

Looking for Langston includes the original works and recreates the style of the "fetishising homoerotic photographs of black nudes"⁶¹² by Robert Mapplethorpe.⁶¹³ Similarly, *Go Fish* evokes and quotes the works by lesbian photographers Jill Posener, Jackie Kay, Della Grace, Tee Corrine⁶¹⁴ in staging and framing the faces and bodies of its female protagonists in the urban setting.

Derek Jarman brings to the fore the homoerotic reading of Caravaggio's paintings⁶¹⁵ in the eponymous biopic, casting them as part of the queer heritage. Even more complex is the work in this aspect in *Sebastiane*, which simultaneously works with the queer cultural appropriation of the Saint Sebastian legend and the classical imagery of his depiction in painting, as "pierced or unpierced, Saint Sebastian has endured in the popular imagination as the patron saint of homosexual men."⁶¹⁶

⁶¹² Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁶¹³ Mennel points out the discussion of whether his work objectified the black male form from the point of view of the dominant white view, and concludes that the film "integrates the erotic photographs by Mapplethorpe and contextualises them in articulations of desire by gay, black men." See Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁶¹⁴ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4.

⁶¹⁵ See James Tweedie, "The suspended spectacle of history: the tableau vivant in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*," *Screen* 44.4 (2003): 379-403.

⁶¹⁶ Richard A. Kaye, "Losing his religion. Saint Sebastian as a contemporary gay martyr," in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, eds. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 86. See Kaye's whole essay for an insight on the role of the legend and the imagery of Saint Sebastian plays in queer cultural consciousness.



Figure 21: *Sebastiane* (1976) promotional still.

In *The Living End*, Gregg Araki casts Mary Woronov, the former Superstar from Andy Warhol's films, as one of the Thelma and Louise inspired killer lesbians;⁶¹⁷ the poster of Warhol's film *Blow Job* hangs on Jon's wall in his shabby apartment. Mark Adnum reflects on the allusions in the depiction of the Mike character in *My Own Private Idaho*: "He's even dressed as a Dutch sailor at one point, replete with Querelle's pom-pom hat. ...he's the meeting place of every piece of gay iconography from Tennessee Williams and James Dean to Pierre et Gilles and Calvin Klein and back again,"⁶¹⁸ connecting Mike to the sailors in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's adaptation of Jean Genet's novel *Querelle* (1981) and the lineage of images of queer men. *Idaho* also contains a sequence which toys with the imagery of erotic magazines marketed for gay men, inserting its protagonists as animated bodies on their covers.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁷ Grundmann, "bad boys."

⁶¹⁸ Mark Adnum, "My Own Private New Queer Cinema," *Senses of Cinema* 34 (2005), accessed June 1, 2015, http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/new_queer_cinema.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.



Figure 22: *My Own Private Idaho* (1992) screenshot, Scott (Keanu Reeves) chatting up the audience and his colleagues on covers of other magazines.

Todd Haynes has been quoted that "[Jean] Genet was the genesis of *Poison*."⁶²⁰ The segment *Homo*, set in a men prison, makes the homage to Genet explicit - the protagonist of the segment is named John Broom, which is a translation of Jean Genet into English,⁶²¹ the depiction of desire and sex between prisoners is taken from Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* and the fantasy sequence is a loose adaptation of his novel *Miracle of the Rose*.⁶²² Direct allusions to works of two other queer filmmakers stand out in *Poison*, as the scene at the dinner in the *Horror* segment quotes and appropriates the scene in 'Hitler's favorite restaurant' in Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Souls* (1974) and there are echoes of Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950) in the segment *Hero*.⁶²³ The referential use of a queer cultural figure and his work is a technique Haynes also employs in *Velvet Goldmine*.

The prologue of the film depicts the arrival of a UFO in 18th century Ireland, where an extra-terrestrial baby boy is left at the doorstep of a Mr. and Mrs. Wilde. The cloth the baby is draped with is held by an emerald pin which will be through the

⁶²⁰ Sam Ishii-Gonzales, "To Appear, to Disappear: Jean Genet and *Poison*," in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 35.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Ibid., 34-35.

⁶²³ Rob White, "Todd Haynes's "Poison" Reconsidered," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 65 No. 1 (2011), accessed June 5, 2015, <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2011/10/bad-blood-caviar-and-ketchup>. As White writes, the Fassbinder citation is acknowledged and commented on in the *Poison* DVD's commentary by Haynes; the *Orpheus* allusion is White's interpretation, but one that is fairly obvious to an attentive viewer.

course of the film passed down by all the principal male characters and is explicitly referred to as 'belonging to Oscar Wilde' . The lineage of the film's dandy glam-rock figures is tied together to Wilde's legacy through this physical object, following little Oscar declaring “I want to be a pop-star,” at school.



Figure 23: Oscar Wilde (Luke Morgan Oliver), age 8, in school, screenshot from Velvet Goldmine (1998).

Also, lines of dialogue are verbatim quotes from Wilde's actual works as well as from his personal correspondences and recorded comments made in person - they are not annotated as quotes in the diegesis of the film but used as dialogue lines uttered by the film's characters: When the character Brian Slade is giving a press conference in a circus arena, he answers the journalist's questions with Wilde quotes - “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” When Curt Wild approaches him in the arena, he recites the line from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “the world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold. The curves of your lips rewrite history,” before leaning in for a kiss. The Oscar Wilde legacy frames and pervades the whole film and Haynes directly identifies his protagonists as his descendants.⁶²⁴ In addition to the Oscar Wilde framing, allusions to real glam rock bands, performers and individual works are scattered throughout the film, the character Jack Fairy quotes Jean Genet and one of the film's fictional bands' name *The Flaming Creatures* is the direct reference to the

⁶²⁴ For a thorough analysis of the film's positioning itself within the Oscar Wilde lineage, see Luciano, “Nostalgia.”

1963 Jack Smith film. On top of that, there is a brief exchange between two minor characters in *Polari*, the historical British gay slang, subtitled in English, thus making *Polari*, into a credible, autonomous language.⁶²⁵

Cecilia Barriga's 14-minute video *Meeting of Two Queens* uses footage from various films of two prototypical queer female icons, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo - rearranging and combining them into an evocative tale of female desire. It should be noted that as "through poaching, Barriga creates a lesbian text (instead of a subtext),"⁶²⁶ in the vein of creating a slash fiction from dominantly heterosexual content, the question arises whether the video should not have been included in the previous section concerned with queering history. The question and option are valid, but the chosen categorization highlights the slight, but crucial difference that Barriga's video works solely with filmic images of Dietrich and Garbo, not the actual personas of the actresses, and deliberately omits the historical context including any implications of their real life queerness.⁶²⁷



Figure 24: Still from *Meeting of Two Queens* (1991).

⁶²⁵ Paul Baker, *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men* (London and New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2002), 138-139.

⁶²⁶ Desjardins, "Meeting."

⁶²⁷ Desjardins, "Meeting."

Barriga's video provides an ideal transition between the two proposed vectors of this section, as it uses actual images of *queer iconography* in an active performance of queer spectatorship, *queering* these past cinematic images, that were previously grounded in the dominant heteronormative discourse, as in 'only potentially queer'. The distinction made here is between the blatant references to queer cultural history and the queer appropriation of predominantly heterosexual cinematic genres, tropes and paradigms - the seemingly oppositional double-reach, towards queer cultural history on one vector and towards 'heterosexual' (as oppository to queer) cinema shatters this perceived binary opposition in NQC films.

The segment *Horror* in *Poison* exploits the aesthetics and narrative tropes of the 1950's horror film, specifically the tropes of the mad scientist and the monster film. The serum the scientist isolates is the essence of human sexuality. The accidental use of the serum on himself triggers the evolution of the scientist to a monster - both literally, as his face and body undergo a disfiguring transformation and in the eyes of society, in which he induces fear due to his appearance and the contagious nature of his condition. *Horror* of course serves as a powerful and unsubtle AIDS metaphor, but the implications transgress this primary reading of the film - embedded in cinema's history, *Horror* explicitly names sexuality as source of monstrosity in horror films.



Figure 25: Screenshot from *Poison* (1991), segment 'Horror.'

