THE NEW QUEER CINEMA

Director's Cut

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Anyone who has been following the news at film festivals over the past few months knows that 1992 has become a watershed year for independent gay and lesbian film and video. Early last spring, on the very same day, Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992) and Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) opened in New York City. Within days, the prestigious New Directors / New Films Festival had premiered four new "queer" films: Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times* (1991), Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), and Laurie Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* (1991).

Had so much ink ever before been spilled in the mainstream press for such a cause? *Basic Instinct* was picketed by the self-righteous wing of the queer community (until dykes began to discover how much fun it was), while mainstream critics were busily impressed by the so-called queer new wave and set to work making stars of the new boys on the block. Not that the moment isn't contradictory: this summer's San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival had its most successful year in its sixteen-year history, doubling attendance from 1991, but the National Endowment for the Arts pulled its funding anyway, courtesy of the resurgent right wing in the Republican Party that saw votes wherever there were "family values" to be defended.

The queer film phenomenon was introduced in fall 1991 at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, the best spot in North America for tracking new cinematic trends.[1] There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their

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image. All through the winter, spring, and summer, the message was loud and clear: queer is hot. My itinerary accelerated my rate of discovery, as I went from festival to festival and took time out for the Fifth Annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Rutgers University. I checked out the international circuit from Park City to Berlin to London. Awards were won, parties held. At Sundance, in the heart of Mormon country, there was even a panel dedicated to the queer subject, hosted by yours truly.

"Barbed Wire Kisses" put eight panelists on stage, with so many queer filmmakers in the audience that a roll call had to be read. Filmmakers stood, one by one, to applause from the matinee crowd. "Sundance is where you see what the industry can bear," said Todd Haynes, there to talk about *Poison*'s previous year on the firing line. He stayed to be impressed by an earnest eighteen-year-old *wunderkind*, Sadie Benning, whose bargain-basement videos, shot with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision toy camera and produced for less than $20 apiece, had already received a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Isaac Julien was unexpectedly cast in the role of the older generation. Summarizing the dilemmas of marketing queer product to general audiences, he described a Miramax Prestige advertising campaign for his *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) that used a bland image of guys and gals hanging out, like a Newport ad gone Benetton.[2] The film wasn't doing well until Julien got them to change the ad to an image of the black and white boyfriends, Caz and Billibud, kissing on a bed. The box office immediately improved.

Tom Kalin struggled to reconcile his support for the queer community's disruptions of *Basic Instinct*'s shoot last spring with his film *Swoon*'s choice of queer murderers as subjects. And to explain how his passion for queer transgression related to his earlier participation in Gran Fury, the arts wing of ACT UP, responsible for many of the most memorable graphics of the era in New York. The Australian filmmakers Stephen Cummins and Simon Hunt, who were there with their short dance film, *Resonance*, regaled the audience with a story of censorship Australian-style, involving one episode of *The Simpsons* in which a scene of Homer kissing a swish fellow at the plant ended up on the (censor's) cutting-room floor.[3]

When time came to open up the session to the audience, the panel turned surprisingly participatory. One Disney executive identified himself as gay and then excoriated the homophobia of the industry. A filmmaker called for a campaign to demand that Oliver Stone not direct the announced biopic of Harvey Milk (later rumored to be readied for direction by Gus Van Sant in

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1992, with Stone as coproducer).[4] Meanwhile Derek Jarman, the grand old man in his fourth decade of queer activity, beamed. He announced that he'd never been on a panel of queers at a mainstream festival before.

Try to imagine the scene in Park City. Robert Redford held a press conference and was asked, on camera, why there are all these gay films at his festival. Redford finessed: it is all part of the spectrum of independent film that Sundance is meant to serve. He even allowed that the best-feature and best-documentary awards last year to *Poison* (1991) and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1991) might have made the festival seem more welcoming to gays and lesbians. He could just as easily have said, These are simply the best films being made.

Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary, strategy, or concern. Nonetheless they are united by a common style: call it "Homo Pomo." In all of them, there are traces of appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively 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.

All the same, success breeds discontent, and 1992 is no different from any other year. When the ghetto goes mainstream, malaise and paranoia set in. It can be ideological, generational, or genderational.[5] Consider the issues that might disturb the peace. What will happen to the lesbian and gay filmmakers who have been making independent films, often in avant-garde traditions, for decades already? Surprise, all the new movies being snatched up by distributors, shown in mainstream festivals, and booked into theaters are by the boys. Surprise, the amazing new lesbian videos that are redefining the whole dyke relationship to popular culture remain hard to find and marginalized.

