

Vol. 10 No. 2 New Queer Theory in Film

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CINEPHILE



Lee Edelman Shi-Yan Chao Derrick King Allison Macleod Mario Obando Jr.

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Editor's Note

What is queer theory? Or, better yet, what is queerness? Language struggles to grasp at the spaces within which queerness exists, the time that it sifts through, the identities that it shapes, resists, troubles, and grounds. Queer theory aims to give definition to these abstractions, to drag the margins to the fore, and to render in vivid lines the contours of queerness. Queer theory provokes and troubles hegemonic notions of who we are as so-called normative or non-normative subjects and how we should behave. It resists the violence of identity politics and seeks to destabilize the heteronormative and cisgendered ideological constructions at the core of such a discussion. It is no more and no less than a challenge to the idea that gender and sexuality are part of the essential self.

The groundbreaking work of queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, David Halperin, and Jose Muñoz (to name but a few) has transformed cultural theory in the last twenty years, where now queerness as a concept exists to be dismantled, reassembled, negated, reinstated, and, most importantly, questioned. The diversity of the articles in this issue, only two of which deal directly with the topic of what could strictly be called queer cinema, is reflective of the far reaching impact of queer theory and its many and varied applications.

This issue of *Cinephile* aims to further expand the framework within which queer theory exists today. We believe that the application of queer theory to film provides an especially fascinating avenue for pushing such scholarship toward new horizons and it is our hope that these articles will be at turns passionately defended and argued vehemently against. As *Cinephile's* first issue to focus on theory as a lens through which we better understand cinema, we hope these articles will take part in the ongoing ontological and epistemological conversations that lie at the heart of queerness.

We begin with an article by Lee Edelman that employs queerness as a disturbance in the order of meaning. In turning his gaze to *The Lodger* (Hitchcock 1927), Edelman explores Hitchcock's confrontation of queer negativity as the counterpart to the fetish. Next, Shi-Yan Chao profiles two documentaries from People's Republic of China, *Snake Boy* (Chen and Li 2001) and *Mei Mei* (Gao 2005). Chao

discusses the demonstration of queer agency through drag performance in relation to each film's subject, and explores how this performance is played out against the parameters of temporality and spatiality, or, as designated by Chao, queer chronotope. In an essay that bridges discussions of Irish cinema, the road film, and queer theory, Allison Macleod offers an interrogation of queer space and queer mobility in *I Went Down* (Breathnach 1997), positing that the film's queerness offers a disruptive portrait of masculine identity. In an essay that explores the intersection of queer theory with discussions of race and migration, Mario Obando Jr. offers a close analysis of Eugenio Derbez's recent film *Instructions Not Included* (2013). Obando enlists theorist Jasbir Puar in conjunction with critical Latino/a studies to assess the film's formation of queerness as conviviality. To end, Derrick King employs Alain Badiou's theorization of love as a radical act in conjunction with Jose Muñoz's theories of utopianism and futurity to recast the role of the queer rom-com in the 1990s.

I have many people to thank for helping this issue come to fruition, and I fear there is neither the space nor the words available to express my gratitude with any justice. Thank you to the authors who contributed such outstanding work to this issue, and to the tireless editorial board whose suggestions were invaluable to each article's publication. To the talented artists who contributed to this issue, you have my endless admiration and appreciation: Max Hirtz, whose beautiful images are perfectly coupled with each essay within these pages and Kerry Grainger, who produced this issue's teaser image and its flawless cover. My heartfelt thanks is also offered to The Department of Theatre and Film at UBC, especially Christine Evans, who is perhaps also owed an apology for the barrage of texts every time something went wrong.

I hope there is something within these pages that provokes and challenges you and leads you to question your assumptions about your own and others' identity. I hope that there is something you enjoy. And, finally, I hope that there is something that prompts you to take part in the conversation. After all, the question as to what queerness *is* remains open.

—Claire Davis

Contributors

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Lee Edelman is the Fletcher Professor of English Literature at Tufts University. He has published widely in the areas of film, literature, and theory and is the author of *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (1987), *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994), *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), and, with Lauren Berlant, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014). He is currently completing a book with the working title, *Bad Education: Why Queerness Is No Good*.

Derrick King is a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Florida, where he has also taught courses in film analysis, American literature, and composition. His research interests include utopian studies, queer theory, and Marxism. His other publications include an essay on the television series *Dollhouse* (2009-10), which appears in an edited collection entitled *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Confusing Purpose, Confounding Identity* (2014), and an essay on the horror film *The Cabin in the Woods* (Whedon 2012) in the journal *Slayage* (Summer 2014). He has also presented his research at several conferences, including the South Atlantic MLA, MELUS, the Popular Culture Association, and the Marxist Reading Group.