Two of the principal NQC films are road movies - *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho*.⁶²⁸ They both queer two road movie sub-genres - the (heterosexual) outlaw couple road movie and the macho, heterosexual male (though homosocial and open to queer reading) buddy movie variant of the road movie. Katie Mills writes about the *The Living End* and how the act of using two male lovers as protagonists of the film subverts the genre:

[Araki] throws the presumptions of the road genre – especially its focus on the heterosexual male – into high relief. By deploying the road genre as the source of collective identifications and desires in which the two elopers run amok, Araki bridges the distance between private anarchy and political affiliation. These are rebels with a cause, simply by virtue of being gay in a road film.⁶²⁹

The sub-section regarding *queer reading* of dominantly heterosexual filmic texts quotes Cohan's essay on queering the buddy road movie series starring Hope and Crosby. Araki has been quoted regarding *The Living End* that "it's like a Hope/Crosby movie ... in which Crosby fucks Hope."⁶³⁰ The connection to the Hope/Crosby paradigm, in lieu of the buddy road movie genre and its implicit queerness, is also made regarding *My Own Private Idaho*:

Fifty years after [the Crosby and Hope film] *Road to Morocco*, the road movie can explore some of the erotic complexity of male–male friendships, without prohibitive cultural anxieties and Production Code pressure making comedy the only genre in which such questions can be honestly addressed.⁶³¹

Both films bring out the possible queerness of the road movie classic pairing and exploit its tropes to serve their narratives of two queer couples, the street hustlers Mike and Scott on the unsuccessful search for the former's mother in *Idaho*, and the latter's HIV-positive lovers Jon and Luke on a killing spree, heading "nowhere," or rather "off this fucking planet." On the formal level, both films go against the grain of generic road movie expectations - *Idaho* uses exclusively static imagery of the road

⁶²⁸ The films are sometimes reflected upon jointly, see for example the chapter "Growing Up Monstrous: My Private Idaho and The Living End," in Saunders, *Imps*, 21-41; as well as Adnum, "Private;" and the two complementary essays: Katie Mills, "Revitalizing the Road Genre. The Living End as an AIDS road film," in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), Adobe e-book, 307-329; and Robert Lang, "My Own Private Idaho and the New Queer Road Movies," in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), Adobe e-book, 330-348.

⁶²⁹ Mills, "Revitalizing," 308.

⁶³⁰ Adnum, "Private."

⁶³¹ Lang, "My Own," 335.

and *The Living End* mostly disregards the glimpses of passing landscapes, enclosing the visuals to the interior of the car and concentrating on the protagonists who fill the frames.



Figure 26: Screenshot from *The Living End* (1992).

Zero Patience employs the overt camp-ness of the musical and uses it to tell an explicitly queer story, of a young gay man dead from AIDS. The energetic and joyful musical numbers work subversively in the use of Hollywood camp for the theme and also against the gloomy, depressive mood of earlier AIDS films.⁶³² As Hallas writes, the film uses the AIDS iconography and "the generic framework of the musical facilitates the film's critique of the spectacle of AIDS."⁶³³

⁶³² See Knabe and Pearson, *Zero Patience*, chap. 1.

⁶³³ Roger Hallas, "The genealogical pedagogy of John Greyson's *Zero patience*." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* XII 1 (2003), 16-37. Accessed via the FIAF database.



Figure 27: Screenshot from *Zero Patience* (1993).

Todd Haynes queers melodrama, from *The Karen Carpenter Story*, through *Safe*,⁶³⁴ and most pointedly in *Far From Heaven*, which flaunts its status as an homage to late melodramas of Douglas Sirk, and found its direct inspiration in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955).⁶³⁵ Formally and visually evoking the film down to the details such as the credits, the film's narrative follows two lines of dissident desire, unthinkable in the 1950's melodrama - upper-class housewife's Cathy Whitaker's relationship with her black gardener Raymond and her husband's Frank's homosexual affair, that leads to the dissolution of their marriage as he chooses not to undergo counseling but leave with his lover. The socially subversive context of such pairings comes to the fore in the use of the genre of 1950's domestic melodrama, the inherent "straightness' [of which] is, ironically, the key to the queer force of Haynes's return to classic Hollywood form."⁶³⁶

To sum up, NQC films highlight their place in the larger context of the queer cultural lineage, using varied in-diegesis references, quotes and appropriations of visual works, literary texts and even actual figures from this lineage, that together form the map of queer iconography. They embed and allude to works of queer auteurs of the *old queer cinema* (Pasolini, Cocteau, Fassbinder...), actively claiming

⁶³⁴ See Anat Pick, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of Abstraction," in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 145-155.

⁶³⁵ Luciano, "Coming Around," 249.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

the heritage from which they descend. Simultaneously, they interact and appropriate dominantly 'straight' cinematic tradition, subverting cinema's heteronormative history (or 'rewriting it,' as Mennel remarked about *Swoon*) and activating its inherent queerness - the heterosexual *buddy film* configuration and the monster horror are traditionally the 'straight' genres with a queer potential, as are the musical and female-centered melodrama (see section 2.2.3 Queer reading). The proposed two-vector distinction between queer/straight, is thus exposed as frail by these NQC films - 'straight' cinema is queered and placed within the queer heritage.

Further examples entwining the modes of utilization of queer iconography and queering dominantly straight cultural text, most of all filmic genres and tropes in NQC films could follow, for example, the use of William Shakespeare's works in Jarman's *The Tempest* (1979) and *Angelic Conversations* (1987), as well as the appropriation of Shakespeare's plays *Henry IV* and *Henry V* in *My Own Private Idaho* - whereas it could be discussed whether Shakespeare is a queer cultural icon or these films do queer the 'straight' Shakespeare (or both, and ask the same with Christopher Marlowe, whose *Edward II* is loosely adapted by Jarman's eponymous film). The use of established genres can examine Cheryl Dunye's subversive use of documentary tropes to create a fictional film that can be mistaken for a documentary in *The Watermelon Woman*,⁶³⁷ whose fictional female director is a character modeled on Dorothy Arzner.⁶³⁸ On another level, understanding NQC film as a new genre precedent, an inquiry could examine the continued lineage of queer films that are documentaries about performers and queer spaces following *Paris is Burning* as well as the popular and audience-friendly gay and lesbian romantic comedies that could be seen as following the box-office success⁶³⁹ of *Go Fish*.

The seminal post-scriptum film in this line of inquiry is the film, which according to Ruby B Rich, especially but not only from the queer cinema perspective, "alters our perceptions so thoroughly that cinema history thereafter has to arrange itself around

⁶³⁷ Again, see Foote, "Hoax."

⁶³⁸ Alexandra Juhasz, "A Stake in the Future: Transforming Queer Cinema, Staying Dissonant," in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 264.

⁶³⁹ See Vachon and Edelstein, *Shooting*.

it” - *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The watershed moment for queer film represented by the film is widely agreed,⁶⁴⁰ while some queer film scholars do not share Rich’s excitement for the film, for example Nick Davis acknowledging the paradigmatic shift of the film’s success, while dismissing the work itself as a “bourgeois melodrama”⁶⁴¹ with “imported queer themes.”⁶⁴² The film is a chronicle of a decades-long romance between two ranch-hands, starting in the 1960’s, set in the rural Wyoming. Since the summer they met and started their affair, the film follows their lives, as they both get married and have children and concentrates on their intermittent, scarce meetings over the years and the painful impossibility of having a life together, shaped by perceived as well as internalized homophobia.

Brokeback Mountain is ‘the gay cowboy movie’ and ‘the gay western,’ the subversive force lying in the superficially insurmountable⁶⁴³ pairing of the hyper-masculine icon of the cowboy and the western genre and the uber-romantic narrative of a doomed love story of a same-sex relationship. Erica Spohrer writes: “*Brokeback Mountain*’s most profound genre impact is not on the future of the Western genre but on its past: by inserting *Brokeback Mountain* into the Western canon, critics force a re-vision, a re-seeing of all Westerns that have preceded it.”⁶⁴⁴

Following this line of discourse, it is of interest to keep inquiring how the appropriation of queer iconography and queering popular genres, at least in terms of introducing queer characters, fares in mainstream high-budget films and what subversion it can bring to the heteronormative discourse, for example in ‘outing’

⁶⁴⁰ In the *Variety* feature for the film’s release 10th anniversary, it says: “This year marks the 10th anniversary of “*Brokeback Mountain*,” which made history as the first gay romance to cross over into the mainstream, eventually grossing \$178 million worldwide. Nearly a decade later, it’s still the most successful same-sex love story that Hollywood has ever produced.” (Ramin Setoodeh, “*Brokeback Mountain*’s’ 10th Anniversary: Ang Lee and James Schamus Look Back,” *Variety*, June 28, 2015, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/making-brokeback-mountain-ang-lee-james-schamus-gay-romance-film-1201529588>.) It is also of interest, that James Schamus, the film’s producer who, as mentioned in the article, was trying to have the adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story greenlit for years, was the executive producer of early NQC films *Swoon* and *Poison*.

⁶⁴¹ Davis, “View,” 635.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ For a study of the queerness of the western and previous instances which employ the mixture, in connotation and openly, especially recalling Andy Warhol’s *Lonesome Cowboys*, see Judith Halberstam, “Not So Lonesome Cowboys: The Queer Western,” in *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. William R. Handley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 190-203.