Amsterdam's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival made these discrepancies plain as day (fig. 2.1). The festival was staged in November 1991, wedged between Toronto and Sundance. It should have been the most exciting place to be, but wasn't, not at all. And yet that's where the girls were. Where the videos were. Where the films by people of color and ex–Iron Curtain denizens were. Only the power brokers were missing.

Christine Vachon, the coproducer of *Swoon* and *Poison*, is sure that the heat this year has been produced by money: "Suddenly there's a spotlight that says these films can be commercially viable." Still, everyone tries to guess how

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2.1 T-shirt created for the Amsterdam Gay and Lesbian Film Festival '91. Collection of the author.

long this moment of fascination will last. After all, none of this is taking place in a vacuum: what is celebrated in the festivals is despised in the streets. Review the statistics on gay-bashing. Glance at would-be presidential candidate Pat Buchanan's demonizing of Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989), which was attacked on its own and as a proxy for defunding the National Endowment for the Arts. Check out U.S. immigration policy. Add the usual quota of internecine battles: girls against boys, narrative versus experimental work, white boys versus everyone else, elitism against populism, expansion of sights versus patrolling of borders. There's bound to be trouble in paradise, even when the party's just getting going.

Dateline: Toronto, 1991

Music was in the air in Toronto in September 1991, where the reputation of queer film and video started to build up. Or maybe I just loved Laurie Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* because it made my elevator ride with Jessye Norman possible. Lynd's film used Norman's aria from Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'Eté* as its Madeleine;

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supposedly Lynd sent Norman the finished film as a belated form of asking permission, and she loved it so much that she offered to attend the world premiere at Toronto. With red carpet in place and a packed house going wild, Norman sat through the screening holding Lynd's hand. *R.S.V.P.* suggests that the tragedy and trauma of AIDS have led to a new kind of film and video practice, one that takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. This time, it's art for our sake, and it's powerful: no one can stay dry-eyed through this witty elegy.

Lynd was there as a producer too, having worked on fellow Canadian John Greyson's *The Making of "Monsters."* In Greyson's wonderfully fevered imagination, Georg Lukács comes out of retirement to produce a television movie and hires Bertolt Brecht to direct it. Along with Greyson's signature comedy and lingering shots of boys in briefs, there's a restaging of the central aesthetic argument of the Frankfurt School as it might apply to the crises of representation engendered by today's antigay backlash, violence, and television treatments of the AIDS era.

Both low-budget and high-end filmmaking showed up in Toronto. Not surprisingly, the guys were high end, the gals low. Not that I'd begrudge Gus Van Sant one penny or remove a single frame from *My Own Private Idaho*, a film that securely positions him as heir apparent to Fassbinder. So what if it didn't get a single Oscar nomination? At the other end of the spectrum was the veteran avant-gardist Su Friedrich, whose latest film, *First Comes Love*, provoked catcalls from its largely queer audience. Was it because its subject was marriage, a topic on which the film is healthily ambivalent, mingling resentment with envy, anger with yearning? Or was it an aesthetic reaction, since Friedrich returns to a quasi-structuralist mode for her indictment of institutionalized heterosexuality, and thus possibly alienated audiences accustomed to an easier queer fix? Was it because the director was a woman, since the only other lesbian on hand was Monika Treut, who by now should probably be classified as postqueer given the expansion of her filmic characters and interests. Whatever the reason, Friedrich's elegant short stuck out, a warning-of-storms-ahead barometer in a pack of audience pleasers.

The epiphanic moment, if there was one, was the screening of Jarman's *Edward II*, which reinscribed the homosexuality so integral to its sixteenth-century source. Christopher Marlowe's lifestyle actually prohibited his corpse from being buried in the hallowed Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey a full

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three centuries after his rough-trade death in a tavern fight, per Jarman. No wonder he was drawn to the man's finest creation. To honor it, Jarman applied a syncretic style that mixed past and present in a manner so arch that the film easily fits its tag, no doubt scripted by Jarman himself: the "QE2." Think anachronistic pastiche, as OutRage demos and gay-boy calisthenics mix with minimalist period drama. Homophobia is stripped bare as a timeless occupation, tracked across centuries but never lacking in historical specificity. Obsessive love, meanwhile, is enlarged to include queer desire as a legitimate source of tragedy, entitled to inhabit center stage.

