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Utopian Futurity and Evental Love

Toward a New Theorization of 1990s Queer Cinema and the Rise of the Queer Rom-Com

A commonly cited trend in American "indie" gay and lesbian film is a movement away from the experimental aesthetics and narrative techniques characterizing the "New Queer Cinema" of the early 1990s toward more conventional narratives that draw on popular Hollywood genres, particularly the romantic comedy (McWilliam 10; Mennel 99; Pidduck 284). The ideological stakes of this transformation are rather high, especially as the discussions about these films are often reflective of larger social debates about the mainstream LGBTQIA projects of queer visibility and the possibility of inclusion within normative class and sexual frameworks. It is therefore tempting to read the new same-sex romantic comedy as a mere ideological symptom of an increasingly normative middle-class gay and lesbian politics, or what David Eng has unmasked as "queer liberalism" (2-3) or Lisa Duggan as "homonormativity" (68). However, against the grain of such analysis, I want to scandalously claim that the queer romantic comedy, which I argue develops as a rejoinder to the New Queer Cinema in the mid to late 1990s, might actually provide a more powerful and radical figuration of what José Muñoz calls "queer futurity." The 1990s are a crucial hinge point in the history of US queer cinema—both because of the sheer number of films produced and the transformation of narrative queer cinema from its *avant-garde* beginnings to the more commercial genres we have seen in recent years. I propose that by focusing on this transitional moment in the 1990s, we can recover a crucially overlooked site of a queer 'desire for utopia' within popular queer cinema.

This essay therefore seeks to accomplish two tasks: first, I develop a new theorization of queer cinema during the 1990s, an analysis that hopes to make clear the close dialectical relationship between New Queer Cinema and the queer romantic comedy. I claim this relationship as dialectical in the sense that the queer rom-com is both a continuation of the thematic preoccupations of the New Queer Cinema as well as a radical break that moves beyond a critique of the present and begins to envision possible utopian futures. Secondly, I argue that the queer romantic comedy is a politically radical cultural form if we rethink it in terms of fidelity—or a sustained intervention and commitment—to the project of making a utopian, which is to say queer, world. I thus stage an encounter with Muñoz's theorization of queer utopian futurity in *Cruising Utopia*—one of the most significant texts to come out of the incredible boon of queer theory in recent years—and Alain Badiou's conceptualization of love as a radical, "evental" project. I use this encounter between love and queer futurity to rethink the history of 1990s queer cinema with an eye toward the horizon of utopia.

Muñoz's project is an important intervention in queer studies because it attempts a double negation of both "gay pragmatism"—Muñoz's name for the anti-utopian "practical" politics of the LGBTQIA rights movement whose

Go Fish (Troche 1994)

horizons cannot extend past the desire for marriage and military service—as well as "antirelational" queer theory as developed by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. If Edelman's project—epitomized by the slogan "no future"—is a radical negation of the future, gay pragmatism, and the cult of the child, then Muñoz's project is a Hegelian negation of the negation that reimagines a futurity "that is not kid's stuff" but rather queerness itself (92). Muñoz thus articulates a collective, rather than individual, vision of queerness that is "primarily about future and hope" (11). This understanding of queerness as collectivity—or a belonging-in-difference from heteronormativity wherefrom we can imagine new relationship structures and forms of solidarity—gives us a standpoint from which to imagine the creation of a better world. Muñoz's hermeneutic of hope, like the work of Ernst Bloch, then also concerns the recovery of "utopian impulses," which he describes as "something that is extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism" which can be "glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment" (23). These impulses then produce an affect of hope, or the desire for a queerness, which is always "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). It is precisely this desire for utopia that I argue we can uncover in 1990s US queer cinema.

The 1990s witnessed an explosion of queer independent cinema, the most famous and critically acclaimed of which is the New Queer Cinema (NQC), which includes the early work of filmmakers such as Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, and Gregg Araki. B. Ruby Rich, who coined the phrase "new queer cinema," describes these films as "Homo Pomo" because of their use of "appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind" (165). She argues NQC is a "break" with previous forms of queer (or LGBTQIA) cinema and their "older humanist approaches [and] identity politics" (165-6). Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of NQC is its refusal of positive images and willingness to dwell on negativity: for instance, the cross-country murderous road trip in Araki's *The Living End* (1992) or the restaging of the Leopold and Loeb case in Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992). Muñoz proposes, "utopia has a positive valence, that of projection forward, and a negative function, which is the work of critique" (125). We might then understand NQC as performing the "work of critique": its importance is to negate the present moment, reminding us that it is often intolerable or even unlivable for queers. Yet NQC is also crucially limited in that its critique of the present does not include the positive "projection forward" of alternative futures. For this sense of queer futurity, we must turn to the queer rom-com.