⁶⁴⁴ Erika Spohrer, “Not a gay cowboy movie?: *Brokeback Mountain* and the importance of genre,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* XXXVII 1 (2009): 26-33, accessed via the FIAF database.

superheroes in the popular comic book franchises and even deliberately transposing the main conflict of a franchise as a parallel to queerness, like in *X-men*.⁶⁴⁵

5.3 Transgressive queer identities

Swoon's protagonists are two young men in a sexual and emotional relationship - but they are not necessarily 'homosexuals,' in terms of the contemporary denomination of a sexual identity, highlighting the critical separation of desire and behavior from the concept of a definite identity on the hetero/homo binary. Also, they are in a 'homosexual' relationship, seen from the vantage point of the early 1990's, in a time where very different psychiatric concepts interpreted same-sex behavior; before discourse of a distinct gay identity. Their relations to their identity as Jews is also explored. Both Leopold and Loeb of the film are intriguing, complex characters, whose set of defining attributes transgress their sexuality. The film affirmatively portrays their physical affection and sexuality on screen - pointing to the disintegrating division between private and public space, where queer sexuality is (not) confined and crashing the cinematic confines of connotative queerness. At the same time, equally openly, *Swoon* depicts their antisocial criminality and the horrendous thrill murder that seals the contract which is their marriage, escalating from the disturbing power dynamic of the couple.

The NQC films bring to the screen and explore a wide variety of queer identities, against the generic typology of Dyer's *stereotyping* and in accord with both Teresa de Lauretis's call for a wide array of queer voices and Eve Sedgwick's deliberately and pointedly open listing of what being queer can mean. As Mennel writes, "the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s mirrored queer theory's deconstruction of the sex/gender system."⁶⁴⁶ They break the 'connotative closet' and bring on explicit depictions of same-sex desire. Further, as Ruby Rich regarded towards *Swoon* and other NQC films listed in the original article, in their characters, they completely subvert the polarity of positive/negative representations. Instead, they embrace and play with the historical and cultural discourse of queerness as tied with moral depravity, criminality and violence.

⁶⁴⁵ See Barry S. Brummett, "Making Gay Sense of X-Men," in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, ed. Barry S. Brummet (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 215-232.

⁶⁴⁶ Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, Conclusion.

The NQC films set in the past are, by default of the setting and the contemporary perspective, examining same-sex desire, sex and relationships before the modern, essentialist post-Stonewall *gay/lesbian identity*. Far back to the past go the listed films of Derek Jarman. Both *The Hours and Times* and *Far From Heaven* look, literally, behind the closed doors that confined queer desire.

Part of the meta-humor in *Urinal* stems from how differently its resurrected queer cultural avatars access their queerness when they find themselves in the present and in the modern activist discourse. *Velvet Goldmine* plays with the 1970's glam paradigm of bisexuality, reflecting the time when, as Todd Haynes reflects, "it was so much about blurring boundaries between gay and straight, between men and women."⁶⁴⁷ *Young Soul Rebels* crosses interracial, subcultural (soul-boys, skinheads, punks) and sexual anchoring of its characters on the 1970's scene.

The films which are set in the present open the array of intersecting identities: In Bruce LaBruce's *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991), a slightly effeminate punk/queer-core hairdresser, played by the director himself, acts out his infatuation with a young skinhead, clashing the punk and skin scenes, with femininity and masculinity playfully subverted in comedy with explicit erotic scenes. Marlon Riggs examines the contemporary gay black male experience in America in his essay-film *Tongues Untied* (1989) and one of the outcomes of the inquiry tackles the very core of the prevalent essentialist approach to identity, not in the realm of theory but in lived experience: "black gay men are often isolated from the larger social networks in which they allegedly belong: many experience homophobia within African American communities and racism within white gay communities."⁶⁴⁸ Cheryl Dunye questions what it had meant to be a black lesbian historically and in the present in *The Watermelon Woman*, how the two politically charged identities intersect and interact.

The group of friends in *Go Fish* offers a colorful palette of young women, who identify as lesbians and have different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and differing expressions of gender and understandings of their identity status as

⁶⁴⁷ James, "Haynes."

⁶⁴⁸ Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 237-8.

lesbians: they are white, black, Asian, femme, butch, tomboy, androgynous, activist; all imagining a wedding wearing flush, white gown and having sex with a man. Debates among the protagonists regarding their navigation along these identity avenues while figuring out romance and friendship constitute a bulk of dialogue scenes in the film.



Figure 28: Screenshot from *Go Fish* (1994).

In *Paris is Burning*, the portrait of a specific subcultural practice, ballroom culture in New York City of the late 1980's, the protagonists of the documentary are a mixture of trans, gay and drag queer people, mostly Hispanic or black, leading Hildebrand to remark that that “the film prefigured the rise of multi-racial, queer, and eventually transgender casting”⁶⁴⁹ in mainstream media. *Paris* highlights the dedicated queer spaces and practices of performance, including a linguistic line of enquiry within the film of usage of charged words outside and within the community.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁹ Hildebrand, *Paris*, Introduction.

⁶⁵⁰ At the same time, the treatment of queerness and especially drag was critiqued by Judith Butler as problematic - see Butler, *Bodies*.



Figure 29: Paris Is Burning (1990) promotional still.

My Own Private Idaho is set in the community of street hustlers in Portland, and the Gus Van Sant film makes several poignant distinctions regarding sexual practices, identity and class, exemplified on the evolution of the character of Scott, who simultaneously moves on these axes, the "passages from youth to adulthood, from poverty to affluence, from homosexual to heterosexual affiliation, from passivity to (corporate/political/procreative) industry."⁶⁵¹ Scott is a hustler, who practices sex with men for money but firmly states that *love* between men is impossible. His endeavor in hustling and living among the homeless is an articulated rebellion against his father, a conservative corporate mogul. After the father's death he assumes his role as his heir, with a beautiful fiancée at his side and abandons his former companions, thus highlighting the possibility of assuming and shedding identities and roles, as well as positioning homosexuality as transgressive, socially unacceptable and relegated to the margins of society, while procreative heterosexuality is tied with the status of wealth and the desired status quo.⁶⁵²

Further down the line of the union between queerness and criminality are *Poison's* prisoners in *Homo*, as the protagonist John Broom narrates in the opening sequence: "In submitting to prison life, embracing it, I could reject the world that had rejected me." The raw masculinity and desire in *Homo* is entwined with violence and homophobic bullying, which is presented as highly erotic and explored as it functions

⁶⁵¹ Paul Arthur, "'My Own Private Idaho' and the Traversal of Welles, Shakespeare, and Liminality," *Post Script* Vol. XVII Nr. 2 (1998): 26-38, accessed via the FIAF database. Arthur in the essay also explores the (we could add 'queering' in the sense of the previous section) relationship of *Idaho* to Orson Welles's *Falstaff* (1967).

⁶⁵² For a differently arranged analysis of the binary of homo/hetero in *Idaho*, see Saunders, *Imps*, 37-38.

in the environment of the correctional system, and thus drawing on the model of 'situational' homosexual behavior by males in confinement, and the hierarchic power structuring fuelled simultaneously by the schism of homophobia and homosociality. The relationship and erotic encounters of Broom and Jack Bolton are set between the spaces of the prison cells, while John's fantasies of the outdoors, violence and sensuous intimacy blend through both of them. Additionally, two specific instances stand out as direct subversions in relation to the heteronormative society: Firstly, the fantasy marriage ceremony, witnessed by prison "comrades" of the two grooms (one wearing a white lace bridal veil).



Figure 29: Screenshot from *Poison* (1991), the wedding ceremony in segment 'Homo.'

Another is the joint mockery of the 'naming' practice, the inseparability of sexual acts and identity, as well as unspeakable nature of homosexuality. As the warden admitting Broom to the prison mumbles while inquiring whether he "engages in the practice of...," he is unable to finish the question, to which Bolton nonetheless firmly states "Yes," prompting the warden to asks whether "that word there," he has scribbled into his file, is written as "homosodomy."⁶⁵³

The Living End's protagonists, the HIV-positive lovers Luke and Jon are on the run (and a killing spree) after Luke, the hustler, has killed a homophobic cop. The proclaimed nihilism, ironic wit, and sensuous depiction of their sexual relationship

⁶⁵³ See also Jon Davies, "Nurtured in Darkness: Queer Childhood in the Films of Todd Haynes," in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison. (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 58.

mixed with the celebratory framing of their killings as something justified, combine into the provocative and hyperbolic rejection of *any* societal norms. As Luke's graffiti unambiguously states: "I blame society." The extreme (and witty, on top of that) parable of the irreparable clash, escalated by the AIDS pandemic, between queers and 'normal' society provides an in-your-face affirmative outlook at queer sexuality and relationships because as Saunders points out "araki's gay men, monsters that they are, prove to have a more stable relationship than do the other characters of the film,"⁶⁵⁴ while "[the] film attacks the notion that gay sexuality is monstrous, by depicting it, straightforwardly and believably, as beautiful and intense and fuck you if you're not ready for it."⁶⁵⁵ It escalates in the final scene, set out in the open, with Luke's fucking Jon and sucking on his with the gun, in the absolute conversion of the dangerous, erotic and transgressing death.



Figure 30: Promotional still for The Living End (1992), the closing scene.