For women, *Edward II* is a bit more complicated. Since the heroes are men and the main villain is a woman, some critics have mistakenly condemned it as misogynist. Indeed Tilda Swinton's brilliance as an actor—and full co-creator of her role—invests her character with more weight, and thus more evil, than anyone else on screen. Further, the film is a critique of both heterosexuality and conservative governance: in a world ruled by Royals and Tories, Isabella seems more inspired by a hatred of Margaret Thatcher than by any generalized misogyny. Annie Lennox is clearly meant to be on the side of the girls, and the angels. Her solo song "Every Time We Say Goodbye" accompanies King Edward II and his lover Galveston's last dance, bringing grandeur, modernity, even postmodernity to their tragedy. The song was first recorded on the landmark *Red Hot and Blue* CD, the first of the AIDS benefit collections, and was released as a video too, which Jarman was actually supposed to have directed for Lennox. Instead, ill with AIDS-related blindness, seemingly near death, he was unable to do it; Lennox went ahead with the video as scheduled but inscribed images of Jarman's childhood into it, his home movies literally projected onto her face, in a tribute to his life, his activism, and HIV-positive status. By casting Lennox and this song into the stone castle of *Edward II*, he imported not only the singer but his own personal history. By such means does Jarman's time-traveling cinema insist on carrying the royal court of yore into today's queer world and vice versa.

Dateline: Amsterdam, 1991

The official car showed up at the airport with the festival's steamy poster of girls in heat and boys in lust plastered all over it. Amsterdam, city of lights for faggots and dykes, offered the promise of an event purely one's own in the city celebrated for queerness. The city with the best laws. The place where "gay liberation" has been most institutionalized. The home of Cinemien, the

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oldest distributor of women's films in the world. Opening night had front rows reserved for heterosexual dignitaries and speeches by local politicos eager to claim a queer constituency; the speeches by deputy mayors and cultural ministers went on seemingly forever. But little concession was made to their presence: a 35mm trailer was projected, filled with naked couples of queers of both genders, getting it on right there on screen, heating up the beds, then abruptly surrendering the pleasures of the flesh to roll onto the floor, transfixed by the nun on the television set, presumably a nod to the festival co-organizer Annette Forster's favorite theme of lesbian nuns.

The opening ceremony's official and subcultural discourses merged in the set of lifetime achievement awards presented to the directors Ulrike Ottinger and Derek Jarman. Typical plaques, they were less typical in whom they commemorated: the Bob Angelo awards. Named for a famed Dutch antifascist and Resistance fighter whose nom de guerre was Angelo, the awards point to his equally prominent identity as a queer. He founded the first Dutch "homosexual liberation" organization in 1945, immediately after the war, and went on to establish the precursor to the Netherlands' major gay rights group. I usually find awards ceremonies pretty dull, but there was something sincerely moving about this one. When Derek Jarman used the occasion to call for the decriminalization of Oscar Wilde in an official pardon in time for the centennial of his conviction in 1995 and vowed to spearhead a commission to place a statue of Wilde in the London streets, queer past and present seemed to be firmly in dialogue with one another.

The festival had two directors, one male and one female, and two sets of T-shirts, one with guys, one with gals. My Brit pal Mark Nash caused an uproar by demanding one with the women on it for himself. There were two theaters too, and the festival tended to screen the guys' movies in the bigger house. One international guest hazarded the guess that the girls got the smaller house because its snack bar was the only one with hot chocolate, clearly a lesbian necessity.

Expectations were running high, but in fact the festival showed all the precious advantages and irritating problems that life in the ghetto entails. Amsterdam was a crucible for queer work, all right: some got celebrated, some got burned, some could have skipped it completely. How does this event fit into the big picture set by the big festivals? Well, it doesn't. The identity that elsewhere becomes a badge of honor here became a straitjacket. But could "elsewhere" exist without the "here"?

Amsterdam was an exercise in dialectics in action, with both pleasures

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and dangers. For dialectics in tourism, the video maker Cecilia Dougherty and the video distributor Kate Horsfield took me on a field trip to the city's gay monument, a tripartite structure of triangles set in stone to commemorate the genocide of homosexuals under the Nazi occupancy. I thought it was tacky; Cecilia found it subtle; Kate said it was enough just that it was *there*. She taped it with her ubiquitous Video-8 camera, state-of-the-art technology. Sadie Benning was there too, in Amsterdam if not on this tour; it was her first time ever out of the United States. She had different adventures. One day she bought a stolen bicycle at the flea market; a few nights later she was surprised to leave the festival and find her bike still there, only her lock missing. Undaunted, off she went to look for rad fourteen-year-old girls (and, of course, found them).