Indeed, if NQC is the negation of the present, then the queer rom-com functions as the negation of the negation that allows us to begin imagining queer futures that are allegorically embodied in the collectivities formed within these films. *Go Fish* (Troche 1994), which kicks off the initial cycle of the queer rom-com, demonstrates this dialectical relationship. Formally, the film recalls the aesthetic experimentation of NQC films such as Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) in its fragmentary narrative development and self-referential sequences in which characters discuss events that have transpired as if they were in the audience. Troche also refuses the standard scene transitions of mainstream cinema, instead opting for abstract montages of objects and landscapes that disorient the viewer. The narrative even begins with a portrait of a listless young lesbian named Max (Guinevere Turner), who is afraid that love has passed her by, recalling the alienated protagonists of Araki's film. Finally, like *Totally Fucked Up*, Troche's narrative engages with contemporary social issues: Evy (Migdalia Melendez), the partner of Max's roommate Kia (T. Wendy McMillan), is kicked out of her home when her family learns of her sexual identity.

While *Go Fish* engages with similar social problems as the NQC, it also moves beyond the earlier movement in that Troche imagines properly utopian alternatives to the

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devastating conclusions commonly found in the NQC. For instance, after Evy is abandoned by her biological family, Max tells her that she and Kia will become her "new family." *Go Fish* thus suggests an enactment of Judith Butler's powerful attempts to "expand our notions of kinship beyond the heterosexual frame" (26). Instead of hegemonic, Oedipally-derived conceptualizations of kinship, Butler argues,

> The relations of kinship cross the boundaries between community and family and sometimes redefine the meaning of friendship as well. When these modes of intimate associations produce sustaining webs of relationships, they constitute a 'breakdown' of traditional kinship that displaces the presumption that biological and sexual relations structure kinship centrally. (26)

Butler thus offers us a way of queering familial structures: by creating such a new, queer family for Evy, *Go Fish* echoes Muñoz's point that queerness needs to be understood as a collective rather than individual figuration, and moves beyond the negative work of critique to imagine alternative ways in which the world might organize itself.

Go Fish thus enacts a powerful reversal of a NQC film like *Totally Fucked Up*: whereas Araki's film represents queerness as an ultimately alienating, individual experience despite the group structure of the film—the most devastating figuration of this alienation occurs in the sequence immediately preceding Andy's (James Duvall) suicide in which he tries desperately to reach any of his friends on the phone but is unsuccessful—Troche optimistically posits the possibility of a queer community that is able to meet the affective and material needs of its members. Collectivity is then a way in which a future becomes possible. Indeed, such figurations of collectivity—or queer utopian families—appear in several queer rom-com films: *Bar Girls* (Giovanni 1994) centres around a group of friends who congregate at a lesbian bar; the protagonist of *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (Maggenti 1995) lives in an all-female family consisting of her aunt, her aunt's partner, and her aunt's ex-partner; and *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit 1999) ends with the central lesbian couple running away to live with a group of queers who have all been expelled from an "ex-gay" camp.

I now want to move beyond these overt displays of collectivity and claim that the very narrative trajectory of the queer rom-com is similarly utopian in its production of the queer couple (or, as we shall see, the queer threesome). Of course, it is precisely this component of the films that seems to problematically align them with a "gay pragmatism," or the retreat from the political into romantic love. But what if we understand love not as a retreat from the world, but rather the radical, utopian commitment to make a new world? This is precisely the claim made by Alain Badiou, who argues that love is "an existential project: to construct a world from a decentered [sic] point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity" (Badiou and Truong 25). Badiou's point here is that love radically transforms us; when one has entered into an amorous relationship, the self is no longer the privileged referent from which the world is understood. Love, then, forces us to step outside ourselves—or, perhaps, to be "beside ourselves" as with ecstasy (Butler 20)—and see the world from the point of view of the two (or more) rather than the one (Badiou and Truong 22).