The discourse of queer sexuality as perverse, dangerous and criminal is explored and simultaneously subverted by several NQC films - by embracing the figure of the 'sexual outlaw,' with its echelon of cinematic queer villains and monsters and its Genet-ian legacy. It rejects also the assimilationist call to depict gay and lesbian sexuality as 'normal,' by showing it as normative, sanitized, monogamous and confined to the bedroom; a sterile derivative in order to not offend or threaten the

⁶⁵⁴ Saunders, *Imps*, 38.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

heterosexual audience. As Pidduck writes: "new queer cinema deploys desire as an unruly, transgressive force that unsettles normative social structures, tidy endings and stable identity formations alike."⁶⁵⁶

On top of the "frank depictions of sex"⁶⁵⁷ itself, understood as the unifying feature of NQC films,⁶⁵⁸ it is important to point out that they do not shy away from sexual practices that are often viewed as transgressive even from within the gay community, like hustling (in *Idaho*, *Living End* and Bruce LaBruce's *Hustler White* (1996)) and cruising (in Jarman's films).⁶⁵⁹ The subsequent inquiries would follow the pushing of boundaries in depicting queer sex further, exemplified by John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*, and looking at pre-pubescent queerness, through Todd Haynes's films.⁶⁶⁰

As Pidduck notes, the "triangle of desire, death and criminality illustrates a historical refusal of positive image strategies by new queer film-makers."⁶⁶¹ (On a side-note from the vantage point of 2015, when a strong vein of the radical queer opposes the assimilationist efforts for marriage equality, it is interesting to view the early 1990's allusions to same-sex marriage in these *radically queer* films - the marriage framing of the Leopold and Loeb relationship in *Swoon*, the wedding gown fantasies of the *Go Fish* lesbians, the wedding sequence in *Poison*'s 'Homo.')

The "dark lovers"⁶⁶² pairings cultivating the queer-criminal motif in these 'canon' NQC films are exclusively male.⁶⁶³ In order to examine this course of its horizon in regard to female same-sex desire, we need to look into the parallel 'lesbians who kill' expansion of NQC, and employ at least a partial, against-the-grain position in order

⁶⁵⁶ Pidduck, "After 1980."

⁶⁵⁷ Cunningham and Crimmings, "New Queer," 27.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., this point is also made in Morrison, "View."

⁶⁵⁹ See Ellis, *Angelic*, 114-184.

⁶⁶⁰ See Davies's essay that takes this angle to survey Haynes's films - Davies, "Nurtured." Additionally, it is interesting to note that one of the rare films that explore queer identity in children, the intriguing *Bad Hair* (2013) won the main prize at IFF San Sebastian, awarded by a jury presided by Haynes. ("San Sebastian: 'Bad Hair' Wins Golden Shell Award," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 28, 2013, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/san-sebastian-bad-hair-wins-638645>.)

⁶⁶¹ Pidduck, "After 1980," drawing on Arroyo, "Death."

⁶⁶² Saunders's fitting expression for the central couples in *Swoon* and *The Living End* - see Saunders, *Imps*.

⁶⁶³ The suggestive explanation would highlight firstly, that historically the criminalization of same-sex sexuality was overwhelmingly directed at male-on-male acts, and secondly, that the discursive perception of sex itself as criminal because of the AIDS pandemic designated male homosexuality and promiscuity as the 'perpetrator.'

to accept them as transgressive⁶⁶⁴ in how they deal with queer female sexuality. Here we are posing the precautionary question whether they are examples of continuing the exploitative 'male-gaze' based lineage, and opening the wide field of inquiry of queer audience reception. Following a different line, two films suggestively stand out as direct parallels that could be paired with NQC sexual outlaw films, and in comparison offer an intriguing insight into queer-based transgressivity in cinema: *Thelma & Louise* (1991) as a feminist-with-a-question-mark variant of *The Living End* (invigorated by the fact, that the latter expressly quotes the film - showing the heroines' continued fate, if they had not died, as lesbian vigilantes);⁶⁶⁵ and even more strongly Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, that are in many eerily similar aspects an outright lesbian companion piece to *Swoon*.

Building on the diversity angle of portraying queer identities in NQC, the pivotal observation is aimed at the void where trans* characters are missing (apart from *Paris*). The two trans* themed films that are tied to NQC, and the comparison of which along the arguments laid out in these section here would provide an interesting starting point, are *Boys Don't Cry*, released to unprecedented mainstream success in 1999 and pointedly critiqued from the queer angle,⁶⁶⁶ and the queer darling, hailed as resurrecting the energy and edginess of NQC, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

A crucial caveat remark regarding NQC films is an implicitly evident one, but it needs to be stated - all of them have queer desire and identity at their center, but they do not revolve their respective narrative arches around the *determination* (and subsequent acceptance) of their character's sexual orientation or gender identity, thus transgressing the coming out narrative trope. We can pose a stark contrast between NQC's characters, who do not define themselves on the basis of their sexuality and the generic, sympathetic gay or lesbian character who journeys through their respective film overcoming obstacles stemming from accepting their sexual orientation and being in love with an incompatible partner (either straight or in denial about their own homosexuality).⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁴ See section 3.3 of this thesis and the arguments for this position in Pidduck, "After 1980," and Kelly, "Bound."

⁶⁶⁵ This interpretation of the sequence is offered by Grundmann, see Grundmann, "bad boys."

⁶⁶⁶ See Halberstam, *Queer Time*.

⁶⁶⁷ The lineage of coming-out-films precedes as well as succeeds NQC on the queer film history timeline (see Pidduck, "After 1980.") To offer my own observation from the queer film festival circuit,

Turning to the present, this is the place to attest to a seminal event in the wider political context of this thesis, which occurred during its writing - namely the marriage equality ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court on July 9, 2015. Effectively, same-sex marriage is fully recognized by all federal states - there were five in July 2011, when Marriage Equality Act was passed by New York State Legislature, making New York the sixth. This event is crucial to Ira Sachs' film *Love is Strange* (2014) as the two protagonists, men who have been in a relationship for thirty-nine years, legally marry in New York City soon after it is made possible and trigger unforeseen events as one of them immediately loses his job as a music teacher at a church-run school. One controversy was aroused around the film, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2014 to quite universal acclaim, and that was the rating given by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America). The film is rated "R" - "Restricted," which is a the second harshest rating currently, and practically a death-sentence for box-office success. J. Bryan Lowder,⁶⁶⁸ Stephen Witty⁶⁶⁹ and *Indiewire's* queer blog's writers⁶⁷⁰ have all expressed their outrage at the rating that is perceived to be unfair and actually homophobic. As they all point out, the rating is "one normally reserved for movies that prominently feature violence, sex, or crude language",⁶⁷¹ none of which applies to the film apart from a few curse-words that would, as they all agree, get a pass in a *straight* film.

The case seeks to illustrate, how in the wake of enormous changes in the general societal attitude towards queer people (sometimes summed under the short-cut 'from prison to the altar in X years'), queerness can still be perceived as a 'threat.' One other aspect of *Love is Strange* that deserves highlighting in the context of this section and all its young, hot protagonists - its central couple are queer seniors and though the film does not show them having sex, the portrayal of their relationship is anything but desexualized.

⁶⁶⁸ Bryan J. Lowder, "Love Is Strange, but the Movie's R Rating Is Stranger," *Slate*, August 21, 2014, accessed January 11, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/08/21/_love_is_strange_rated_r_is_the_mpaa_s_rating_system_homophobic.html.

⁶⁶⁹ Stephen Witty, "Why the MPAA thinks all gay people should be rated 'R'," *NJ*, August 20, 2014, accessed Jan 10 2015, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2014/08/why_the_mpaa_thinks_all_gay_people_should_be_rate_d_r.html.

⁶⁷⁰ "Why Is 'Love Is Strange' Rated R?" *bent*, August 21, 2014, accessed Jan 10 2015, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/bent/why-is-love-is-strange-rated-r-20140821>.

⁶⁷¹ Lowder, "Love."

The question of direct depictions of queer sexuality (both in terms of showing physical affection and sex as well as 'confirming' characters' non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity) finds a abundant field for inquiry in popular television. We can explore *diversity* (for example looking at *Glee* and *Orange is the New Black*, which also points to the links between sexuality and criminality among women), over-sexualization in niche gay/lesbian shows (*Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*), 'token gay characters' (*Game of Thrones*) as well as the revised return of *connotative queerness* - as *queerbaiting* (*Sherlock*) or intelligent and layered use of homoerotic *subtext* tied with criminality (*Hannibal*).

5.4 New queer authorship: the personal is the political

Swoon as a film project was driven by writer/director/editor/co-producer Tom Kalin's personal desire and fascination, intersected with the ambition to add a *revisionist* reading (implied by Kalin and interpreted by Rich) of a gruesome event of queer history at the time of the AIDS pandemic turmoil and renewed institutional homophobia. The cinematic and critical reception context of the film highlighted the 'paradox' that a film about queer killers, at the height of protest against this treatment of queers by the 'straight Hollywood,' is made as a personal-political project by an openly gay man and AIDS activist.