The filmmaker Nick Deocampo from the Philippines was planning his country's first gay festival and hoping that the War of the Widows wouldn't forestall it.[6] Events suggested he might have some problems. For instance, the planned Amsterdam revival of Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980) never came off: banned under the Marcos regime, the print ironically wasn't allowed to leave Aquino's Philippines either. A tribute to Thai queer cinema never happened either: the trilogy of Thai films never arrived, detained at the airport in Bangkok, prohibited from exiting the country.

Race, status, romance, gender, even the necessity of the Amsterdam festival came up for attack and negotiation on those few occasions when the public got to talk back. Pratibha Parmar affirmed the importance of a queer circuit, "my lifeline," and was sure that it is key to the work she brought, most produced for Channel Four (which gets a lot of credit for the Brit queer revival). Fellow Brit Jarman disagreed: "Perhaps their time is up." Maybe life in the ghetto now offers diminished returns. Jarman expressed a hope that the days of "ghetto" festivals were over.

Not that there weren't good films at Amsterdam. But the best work seemed to come from long ago or far away, like the great archival shows of German cross-dressing movies which included Asta Nielsen in Urban Gad's *Zapata's Band* (1914), an early Ernst Lubitsch, *Ich Mochte Kein Mann Sein* (*I Don't Want to Be a Man*, 1918), and even Reinhold Schünzel's *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933) with nary a Julie Andrews in sight. The detective novelist Mary Wings paid tribute to "Greta Garbo's lesbian past." For me, though, the most extraordinary revival was a more recent one but no less unseen: Toshio Matsumoto's *Funeral of Roses* (1969), a gay fantasy from Japan. A mad underground rant that came off as a cross between Jean-Luc Godard and the late great Lino

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Brocka, it included an oedipal narrative turned upside down, intrigue, sexual liberation, drugs, cross-dressing, protest politics, full color gone haywire, and an aesthetic manifesto quoting Jonas Mekas. It had audiences screaming with pleasure and disbelief.

There were two terrific new lesbian films too, both deserving of instant cult status. Direct from Frankfurt, the former Oberhausen director Karola Gramann's fine-tuned show "Cerebral Ecstasy" unearthed a Swiss film that was instantly captivating. Cleo Uebelmann's *Mano Destra* (1986) delivered bondage and domination straight to the viewer, serving up knot fetishism and the thrills of specular anticipation with an uncanny understanding of cinema's own powers. It knit the viewer directly into a visceral experience of bondage and domination.

From a trio of Viennese filmmakers—Angela Hans Scheirl, Dietmar Schipek, Ursula Puerrer—came *Flaming Ears* (1991), a surreal fable that drew on comics and sci-fi traditions for a post-human love story visualized in an atmosphere of cabaret, rubble, and revenge.[7] The fresh cyber-dyke style reflected Austrian sources as diverse as Valie Export and Otto Muehle, shot through with Super-8 visual rawness and a script that could have been written by J. G. Ballard himself. Shunning narrative, it embraced junkyard surrealism as a plausible substitute and became the lesbian hit of the festival.

Oddly enough, Amsterdam suffered from a curious lack of a public sphere: it was a local event gone global, an identity festival without an identity. The Dutch press, which I expected to be fully in evidence and engaged, was missing in action. It was a shame that they marginalized the festival, because the kind of scoop that the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* would later find in Utah and trumpet as a discovery could have been theirs right at home.

On those rare occasions when a public dialogue did take place, the levels of contestation and divergence of agendas became painfully apparent. The film theorist Teresa de Lauretis, who was in residence at the University of Utrecht that fall, had organized a panel, "Lesbian Cinema: After the Love Story." It was a great idea, an attempt to move the thinking forward beyond the first, girl-meets-girl phase. Think again. The Dutch women didn't want to move on past the love story; incensed, they resisted what they mistook for a scholarly plot to take away their pleasure.