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Badiou warns us, however, that this transformation is not instantaneous. He argues that we need to reject a vision in which "love is simultaneously ignited, consummated and consumed in the meeting, in a magical moment outside the world as it really is" (Badiou and Truong 30). Rather, love is a "construction" that must "triumph

Love and Other Catastrophes **(Croghan 1996)**

But I'm a Cheerleader (Babbit 1999)

lastingly, sometimes painfully, over the hurdles erected by time, space, and the world" (Badiou and Truong 32). Love is then not just a new perspective on the world as it currently exists, but also a commitment to "the birth of a new world" (Badiou and Truong 69). Love unlocks and engages our desire to transform or "construct" the world—not from the point of view of the individual, but rather from the multiple perspectives of the partners in the love relationship. Badiou's conceptualization of love as a "construction" also resonates queerly with Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's notion of "queer culture building," which they define as "the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or privileged example of sexual culture" (187). Queer love is utopian in its insistence on collectivity and the construction of a transformed, queer world. Like Muñoz's project, love is about the imagining of a different future.

This construction does not come fully formed, however; it must continually be (re)built and (re)affirmed in a process of repetition which can also be located within the formal structure of the queer rom-com. Phillip E. Wegner has argued that Badiou's utopian notion of love undergirds the Classical Hollywood rom-com genre that Stanley Cavell calls the "comedy of remarriage" (85). Wegner's powerful intervention allows us to understand not only the utopian dimension of love, but also the way in which a seemingly hegemonic film genre harbours a utopian figuration of collectivity and the desire to bring another world into existence. Wegner locates the particular utopianism of the comedy of remarriage in the genre's "structures of repetition": the couple must continually re-affirm their commitment to each other in a series of "unions, breakups, and reunions" (85). So whereas the standard Hollywood rom-com simply ends with the couple's union, abandoning the structure of repetition inherent to love, the comedy of remarriage is precisely about the ongoing project of "fidelity," Badiou's term for the "transition from random encounter to a construction that is resilient" (Badiou and Truong 44). The utopianism of love, and thus these films, is then not to be found in the "wholly contingent, random" (Badiou and Truong 41) encounter that Badiou names the "event," but rather in the extended fidelity to that event through which its participants ensure the "birth of a new world" (69). While the precise subgenre of the "comedy of remarriage" is unavailable to the queer rom-com, I claim we can locate this formal structure of ongoing fidelity within the queer rom-com as well.

Indeed, queer rom-coms like *Bar Girls* and *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Croghan 1996) closely follow the breakup-makeup sequence that Wegner describes as utopian in the comedy of remarriage. In each film, the couples must demonstrate fidelity to their love by working through the problematic aspects of their relations with each other: jealousy in *Bar Girls* and inattention to one's partner in *Love and Other Catastrophes*. In each film, the central relationship reaches a "point," or a major conflict between the lovers in which their relationship can either be renewed or abandoned. Badiou describes a "point" as a moment of crisis "that suddenly compels you to opt for a radical choice,

Splendor (Araki 1999)

as if you were back at the beginning, when you accepted and declared the event" (Badiou and Truong 50-51). While the couples in *Bar Girls* and *Love and Other Catastrophes* initially break up, both films conclude with the couples reaffirming fidelity to their love and committing themselves to changing the problematic elements that brought the relationship to crisis. Both films offer the Hollywood happy ending, but only through the complete subjective transformation of the romantic couple.

This formal sequence is also crucial for queer rom-coms in which one of the partners does not identify as queer or homosexual prior to the romantic encounter with their eventual (or "evental") partner. For Badiou, the event, whether it appears in science, politics, art, or love, is something that exceeds the ontological capacity of the pre-evental situation or world: "an event paves the way for the possibility of what—from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of the world—is strictly impossible" (*Communist* 243). This definition resonates with the queer rom-com both at the level of genre—two characters of the same-sex falling in love is "strictly impossible" within the heteronormative codes of the rom-com as it existed prior to the 1990s—and within the diegesis itself as the formerly-heterosexual partner finds themselves impossibly in love with someone of the same gender. For these films, I designate the event as the moment in which the central couple first expresses their desire physically, often with a lengthy kissing sequence. Crucially, this sequence never occurs at the end of the film, but about halfway through its running time. This sequence then unlocks the possibility of fidelity to this evental encounter, or the ability for the romantic partners to "invent a new way of being and acting in the situation" (*Ethics* 42).