In the realm of queer film studies, as Dyer and Benshoff and Griffin show in introducing their methodology, the sexuality of the director (and other film's authors) is of paramount importance - even the more recent approaches that claim to transcend the basic 'evaluative' aspect of the Russo-like approach that translates gay/straight into good/bad, factor this question in.⁶⁷²

Going back to the concept of *minority authorship*, two key remarks provide the framework for surveying the *new queer auteurs*: David Gerstner writes that "auteur theory in cinema is rooted in the theatrics of a political gesture."⁶⁷³ Janet Staiger translates the question of authorship into "causality for the film."⁶⁷⁴ For NQC's

⁶⁷² An overview of the individual studies included in the pronouncedly 'post-Russo' anthologies support this claim, see Hanson, *Out-takes*; Griffiths, *Queer Europe*; Juett and Jones, *Coming Out*; as well as Glyn Davis, Gary Needham, eds., *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), Kindle edition.

⁶⁷³ Gerstner, "Practices."

⁶⁷⁴ Staiger, "Authorship."

directors, we can establish a *political causality* of their authorship, both from the perspective of the filmmakers and in the manner that the author-as-discourse functions. While bearing the risk of reductive essentialism in mind, their queerness is fundamental to that political causality. Keeping in mind also the potentially superfluous tendency in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin's fear of "naive biographism,"⁶⁷⁵ the framework of New Queer authorship is indebted to the ethos of the famous feminist catch-phrase 'the personal is political.'⁶⁷⁶

The Watermelon Woman producer as well as actress (playing the Dorothy Arzner-inspired white director) Alexandra Juhasz formulates the film's exploration of identity in relation to history⁶⁷⁷ climaxes in order to "empower Cheryl, at the end, to conclude 'I am a black lesbian filmmaker and I have a lot to say.'"⁶⁷⁸ Dunye's own statement, in 1992, lauds "I'm continually pushing those boundaries of cultural politics, identity politics, and personal politics."⁶⁷⁹ Upon the film's initial reception, as it was by many thought to be a "nonfiction autobiographical narrative,"⁶⁸⁰ blending the fictional Cheryl with Cheryl Dunye. The continual affirmation of the *black lesbian filmmaker* voice is inherent to the themes in Dunye's work as well as to its reflection.⁶⁸¹

As Ruby Rich's original article underlines, a key, originating feature of the NQC discourse was that these were queer-themed films made by openly queer filmmakers.

⁶⁷⁵ Gerstner, "Practices."

⁶⁷⁶ Carol Hanisch landmark 1969 essay bears the title and the content of the essay is an elaboration of its implications. However, she did not name the piece. See the original essay and its 2006 introduction - Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political. The Women's Liberation Movement classic with a new explanatory introduction," *Carol Hanisch website*, January 2006, accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>. 'The personal is (the) political' was a widely used slogan of the Second Wave Feminism (see Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film*, chap.), with *political* "in the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics." (Hanisch, "Personal.")

⁶⁷⁷ In the words of Foote, reflecting on the film on the 10th anniversary of its theatrical release, "critically examining the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, class, and age within the context of the contemporary black lesbian subject's relationship to the past." (Foote, "Hoax.")

⁶⁷⁸ Juhasz, "Stake," 265.

⁶⁷⁹ Foote, "Hoax."

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ See Rich, "New Queer;" Mennel, *Queer Cinema*, chap. 4. See also Laura L. Sullivan, "Chasing Fae: 'The Watermelon Woman' and Black Lesbian Possibility," *Callaloo* Vol. 23 No. 1 (2000): 448-460, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299571>; and the chapter on Dunye in the aptly titled anthology - Mark Winokur, "Body and Soul," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-representations by African American Women*, eds. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 231-252.

Also, Rich and her critics pose crucial questions regarding essentially-framed diversity *within* the envelope of queer authorship. As with Dunye, it is *relevant* that the exploration of black homosexual desire in *Looking for Langston*, *Young Soul Rebels* and *Tongues Untied* is performed by black gay authors. Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs (contrasting the fetishization of black bodies by the white gay gaze). Similarly, it matters that the survey of lesbian dating, friendship and sex is done from the perspective of Rose Troche, as a lesbian answer to the male-gaze based fancies of female sexuality. Conversely, as Hildebrand recounts, there was identity-based criticism directed at Jennie Livingston, as an *upper-class white Jewish lesbian cis-woman* making a documentary about socially excluded drag queens and trans* people of color.⁶⁸²

The following paragraphs look more closely at two of the NQC directors, namely Gregg Araki and Todd Haynes. Their body of work stretches far beyond the historically strict markings of NQC and the essentialist ‘New Queer’, as well as the ‘queer auteur’ label that has followed them throughout their careers.⁶⁸³ The two condensed ‘auteur profiles’ seek to show how the discourse of the (new) queer auteur ties into the directors’ queerness, both in terms of personal sexual orientation and its public acknowledgment, to their films’ content as well as style, and reversely, how they interact with it.

James Moran explores Gregg Araki’s films in terms of “continuity”⁶⁸⁴ of content and aesthetics (the articulated post-modern approach and use of the pastiche techniques),⁶⁸⁵ with the bind holding them together being the writer–director’s⁶⁸⁶ “critical gay voice.”⁶⁸⁷ Glyn Davis, in Aaron’s anthology, presents Araki in one of the two case-studies focused on a single director, enveloping his films in a reading

⁶⁸² Lucas Hildebrand, *Paris is Burning. A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), Kindle edition, Introduction.

⁶⁸³ Unlike the maverick NQC ‘godfather’ Derek Jarman. For a dedicated study that shows how Jarman’s personal life translated loudly and politically into his films, see Ellis, *Angelic*. For Gus Van Sant, whose auteur-discourse cyclically evolves around the labels ‘openly gay’ and ‘post-gay’, see Staiger’s case study of his authorship - Staiger, “Van Sant.”

⁶⁸⁴ James M. Moran, "Gregg Araki: Guerrilla Film-Maker for a Queer Generation," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 50 No. 1 (1996): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213324>.

⁶⁸⁵ Moran, “Araki,” 19-21.

⁶⁸⁶ On his first four features, Araki was also the cinematographer and editor. (Hart, *Araki*, chap. 1.)

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

through “queer camp.”⁶⁸⁸ Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, in his 2010 monograph on Araki, casts him as “one of the limited number of auteurs working in U.S. cinema today,”⁶⁸⁹ as well as a “pioneer of New Queer Cinema”⁶⁹⁰ and surveys his oeuvre in terms of “cinematic representations of non-heterosexuals”⁶⁹¹ which are brought on in his “established in-your-face style and extreme sexual/violent imagery,”⁶⁹² which started to lose its “radical/subversive potential”⁶⁹³ by the end of the 1990’s.

What is Araki’s own take on the queer auteur discourse into which his work is embedded? He is consistently dismissive of labels⁶⁹⁴ when it comes to his sexuality (and race) and works the expectations into the performative discourse of his own, as exemplified, three years following *The Living End*, which made him one of the key public personas of NQC;⁶⁹⁵ by subtitling *Doom Generation* (1995) as ‘A Heterosexual Film by Gregg Araki.’⁶⁹⁶ In 2007, looking back at his films, Araki shares that he sees each of them as a “Polaroid snapshot”⁶⁹⁷ or “time capsule”⁶⁹⁸ of a certain period of his life, adding:

My work as always been more personal than political, but as we all know there is a huge crossover. ... The film [The Living End] ... came from a very real and very specific time and place and mood, where being gay felt like a political act in itself - in a much more radical way than today.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁸⁸ Glyn Davis, "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director: Case Study - Gregg Araki," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 53-67.

⁶⁸⁹ Hart, *Araki*, chap. 1; see also the 2014 interview with Araki for *Out*, where he is also presented as an “auteur,” with the interviewer Michael Musto lightly hinting at continuity of his work (“I knew it was an Araki film when I saw a gay best friend and a hunky guy,”) especially in the terms of the focus on “young outsiders you’re obsessed with,” later asking head-on about how does Araki identify in terms of his sexuality and its relevance for working in the industry (the title of the interview includes “Being Gay in Hollywood”) - Michael Musto, "Gregg Araki on His New Movie, *White Bird in a Blizzard*, and Being Gay in Hollywood," *Out*, October 20, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/michael-musto/2014/10/20/gregg-araki-new-movie-white-bird-blizzard-being-gay-hollywood>.

⁶⁹⁰ Hart, *Araki*, chap. 1.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ See the interviews with Araki - Musto, "Araki;" and Matthew Hays, "Gregg Araki: Nowhere Man," in *The View From Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers*, by Matthew Hays (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 35-42.

⁶⁹⁵ Aaron, "New Queer," 8; Hart, *Araki*, chap. 1.

⁶⁹⁶ See Moran, “Araki.”

⁶⁹⁷ Hays, "Araki," 37.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.; 38.