At the panel on race, meanwhile, the conflict that took place was between the conference's success in finding a great deal of work by lesbians and gay men of color to screen, and foreigners to invite, while failing utterly to find or include those filmmakers of color who resided in Amsterdam itself. Pratibha

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Parmar, Marlon Riggs, and Felix de Rooy (the Dutch Curacao filmmaker of *Ava and Gabriel*, 1990) all addressed the issue only to be shouted down by the festival codirector Paul Verstraeten, who counterattacked with gusto, taking on the whole room at times, and the devil take the consequences. Only the levelheadedness of one panelist, a Dutch Guyanese lesbian activist, salvaged the situation. As it was, the Dutch came away accusing the non-Dutch of ignorance and of exploiting a misunderstood situation, while the North American and European delegates departed with a revised view of Dutch "tolerance."

The festival had an undertone of a world feeding on itself, with race only the most predictable manifestation of the tensions. Another was the uprising by some of the lesbian film and video makers, who felt mistreated in comparison to the male feature filmmakers. Yet another was the frequency of half-empty theaters due to the paucity of local press. Nevertheless a new kind of lesbian video surfaced here, and with it emerged a contemporary lesbian sensibility. Like the gay male films now in the limelight, this video has everything to do with a new historiography. But where the boys are archaeologists, the girls have to be alchemists. Their style is unlike almost anything that's come before. I would call it lesbian camp, but the species is, after all, better known for the kind of camping that takes place in a tent. And historical revisionism is not a catchy term. So I'll borrow from Hollywood and think of it as the Great Dyke Rewrite.

Here's a taste of the new genre: in Cecilia Dougherty's *Grapefruit* (1989), loosely based on Yoko Ono's original book, some white San Francisco dykes (including Susie Bright in an early incarnation) unapologetically impersonate John, Yoko, and the Beatles, proving that appropriation and gender-fuck make a great combination. Did I say impersonate? They *are* the Beatles for the brief period of this video, finally compensating every dyke who ever wanted to be something more than a fan in the rock scene of the early 1960s.

Sometimes the dyke fan wants her idols just the way they first appeared on screen—but, well, different. Cecilia Barriga clearly felt that way too and did something about it. Barriga's *The Meeting of Two Queens* (*Encuentro entre dos Reinas*, 1991) reedits Dietrich and Garbo movies to construct a dream narrative: get the girls together, help them meet, let them get it on. It's a form of idolatry that takes the feminist lit-crit practice of "reading against the grain" into new image territory, blasting the results onto the screen (or monitor, to be exact).

In one episode of Kaucylia Brooke and Jane Cottis's *Dry Kisses Only*

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(1990), Anne Baxter's back-stage meeting with Bette Davis in *All About Eve* is altered, inserting in place of Baxter a dyke who speaks in direct address to the camera about her tragic life, growing up on a farm, moving to San Francisco to work in a lesbian bar and meet the girls in the Forces, her true love lost to World War II combat. She's cross-cut with Bette's original reaction shots, culminating with Davis taking her arm (and taking her home). The cross-cutting attached heterosexual grief and admiration to lesbian grief and courage. Brooke and Cottis not only provided a happy ending for lesbian viewers but actually offered a logical explanation for the original film's narrative.

Apart from the videos, festival lesbians pinned all voyeuristic hopes on the "Wet" Party, where they would finally get to the baths. Well, sort of. Everyone certainly tried. Outfits ranged from the campiness of childhood-at-the-beach to show-your-leather seriousness. Women bobbed in the pool, playing with rubber rafts and inflated black and white fuck-me dolls. (Parmar would later note that there were more inflatables of color in attendance than actual women of color.) The San Francisco sex stars Shelly Mars and Susie Bright both performed, though the grand moment in which Bright seemed to be lecturing us on "oedipal underwear" turned out to be a cruel acoustical joke: she was actually extolling the virtue of edible underwear. But the back rooms were used for heart-to-hearts, not action. Caught between the states of dress-up and undress, everyone waited for someone else to do something.

Other parties offered other pleasures. At one, Jimmy Somerville, unscheduled, performed an homage to Sylvester, San Francisco's late and much missed disco diva. At another, Marilyn Monroe appeared, frosted on a giant cake, clutching her skirt, only to be carved up by a gaggle of male chefs. In the end, somehow, Amsterdam was the festival you loved to hate, the place where everyone wanted the world and wouldn't settle for less, where dirty laundry could be washed in public and anyone in authority taken to task, where audiences were resistant to experimental and nonnarrative work, and where criticisms were bestowed more bountifully than praise. And yet . . . while the marketplace might be seductive, it's not democratic. Amsterdam was the place where a Wet Party could at least be staged, where new works by women and people of color were accorded pride of place, where video was fully integrated into the programming. Amsterdam was a ritual gathering of the tribe and, like a class reunion, filled with cliques, tensions, and ambivalence alongside the celebration.