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The queer rom-com then tests this fidelity through the deployment of social obstacles, including financial pressure (*It's in the Water* [Herd 1997]; *But I'm a Cheerleader*) or social ostracism (*Incredibly True Adventures*; *It's in the Water*; *But I'm a Cheerleader*). These obstacles, like the interpersonal conflicts in films such as *Bar Girls* and *Love and Other Catastrophes*, create a "point" in the filmic relationship in which the couple can either abandon or remain faithful to their love. In the end, the characters always reaffirm their fidelity to their love event, demonstrating the endurance of love and the commitment to the creation of a queer world. We can thus describe the formal structure of the queer rom-com as "event-fidelity-point-fidelity." An analysis of the queer rom-com must therefore pay careful attention to how this formal structure unfolds within the narrative, or the extended process of fidelity to the evental love encounter. Two films that illustrate this structure particularly well appear late in the 1990s queer rom-com cycle: *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Splendor* (Araki 1999), the latter being par-

ticularly notable as it marks the transition of NQC auteur Gregg Araki into the rom-com genre.

But I'm a Cheerleader is about a popular high school teen named Megan (Natasha Lyonne) who, after being 'outed' by her friends and family, is shipped off to a "heterosexual rehabilitation camp" called True Directions to be cured of her lesbianism. This serves as a shocking development for Megan as she does not yet realize she is gay. At True Directions, she meets and falls in love with Graham (Clea DuVall), an unapologetically gay young woman sent to True Directions by her wealthy parents. The film's event occurs when a group of True Directions teens, including Megan and Graham, sneak out of the camp and go to a gay club. This journey represents a moment of transformation for Megan, who is still, at this point in the narrative, uncomfortable with the realization that she is gay. When they first arrive at the club, she begins doing an "intervention" chant she learned at True Directions that is supposed to curb sexual desire, but Graham quickly stops her by reminding her "you don't have to do that here. Just be yourself." Soon after, they kiss for the first time, tentatively beginning their relationship. This sequence in the film is thus a crucial hinge upon which the remainder of the narrative rests—from then on, the film is centred on the couple's ongoing fidelity to this love event. The film's "point" occurs later in the film, after Megan and Graham are caught together at True Directions. They are both threatened with expulsion if they do not break off their relationship, which would also mean a loss of material support from their parents; both are told they will be "cut off" and kicked out of their homes if they do not graduate from True Directions. Graham initially acquiesces to this demand, but Megan remains faithful to the truth-content of their love event and crashes the graduation, re-declaring her love for Graham in front of their parents and peers. The film concludes with them running away together, forcing open a utopian horizon in which they can imagine building a future together.

Crucially, this rom-com structure is in no way limited to the production of a couple: the most radical of the 1990s queer rom-coms is *Splendor*, about a polyamorous relationship between a woman named Veronica (Kathleen Robertson) and two men named Abel (Johnathon Schaech) and Zed (Matt Keeslar). The film is a utopian inversion of Araki's earlier dystopian film *The Doom Generation* (1995), also about a relationship between a woman and two men. However, whereas the earlier film ended with a violent attack by neo-Nazis that leaves one of the men dead, *Splendor* offers a happy, utopian ending in which Veronica embraces her queer relationship, committing herself to an uncertain future. This film's "point" occurs when Veronica, who discovers that she is pregnant, leaves her polyamorous relationship and agrees to marry a third man named Ernest (Eric Mabius), who she does not love but believes will provide a more stable financial and emotional life. When Ernest proposes to Veronica, he invokes the codes of heteronormative culture, telling her, "I want your baby to have a real mother and father." However, Abel and Zed crash the wedding, re-making their declaration of love. Veronica, who understands that her choices are between "comfort" and "a totally uncertain future where all bets were off and I would have to make it up as I go along," radically chooses the latter, remaining faithful to the truth-content of their queer relationship and its utopian future.

The queer rom-com thus goes far beyond the genre's ostensible normative project of making queer sexuality palatable for mainstream audiences by recoding it into the conventions of the Hollywood romantic comedy. Instead, these films are attempts to imagine queer futures at a time when such utopianism is in short supply. I have argued that by reading these films through Badiou's conceptualization of love as a radical, evental project—and queering this vision of love along the way—the 1990s queer romantic comedy opens our imaginations to a queer futurity that, according to Muñoz, is always utopian. Finally, I have suggested that the radical component of these films is to be found within their formal structure rather than their content. Indeed, by focusing on the process of fidelity in these films rather than the "result" of the queer couple or threesome, we can ultimately register them as allegories for the process of transforming our own world into a better one that decentres heterosexuality as the dominant social construction. These films thus unlock powerful visions of a queer utopian future that is still in the offing, provided we can remain faithful to its possibilities.

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