Dennis Cooper writes in the foreword to the published screenplay to *The Living End*, reacting to the “‘Queer Film’ tag:”⁷⁰⁰

That Araki’s Asian American and queer is beside the point, though it is that both aspects are generating interest in his oeuvre at the moment, if that is what it takes. ... “Queer” is a useful way to define yourself, sure, just as long as it gives you a thrill, or it intimidates people in power, or it provides you and your friends with power, but otherwise... who cares? ... Point is, are we so lazy or scared that we’ll not only let ourselves be bunched together behind the minority art banner, we’ll let this construction design our art-making practices, even if these compromises turn our work, no matter how radical, into minor tempests in a societal teapot? Fuck that.⁷⁰¹

In 1995, Todd Haynes voiced the unifying theme of his three films to date as disease ⁷⁰² - anorexia in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), the mysterious environmental allergy that affects the protagonist of *Safe* (1995) and *Poison*, which is "absolutely the result of AIDS and also a result of Genet"⁷⁰³ as well as "a love letter to James."⁷⁰⁴ He also consistently highlights feminist theory⁷⁰⁵ as an underpinning of his work, questioning and disrupting the notions of identification and identity,⁷⁰⁶ and notes that the attack on the idea of a fixed identity (in the familiar territory of queer theory)⁷⁰⁷ runs through his work as a thread⁷⁰⁸ - exemplified by the audience-identification experiment of *Superstar*, starring Barbie

⁷⁰⁰ Dennis Cooper, Foreword, in *The Living End: An Irresponsible Book by gregg araki*, by Gregg Araki (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), 3.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Haynes in Saunders, 1995, reprinted in Leyda (ed.), 2014

⁷⁰³ Justin Wyatt, “Cinematic/ Sexual: An Interview with Todd Haynes,” in *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. Julia Leyda (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), Kindle edition.

⁷⁰⁴ Meaning James Lyons, editor of *Poison* as well as star of the film’s segment *Homo* (in the role of Jack Bolton) and Haynes’s partner at the time. (Todd Haynes, introduction to the screening of *Poison* in Prague, November 15, 2011.)

⁷⁰⁵ In the introduction to the joint publication of the screenplays to *Superstar*, *Safe* and *Far From Heaven* his “women’s films”, Haynes writes that “the imprint of feminism would clearly be at its core. From my first encounter with the invigorating notion of gender as product of ideology, feminist theory left an indelible mark on my own critical - and creative - thinking. ... For me, everything that I questioned about what it meant to be a man - and how much my sexuality would perpetually challenge those meanings - could be found in arguments posed by feminists. What can I say? I identified.” (Todd Haynes, “Three Screenplays: An Introduction,” in *Far From Heaven, Safe, and Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story: Three Screenplays*, by Todd Haynes (New York: Grove Press, 2007), vii.) See also the 1992 interview - Wyatt, “Haynes.”

⁷⁰⁶ Haynes, Prague.

⁷⁰⁷ For a broad interpretation of Haynes’s films in their relation to (mainly post-structuralist) theoretical concepts that are intentionally embedded in them, see James Morrison, “Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice,” in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. James Morrison (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 132-144.

⁷⁰⁸ Haynes, Prague.

dolls, to *I'm Not There*, which is the biography of Bob Dylan through six different personas, played by different actors, each in a distinct formal style.



Figure 31: Promotional still for *I'm Not There* (2007).

As Michael DeAngelis writes in his case study of Haynes as a *NQC auteur*: "Haynes has developed narrative strategies that steer New Queer Cinema towards a version of social constructionism that strives to express something integral to a uniquely queer perspective on human experience."⁷⁰⁹ His interpretation works with the notion of "dialectic 'imagining'",⁷¹⁰ the tool of which is fantasy, resulting in a "politically engaged version of New Queer Cinema whose power and momentum stem from relationships of identification and desire, the dynamics of which implicate protagonists and viewers alike."⁷¹¹ In the dedicated issue of the feminist journal *camera obscura*,⁷¹² two scholars discuss Haynes's "signature" that runs through his oeuvre⁷¹³ - one focusing on the formal side in his use of the tracking shot and the dichotomy of pathos and pathology,⁷¹⁴ the other on the theme of abjection.⁷¹⁵

⁷⁰⁹ Michael DeAngelis, "The Characteristics of New Queer Filmmaking: Case Study - Todd Haynes," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 42.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁷¹² *camera obscura* 57 Vol.19 No. 3 (2004).

⁷¹³ Haynes himself, as well as the above quoted scholars (among others) present a two-lane outline of his filmography, namely his "women's films" and the "more personal" queer films - see Haynes, "Introduction.")

⁷¹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes," *camera obscura* 57 Vol.19 No. 3 (2004): 1-21.

Haynes's engagement with the queer auteur discourse is very present in the interviews he gives, pointing out that his sophomore feature, *Safe*, "doesn't have gay themes in it at all"⁷¹⁶ and his personal investment in preparing *Velvet Goldmine*, about the glam rock era of the 1970's which he considers, with regard to sexuality "far more progressive than the identity politics at work today. So now I find myself feeling nervous to be making a film about something I really *like*."⁷¹⁷ James Lyons, who suggested the subject of the film to Haynes, co-wrote the story and edited it, elaborates, touching on the issue of expectations in regard to sexual politics:

It was a moment when it was cool even for straight people to appear bisexual. ... *Velvet Goldmine* was conceived in 1990, when sex had become straitjacketed, so there's a clear nostalgia for that period when we believed that we were going to have a better and better society, and that feminism would win, and homosexuality would be completely accepted.⁷¹⁸

When asked about essentialism in 1992, Haynes commented:

I don't believe that there is an essential gay sensibility either. What is so interesting about minorities identifying themselves historically and rewriting their own history is that, in a sense, it is an attempt to create an essential difference that isn't really true. But it's one that they are writing, as opposed to the status quo. So it's a way of disarming the conventions of difference that have been imposed on us and rewriting our own differences.⁷¹⁹

The intersection of private and political causality anchors the NQC films and the new queer authorship. The two lengthy quotes by Cooper (regarding Araki) and Haynes pointedly illuminate its essentialist tension - queer as a useful and empowering function on one hand and the danger of marginalizing the queer voice exactly by wrapping it into the label of 'the queer voice' and nothing more.

Further inquiries revert to the very beginning of this thesis, namely how (and why) do we attribute *queer* to queer film? Is *I'm Not There*, which does not include

⁷¹⁵ Laura Christian, "Of Housewives and Saints: Abjection, Transgression, and Impossible Mourning in *Poison and Safe*," *camera obscura* 57 Vol.19 No. 3 (2004): 92-123.

⁷¹⁶ Haynes in Saunders, 1995

⁷¹⁷ Larry Gross, "Antibodies: Larry Gross Talks with *Safe*'s Todd Haynes," in *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. Julia Leyda (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), Kindle edition. Emphasis by the author.

⁷¹⁸ Amy Taubin, "All That Glitters: Todd Haynes Mines the Glam Rock Epoch," in *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. Julia Leyda (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), Kindle edition.

⁷¹⁹ Wyatt, "Haynes."

queer *representation*, apart from the gender-bending casting of Cate Blanchett in drag as one of the Dylan personas, a queer film? And if yes, is it because of the status of Todd Haynes as a queer auteur or because of its narrative and formal strategies of fracturing a fixed identity? The 'why' part of the question leads to the potent field of study of niche distribution channels and film festivals focused explicitly on queer film.

Another point of view turns to reception, both critical and audience. Did it retroactively change regarding the 'male-gaze lesbian film' *Bound* since one of its two directors, Lana Wachowski, came out as a transgender woman? And how important is the question of queer authorship to audiences, both queer and straight? This double-headed essentialist difference begs expanding the authorship of a film to actors and further into the reception territory, asking how the *knowledge* of an actor's sexuality informs the perception of his or hers performance - the openly lesbian Guinevere Turner starring in *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman* on one end, and the two straight (as far as we know) male, rising stars 'playing gay' in *My Own Private Idaho*. Further, it opens the question of the 'bankability' of an openly queer actor in mainstream films.

Stepping over to the recent present, two examples highlight the persistence of the essentialist-based expectations and 'evaluation' tied to the sexuality of the film director.

Andrew Haigh is, together with Ira Sachs, probably the most prominent voice of the contemporary *new new* queer cinema,⁷²⁰ taking a civil look at contemporary gay life with the festival hit *Weekend* (2011) and the HBO series *Looking* (2014-2015). The importance of gay authorship behind the works is a paramount argument in the discussion, especially in the case of *Looking*, "TV's only gay show"⁷²¹ with the watchword being *authenticity*.⁷²² Haigh's third feature film, *45 Years* (2015),

⁷²⁰ Walters, "New-wave."

⁷²¹ See Brian Moylan, "Looking season two: TV's only gay show is growing towards greatness," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/jan/12/looking-review-tvs-only-gay-show-is-growing-towards-greatness>.