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Dateline: Park City, Utah, 1992

Everything came together at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City. Everything. The excitement that had started building in Toronto in the autumn picked up speed. The sense of a historical moment, however contested, that began in Amsterdam now burst into full view. Something was happening, and this time, finally, everyone noticed.

Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times* is a good example. Audiences fell in love with this imaginary chronicle of Brian Epstein and John Lennon's last tango in Barcelona. Munch's camera style and script were a reprise of cinéma vérité, as though some dusty reels had been found in a closet in Liverpool and expertly edited, as though Leacock or Pennebaker had turned gay-positive retroactively. Epstein tries to get Lennon into bed, using old-world angst, homo-alienation, Jewish charm. Lennon tries to sort out his life, balancing wife Cynthia against groupie against Epstein, trying to have it all and to figure out whatever will come next. Just a simple view of history with the veil of homophobia pulled back. It was rumored that the dramatic jury at Sundance loved it so much they wanted to give it the Grand Prize—but since it wasn't feature length, they had to settle on a special jury award.

"Puts the Homo back in Homicide" is the teaser for Tom Kalin's first feature, *Swoon*, but it could easily apply to Gregg Araki's newest, *The Living End*, as well (fig. 2.2). Where Kalin's film was an interrogation of the past, Araki's is set resolutely in the present. Or is it? Cinematically, it restages the celluloid of the 1960s and 1970s: early Godard, *Bonnie and Clyde*, or *Badlands*—every pair-on-the-run movie that ever penetrated Araki's consciousness. Here, though, the couple are both guys and they are HIV-positive, one bored and one full of rage, both of them with nothing to lose. They could be characters out of a porn flick, the stud and the john, in a renegotiated terrain. Earlier Araki films were often too garage-band, too cheesecake, too far into visual noise for my taste, but this one was different. Camera style and palette updated the New Wave. Araki's stylistic end runs paid off, and this time he captured a queers-on-the-lam portrait deserving of a place in movie history: an existential film for a postporn age, one that puts queers on the map as legitimate genre subjects. It's quintessentially a film of its time.

And so was *Swoon*, though it might have seemed otherwise, what with the mock-period settings, the footage purloined from the 1920s, and the courtroom-accurate script based on the trial in Chicago in 1924 of Leopold and Loeb, the pair of rich Jewish boys who bonded, planned capers, and fi-

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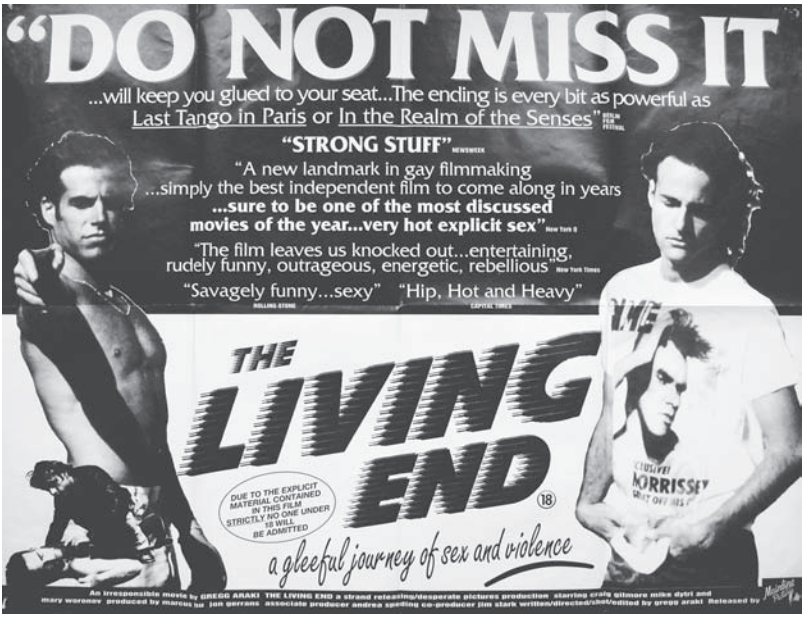
nally killed a boy. In the wake of the Jeffrey Dahmer case, it would be easy to think of this as a film about horrific acts.[8] *Swoon*, however, deals in different stakes: it's the history of discourses that is under Kalin's microscope, as he demonstrates how easily mainstream society of the 1920s could unite discrete communities of outsiders (Jews, queers, blacks, murderers) into a commonality of perversion. The whole look of the film—director of photography Ellen Kuras won a Sundance prize for cinematography—emphasized this point of view with the graphic quality of its antirealism, showing how much Kalin, Kuras, and coproducer Vachon tailored its look to its implicit arguments.[9]

As part of a new generation of directors, Kalin isn't satisfied to live in the past, even a postmodern past. No, *Swoon* takes on the whole enterprise of "positive images" for queers, definitively rejecting any such project and turning the system on its head.[10] 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, and don't mistake any of it for realness.

Throughout Sundance, a comment Richard Dyer made in Amsterdam

2.2 British advertisement for *The Living End* (1992), directed by Gregg Araki. Courtesy of Craig Gilmore.



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2.3 Sundance 1992, "Barbed Wire Kisses" panelists. Front row: Stephen Cummins, Simon Hunt, Derek Jarman; back row: Todd Haynes, Ruby, Isaac Julien, Tom Kalin, Sadie Benning, Lisa Kennedy. Photo © Brook Dillon. Courtesy of the photographer.

echoed in my memory. There are two ways to dismiss gay film, he pronounced: one is to say, "Oh, it's just a gay film," while the other is to proclaim, "Oh, it's a great film, it just happens to be gay." He was speaking of Jarman's and Ottinger's films at the time, arguing that they were both great precisely because of the ways in which they were gay. But his standard held at Sundance as well, as queer film after queer film captured my imagination, audience applause, press attention. No, their queerness was no more arbitrary than their aesthetics, no more than their individual preoccupations with interrogating history. On celluloid and magnetic tape, just as in life and culture off-screen, the queer present negotiates with the past, knowing full well that the queer future is at stake.

Video is an even greater harbinger of that future, yet Sundance, like most film festivals, showed none. To make a point about the dearth of lesbian work in feature film and to confront the industry with its own exclusions, our "Barbed Wire Kisses" panel opened with a projected screening of Sadie Benning's video *Jollies*, which brought down the house (fig. 2.3). With an absolute economy of means, Benning constructed a Portrait of the Artist as a Young

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Dyke such as we'd never seen before. "I had a crush. It was 1978, and I was in kindergarten." The lines are spoken face-front to the camera, black-and-white images floating into the frame alongside the words enlisted by Benning to spell out her emotions on screen, associative edits calling settled assumptions into question. Yes, a genre was born.

The festival ended, of course. Isaac Julien returned to London to finish *Black and White in Color*, his documentary on the history of blacks in British television. The high school dropout Sadie Benning left to show her tapes at Princeton and to make another one, *It Wasn't Love*, that proved she's no fluke. Derek Jarman and Jimmy Somerville were arrested back in London for demonstrating outside Parliament.[11] Christopher Munch and Tom Kalin picked up prizes in Berlin. Gregg Araki found himself a distributor. New work kept getting produced: Frameline's San Francisco gay and lesbian film festival reported that its submissions were up by 50 percent in June. The Queer New Wave had come full circle: the boys and their movies have arrived.

But will lesbians ever get the attention for their work that men get for theirs? Will queers of color ever get equal time? Or video achieve the status reserved for film? Take, for example, Cheryl Dunye, a young video artist whose *She Don't Fade* and *Vanilla Sex* put a sharp, satiric spin on black romance and cross-race illusions.[12] Or keep an eye out for Jean Carlomusto's *L Is for the Way You Look* for the episode in which friends at a Reno performance notice Fran Lebowitz in the audience, then gradually realize that the person with Fran is none other than Dolly Parton. It's a definitive take on dyke fandom, the importance of subject position, and the frailty of friendship when celebrity is at stake.

Questions may still have remained, dreams stoked, disappointments ahead, but let it be known that on one magical Saturday afternoon in Park City, there was a panel that traced a history: Derek Jarman at one end on the eve of his fiftieth birthday, and Sadie Benning at the other, just joining the age of consent. The world had changed enough that both of them could be there, with a host of cohorts in between. All were engaged in the beginnings of a new queer historiography, capable of transforming the decade, if only the door would stay open long enough. For him, for her, for all of us.