⁷²² See for example Christopher Glazer, "Modern Love," *Out*, January 12, 2015, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/television/2014/01/14/looking-hbo-jonathan-groff-andrew-haigh>.

premiered in Main Competition at this year's Berlinale⁷²³ and much of the buzz, especially among queer festival programmers, concerned what we can dub *the gay twist expectation*, as the film's narrative is anchored by the discovery of the male protagonist's former lover's body and the influence this event has on his wife and their marriage of the titular forty-five years. The expectation was that the long-dead lover was a man and thus (repressed) homosexuality would be the plot twist of the film and probably its theme - an expectation that turned out to be untrue, founded in the discourse of a gay director who previously made work focused on gay characters, which Haigh himself acknowledges.⁷²⁴

In 2013, the reflection of two films that centre on lesbian desire and relationships came in comparison, with the dividing line that informed the discussion stemming from the very identity of the director. The Palme d'Or winner, *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) chronicles the relationship of two young women, Adèle⁷²⁵ and Emma. It is based on Julie Maroh's graphic novel and was adapted for the screen by Abdellatif Kechiche, who directed the film and co-wrote the screenplay with his frequent collaborator and editor (of *Blue* as well as three previous Kechiche's films) Ghalia Lacroix. While the film's political resonance in the context of the French marriage equality bill and the protests against it echoed in its reception,⁷²⁶ the focus of the controversy shifted to the polarity of sexual identity - the narrative of a lesbian relationship, based on a book by an out lesbian author, rendered by the heterosexual male director: "*Blue Is the Warmest Color*' is a lesbian love story directed by a straight man, and it shows."⁷²⁷ On the front line of the criticism were the notorious lengthy sex scenes between Adèle and Emma, not for their explicit nature per se, but because they represent, according to critics of a wide spectrum, an obvious display of

⁷²³ See "45 Years," Berlinale, accessed April 7, 2015, https://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2015/02_programm_2015/02_Filmdatenblatt_2015_201506056.php#tab=filmStills.

⁷²⁴ See the interview with Haigh - Nigel M. Smith, "Berlin: Andrew Haigh on Surprising With '45 Years' and the Future of 'Looking'," *Indiewire*, February 11, 2015, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.indiewire.com/article/berlin-andrew-haigh-on-surprising-with-45-years-and-the-future-of-looking-20150211>.

⁷²⁵ The original French title of the film underlines the focus on Adèle's character and her point of view - *La vie d'Adèle*.

⁷²⁶ See Darragh O'Donoghue, "Blue is the warmest color," *Cineaste* XXXIX 2 (2014): 40-42, accessed via the FIAF database.

⁷²⁷ Peter Debruge, "Despite Its Graphic Sex, 'Blue Is the Warmest Color' Leaves Much to Be Desired," *Variety*, November 19, 2013, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://variety.com/2013/film/columns/despite-its-graphic-sex-blue-is-the-warmest-color-leaves-much-to-be-desired-1200855132>.

the exploitative “male gaze”⁷²⁸ and were called out on their lack of authenticity which renders them problematic and “ridiculous.”⁷²⁹ The film up⁷³⁰ against *Blue* was *Concussion* (2013), a feature debut by the lesbian writer-director Stacie Passon, produced by Rose Troche, director of *Go Fish*. In reviews of the film, we find remarks contrasting its depiction of lesbian sexuality to *Blue*’s “inauthentic Sapphic displays [and] submitting to the male gaze.”⁷³¹ As a viewer review bluntly puts it: “Over the past year, I watched two films about lesbian women directed by men: *Blue is the Warmest Color* [sic], and *The Duke of Burgundy* [2014]. Stacie Passon, the director of *Concussion*, is a lesbian. It shows.”⁷³² The depiction of lesbian desire on film is being evaluated in terms of *authenticity* and Kechiche’s work in *Blue* remains an exemplary case in that respect - as a review of the young lesbian romance *The Summer of Sangaile* (2015) shows: “Unlike, say, ‘Blue is the Warmest Color,’ which still took female beauty from a male point of view, Kavaïté [the female writer-director of the film] clearly knows the parts of a woman's body that would find Auste falling

⁷²⁸ Glenn Kenny, “Blue Is the Warmest Color,” *RogerEbert.com*, October 25, 2013, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/blue-is-the-warmest-color-2013>.

⁷²⁹ Julie Maroh issued a statement on her blog regarding the adaptation of her book, where she is gracious towards the shift in the adaptation from the position of the writer but takes a very critical stance as a *lesbian* author as well as spectator: “It appears to me that this is what was missing on the set: lesbians. I don’t know the sources of information for the director and the actresses (who are all straight, unless proven otherwise) and I was never consulted upstream. Maybe there was someone to awkwardly imitate the possible positions with their hands, and/or to show them some porn of so-called “lesbians” (unfortunately it’s hardly ever for a lesbian audience). Because - except for a few passages - this is all that it brings to mind: a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn and made me feel very ill at ease. Especially when, in the middle of a movie theatre, everyone was giggling. The heteronormative laughed because they don’t understand it and find the scene ridiculous. The gay and queer people laughed because it’s not convincing at all and they found it ridiculous. And among the only people we didn’t find giggling were the potential guys too busy feasting their eyes on an incarnation of their fantasies on screen. ... As a feminist and a lesbian spectator, I can not endorse the direction Kechiche took on these matters.” (Julie Maroh, “Adèle’s blue,” *JulieMaroh.com*, accessed June 5, 2015, http://sd-4.archive-host.com/membres/up/204771422545612119/Adele_blue.pdf.) In a similar vein of critique, Debruge points out how the sex scenes are out of tune with the rest of the film’s ambition of realism: “Kechiche shows Adele and Emma having what I call “porn sex” — which is to say, a fantasy-oriented encounter designed to excite male viewers, bearing little connection to the rigorous naturalism seen throughout the rest of the film.”

⁷³⁰ Comparisons and putting the films together was significant in the reception, see for example Eric Hynes, “Explorations in Identity and Pleasure. Messages of ‘Concussion’ and ‘Blue Is the Warmest Color,’” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2013, accessed June 9, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/movies/messages-of-concussion-and-blue-is-the-warmest-color.html?_r=1; as well as the “Trailer Faceoff: Blue is the warmest color vs. Concussion,” *Interview Magazine*, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/fashion/trailer-face-off-blue-is-the-warmest-color-vs-concussion#>.

⁷³¹ Bob Strauss, “L.A. Film Festival review: ‘Concussion,’” *Los Angeles Daily News*, June 25, 2013, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.dailynews.com/general-news/20130625/la-film-festival-review-concussion>.

⁷³² “Concussion,” Letterboxd website, accessed June 14, 2015, <http://letterboxd.com/film/concussion>.

head over heels for Sangaile. ... And when the two leads are together sexually, it certainly feels more natural than the aforementioned Cannes winner.”⁷³³

These examples illustrate how the contemporary assessing of queer (in the broad sense) cinema employs the essentialist division applied to sexuality of the film’s director. Also, the trend shifted from passing judgment along the binary of positive/negative representation to evaluating the depiction of queer desire on the axes of authenticity and exploitation.

⁷³³ Gregory Ellwood, "Review: 'Summer of Sangaile' is a gorgeous but oh-so-familiar tale of young love," *HitFix*, January 22, 2015, accessed July 30, 2015, <http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/review-summer-of-sangaile-is-a-gorgeous-but-oh-so-familiar-tale-of-young-love#5asiyV5PXJKtuKXw.99>.

6. Conclusion

This thesis started out with a personal remark and I will conclude with a corresponding one. The last micro-analysis sets the celebrated lesbian niche hit *Concussion* against the ‘male-gaze lezploitation’ IFF Cannes winner *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. Representing the *queer female audience* sample the size of one person, I tremendously enjoyed *Blue* - and loathed *Concussion*. Representing the local queer film festival, and thus being in the position to impose my preferences on shaping the queer film discourse in the Czech Republic, I rejected *Concussion* and programmed *Blue* in our main competition.

Audience reception and niche queer film festival strategies are the most intriguing fields of inquiry that are open for further exploration following this thesis. Perspective-wise, they are the flip-side of its central question - what makes a queer film *queer*?

The strategy chosen to provide an answer, in the form of an anticipated but structurally organized multiplicity of possible answers, proved productive and successful in its ambition. Building on the core term *queer*, through its possibilities and implications, exploring its function in relation to cinema and turning its analytical power to New Queer Cinema, this thesis offers a functional structure for discerning how queer discourse is produced by film. At the same time, it provides a compounded introduction to New Queer Cinema from the angle of its queerness.

The chief challenge in researching and writing the thesis presented the inherent heterogeneousness of the subject, its potentially infinite scope and the aspiration to keep its horizon as dynamic as possible. The result is a deliberately open structure that hopes to offer guidance for navigating the terrain of queer cinema, prompt further questions, challenging counter-arguments and inquiries and finally, extend an invitation to revisit the New Queer Cinema films.