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Notes

This article was first published in the *Village Voice* of March 24, 1992, under the headline "A Queer Sensation." It was reprinted as the lead article in a special section of *Sight and Sound* 2.5 (1992), 30–34, with the headline "The New Queer Cinema." The phrase originated in a conversation I had with Philip Dodd, then the editor in chief, about how I viewed developments since the *Voice* piece had been published. It is to that conversation that I owe the serendipity of my term's immortalization as a title and, later, movement. In the journal's special section, Dodd and coeditor Pamela Cook commissioned responses to my "manifesto" from Derek Jarman, Isaac Julien, Pratibha Parmar, and Constantine Giannaris, plus additional articles by Amy Taubin and Andy Medhurst. See the following anthologies, which include the original 1992 article and expand significantly beyond it: Aaron, *The New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*; Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. More recently, it was reprinted in the context of the field of critical theories in general: Corrigan, White, and Mazaj, *Critical Visions in Film Theory*.

When this essay was originally published in 1992, it was cut by the *Voice* for considerations of space and newsworthiness. Since all prior reprints used the same text, this marks the first publication of the essay in its entirety, as written.

1. The Toronto Festival of Festivals (today the Toronto International Film Festival, or TIFF) was always a queer-friendly event, whatever that means today, thanks to its former director Helga Stephenson, the late Jay Scott in the press, and programmers Kay Armatage, Noah Cowan, and the late David Overby.

2. Miramax was an upstart company in 1992, Prestige its short-lived, art film label.

3. Stephen Cummins died two years later, in 1994, of AIDS-related causes. Simon Hunt has a long and continuing career as a writer, satirist, even would-be politician, performing under the name Pauline Pantsdown. He interviewed me in Sydney in 1999.

4. Only fourteen years later, it finally happened—with Van Sant, without Stone.

5. This wasn't a theoretical aside. I had already been attacked by filmmakers who felt left out of the discussion. As always, Sundance staff selected the panelists out of the pool of filmmakers whose work was being shown at the festival (plus Todd Haynes, the prior year's laureate). After refusing to moderate an all-male panel, I was able to add the video artist Sadie Benning and my *Village Voice* editor Lisa Kennedy, but no filmmakers. Su Friedrich sent me a single-spaced diatribe accusing me of betrayal and treachery. I was attacked in the letters column of the *Voice* by Jennie Livingston for leaving her out of the article, though she'd had no role in the events I described. Even the admired Teresa de Lauretis sent me a letter of complaint, though a much more supportive one, phrased in terms of disappointment rather than anger: why did I have to describe such a bleak gender imbalance?

6. That was the term for the events surrounding Imelda Marcos's return to Manila in defiance of Corazon Aquino's government, a reversal of the time when Aquino's

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martyred husband sought to return under Imelda's husband's dictatorship and was assassinated. For more details, see Sandra Burton and Nelly Sindayen, "The Philippines: The War of the Widows," *Time*, November 18, 1991.

7. Its provisional title at the festival was *Red Ears Hunt through Ash*.

8. Jeffrey Dahmer was the notorious serial killer and cannibal who murdered seventeen men and boys in Milwaukee. He was captured in the summer of 1991 when his intended eighteenth victim managed to escape while still handcuffed and led police back to the apartment. Dahmer was tried in 1992, sent to prison, and murdered two years later by another inmate. His crimes were being widely reported in the media at the time of the Sundance premiere of *Swoon*.

9. This effect is even more pronounced in the Strand release of *Swoon* on DVD, for the cinematographer Ellen Kuras oversaw the digital mastering that bestowed a clarity impossible to see in the original 16mm print. Strand's dedication to bringing back many of the films of the early 1990s in high-quality DVD formats is key to preserving NQC history, just as Strand's founding was key to the initial flowering of the NQC.

10. Nobody uttered the name of Vito Russo, but he might have been turning in his grave if *Celluloid Closet* (the book) is a reliable guide to his map of positive and negative images; Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Freedman's *The Celluloid Closet* and Jeffrey Schwartz's new documentary *Vito* are excellent sources for Russo's activist views.

11. Jarman would die of AIDS complications on February 19, 1994.

12. Dunye went on to make *The Watermelon Woman* and other films. In Chicago a young lesbian couple named Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner would read this very article in *Sight and Sound* in the fall of 1992 and decide to contact Christine Vachon about a little film they had started working on together: *Go Fish*.

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