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8. FILMOGRAPHY

Films

(Original title (International English title or Alternate Title) (Director, Year of production))

45 Years (Andrew Haigh, 2015)
A un dios desconcido (To An Unknown God) (Jaime Chávarri, 1977)
Advise & Consent (Otto Preminger, 1962)
After Stonewall (John Scagliotti, 1999)
Anders als die Anderen (Different from the Others, Richard Oswald, 1919)
Angelic Conversations (Derek Jarman, 1987)
Angels in America (Mike Nichols, 2003)
Angst essen Seele auf (Fear Eats the Soul) (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974)
Arrebato (Rapture,) (Iván Zulueta, 1980)
Badlands (Terrence Malick, 1973)
Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992)
Behind the Screen (Charles Chaplin, 1916)
Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999)
Blow Job (Andy Warhol, 1963)
Blue (Derek Jarman, 1993)
Bound (Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, 1996)
Bringing Up Baby (George Cukor, 1938)
Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005)
Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967)
Boys Don't Cry (Kimberly Pierce, 1999)
Cabaret (Bob Fosse, 1972)
Carol (Todd Haynes, 2015)
Carravaggio (Derek Jarman, 1986)
Chasing Amy (Kevin Smith, 1997)
Children's Hour (alt. title The Loudest Whisper) (William Wyler, 1961)
Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)
Compulsion (Richard Fleischer, 1959)
Concussion (Stacie Passon, 2013)
Cruising (William Friedkin, 1980)
Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray (The Picture of Dorian Gray) (Richard Oswald, 1917)
Desert Hearts (Donna Deitch, 1985)
Dos Reinas (The Meeting of Two Queens) (Cecilia Barriga, 1993)
Doom Generation (Gregg Araki, 1995)

Dottie Gets Spanked (Todd Haynes, 1993)
Dressed to Kill (Brian dePalma, 1980)
Dyketactics (Barbara Hammer, 1974)
Eating Out (Q. Allan Brocka, 2004)
Earth Camp One (Jennie Livingston, in post-production 2015)
Edward II. (Derek Jarman, 1991)
Eisenstein in Guanajuato (Peter Greenaway, 2015)
Enigma (Michael Apted, 2001)
Ernesto (Ernesto) (Salvatore Samperi, 1979)
Falstaff (alt. title Chimes at Midnight/Campanadas a medianoche) (Orson Welles, 1965)
Far From Heaven (Todd Haynes, 2002)
Fig Trees (John Greyson, 2009)
Fight Club (David Fincher, 1998)
Fireworks (Kenneth Anger, 1947)
Funny Games (Michael Haneke, 1997)
Funny Games (Michael Haneke, 2007)
Go Fish (Rose Troche, 1994)
Gods and Monsters (Bill Condon, 1998)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)
Happy Together (Kar Wai Wong, 1997)
Head On (Anna Kokkinos, 1997)
Heavenly Creatures (Peter Jackson, 1994)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001)
High Art (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998)
Holy Motors (Léos Carax, 2012)
How to Survive a Plague (David France, 2012)
Hustler White (Rick Castro, Bruce LaBruce, 1996)
I'm Not There (Todd Haynes, 2007)
Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout Ages (D.W. Griffith, 1916)
Jollies (Sadie Benning, 1990)
Jungfrauen Maschine (Virgin Machine) (Monika Treut, 1988)
Kids (Larry Clark, 1995)
L'Homme blesé (The Wounded Man) (Patrice Chéreau, 1983)
La Cage aux Folles (La Cage aux Folles) (Édouard Molinaro, 1978)
La vie d'Adèle (Blue is the Warmest Color, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013)
Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, 1962)
Les Nuits Fauves (Savage Nights) (Cyril Collard, 1992)
Lilies (John Greyson, 1996)

Lonesome Cowboys (Andy Warhol, 1968)
Looking for Langston (Isaac Julien, 1989)
Love and Death on Long Island (Richard Kwietniowski, 1997)
Love is Strange (Ira Sachs, 2014)
Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform) (Leontine Sagan, Carl Froelich, 1931)
Making Love (Arthur Hiller, 1982)
Mala Noche (Mala Noche) (Gus Van Sant, 1989)
Me and Rubyfruit (Sadie Benning, 1989)
Mildred Pierce (Todd Haynes, 2011)
Milk (Gus Van Sant, 2008)
Morocco (Josef von Sternberg, 1930)
Morte a Venezia (Death in Venice)(Luchino Visconti, 1971)
Murder by Numbers (Barbet Schroeder, 2002)
My Best Friend's Wedding (P. J. Hogan, 1997)
My Father Is Coming (Monika Treut, 1991)
My Own Private Idaho (Gus Van Sant, 1991)
Nasty Baby (Sebastián Silva, 2015)
No Skin Off My Ass (Bruce LaBruce, 1991)
Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (Nosferatu, a Symphony of Terror) (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922)
Orphée (Orpheus) (Jean Cocteau, 1950)
Paris is Burning (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
Parting Glances (Bill Sherwood, 1986)
Pelo Malo (Bad Hair) (Mariana Rondón, 2013)
Personal Best (Robert Towne, 1982)
Poison (Todd Haynes, 1991)
Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)
Queen Christina (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933)
Querelle (Querelle) (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982)
Reflections in the Golden Eye (John Huston, 1967)
Rope (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948)
RSVP (Laurie Lynd, 1992)
Safe (Todd Hynes, 1995)
Sangailé (The Summer of Sangaile) (Alanté Kavaïté, 2015)
Savage Grace (Tom Kalin, 2006)
Scorpio Rising (Kenneth Anger, 1963)
Sebastiane (Paul Humfress, Derek Jarman, 1976)
Shortbus (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006)

Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991)
Silkwood (Mike Nichols, 1983)
Sister My Sister (Nancy Meckler, 1994)
Some Like It Hot (Billy Wilder, 1959)
Son frère (His Brother) (Patrice Chéreau, 2003)
Still Alice (Richard Glatzer, Wash Westmoreland, 2014)
Stonewall Uprising (Kate Davis, David Heilbroner, 2010)
Storytelling (Todd Solondz, 2001)
Strangers on a Train (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951)
Suddenly, Last Summer (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1959)
Sunday Bloody Sunday (John Schlesinger, 1971)
Superdyke meets Madame X (Barbara Hammer, 1976)
Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (Todd Haynes, 1987)
Swoon (Tom Kalin, 1992)
Sylvia Scarlett (George Cukor, 1935)
Tabu: A story of the South Seas (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1931)
Tarnation (Jonathan Caouette, 2003)
Taxi zum Klo (Taxi to the Toilet) (Frank Ripploh, 1981)
That Touch of Mink (Delbert Mann, 1962)
The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Stephan Elliott, 1994)
The Boys in the Band (William Friedkin, 1970)
The Celluloid Closet (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, 1995)
The Duke of Burgundy (Peter Strickland, 2014)
The Fan (Edward Bianchi, 1981)
The Flaming Creatures (Jack Smith, 1963)
The Hours and Times (Christopher Munch, 1991)
The Hunger (Tony Scott, 1983)
The Imitation Game (Morten Tyldum, 2014)
The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love (Maria Maggenti, 1995)
The Killing of Sister George (Robert Aldrich, 1968)
The Kiss of the Spider Woman (Hector Babenco, 1985)
The Living End (Gregg Araki, 1992)
The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941)
The Owls (Cheryl Dunye, 2010)
The Sergeant (John Flynn, 1968)
The Sign of the Cross (Cecile B. DeMille, 1932)
The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991)
The Talented Mr. Ripley (Anthony Minghella, 1999)

The Tempest (Derek Jarman, 1979)
The Times of Harvey Milk (Rob Epstein, 1984)
The Victim (Basil Daerden, 1961)
The Watermelon Woman (Cheryl Dunye, 1996)
The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939)
The World According to Garp (George Roy Hill, 1982)
Thelma & Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991)
Therese and Isabelle (Radley Metzger, 1968)
Tongues Untied (Marlon Riggs, 1989)
Tootsie (Sydney Pollack, 1982)
Torch Song Trilogy (Paul Bogart, 1988)
Triple X Selects: The Best of Lezsplotation (Michelle Johnson, 2007)
Un Chant d'Amour (Love Song) (Jean Genet, 1950)
United in Anger: A History of ACT UP (Jim Hubbard, 2012)
Urinal (John Greyson, 1989)
Vampyros Lesbos (Jesús Franco, 1971)
Velvet Goldmine (Todd Haynes, 1998)
Viktor und Viktoria (Victor and Victoria) (Reinhold Schünzel, 1933)
Vingarne (The Wings) (Mauritz Stiller, 1916)
Weekend (Andrew Haigh, 2011)
White Bird in a Blizzard (Gregg Araki, 2014)
Who's the Top? (Jennie Livingston, 2005)
Wings (William A. Wellmann, 1927)
Wittgenstein (Derek Jarman, 1993)
X-men (Bryan Singer, 2000)
Young Soul Rebels (Isaac Julien, 1991)
Zero Patience (John Greyson, 1993)

Television series

(Original title (Creator, Year(s) of production))

Game of Thrones (David Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-present)
Glee (Ian Brennan, Brad Falchuk, Ryan Murphy, 2009-2015)
Hannibal (Bryan Fuller, 2013-present)
Looking (Michael Lannan, 2014-2015)
Orange is the New Black (Jenji Kohan, 2013-present)
Queer as Folk (Ron Cowen, Daniel Lipman, 2000-2005)
Queer as Folk (Russel T. Davies, 1999-2000)

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (2004)

Sherlock (Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffatt, 2010-present)

The L Word (Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, Kathy Greenberg, 2004-2009)

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