Allison Macleod recently graduated with a PhD in Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. Her doctoral thesis, "Spaces of Collision: Queer Masculinities in Recent Irish Cinema," analyzes images of non-normative masculinities to investigate the role of male sexuality within the constitution of Irish national culture and to theorize how the "national" is expressed in terms of gender and cultural hegemonies. She has published on Irish cinema and queer representation in *Irish Masculinity and Popular Culture: Tiger Tales* (2014) and has co-edited a book on different theoretical approaches to spatial analysis, *Spaces of (Dis)location* (2013). Her research interests include gender and sexual representation in film, national cinemas, queer theory, and filmic space.

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Light Hair

The Aesthetics of The Lodger

Prefatory Note

*I confess it must seem a bit perverse to contribute this essay to Cinephile's issue on "New Queer Theory in Film." The text never mentions queerness at all and the film at its centre is far from new. But the essay speaks to my interest in queerness as a disturbance of the order of meaning—a disturbance experienced libidinally as a disorienting enjoyment. Rather than reading queerness, that is, as a sexual orientation, I understand orientations themselves as forms of defence against queerness. By seeming to provide an epistemological ground, orientations, as the word suggests, affirm a capacity to make sense of sexuality through taxonomies of dispositions. As a placeholder for the "nothing," the illegibility, that narrative logic overcomes, queerness, this essay implicitly suggests, both determines and resists that epistemology. As a figure for the negativity that disfigures every mode of signification, it inhabits cinema in two distinct ways: as the fetishization of the image and as the dissolution of that fetish in the recognition of the minimal difference—the flicker—that the image embodies and denies. Dissolving the substance of reality as it normatively appears, destroying the consensus by which social reality and meaning are assumed, queerness is never far from the criminals to whom Hitchcock keeps returning. Indeed, it is never far from Hitchcock, whose cinematic rhetoric abounds in such acts of radical disfiguration.¹ Against the recuperative deployment of aesthetic idealizations, Hitchcock confronts queer negativity as the obverse of the fetish, a negativity whose enjoyment threatens the face of cinema itself. That facelessness, I suggest in what follows, is what *The Lodger* invites us to face.*

1. For a brilliant reading of Hitchcock's films that also engages, though with a different focus, the intrusion of figure in the visual field, see D. A. Miller's two recent essays.

The human face is the sun toward which the camera of Western narrative cinema heliotropically turns. Emitting, by way of its eyes, a sort of solar emanation (a light it seems to radiate, not simply to reflect), the face in film, unlike the sun, compels *our* eyes to take it in as the template of familiarity, recognizability, and legible form, and thus as the figure for the illuminations that cinema itself intends. Almost redundant in close-up—recall Deleuze's formulation that the "close-up is by itself face" (88)—it figures the apprehensible form that the camera, precisely by searching out, constructs on behalf of the film: an ideal of totalization by which the anxiety of the camera's cuts and pans, of its erasures of what we can see, is allayed by the promise of coherence to come when those movements at last achieve proper focus in the light that shines forth both from and as the film's own form or face. All the more worthy of comment, then, that Hitchcock, with the opening shot of *The Lodger* (1927), his third finished work as a director, presents the luminosity of such a face in a close-up filmed while an off-screen assailant, like Othello, puts out its light.

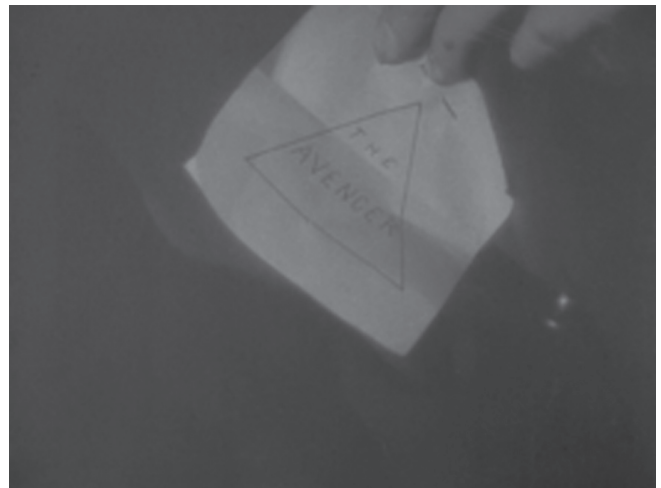


Though my metaphor comes from Shakespeare, *The Lodger* actively solicits it. As the viewer discovers retrospectively, this shot is framed by the narrative as a serial killer's repetition of his first homicidal act, the murder of a young woman at a Coming Out ball that constituted his own coming out in the guise of "The Avenger." That initial murder, shown later in a flashback that quotes this opening shot, depends upon, and follows from, a prior glimpse of the killer's hand as he switches off the lights in the ballroom and thereby plunges it into a darkness that conjoins the condition that enables his crime with its metaphorical effect: "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (*Othello* 5.2.7).



These related shots of the killer's victims at the moment of their deaths—the first introducing the spectacle of murder to the audience viewing the film, the second depicting its earlier eruption in the film's diegetic world—thus refer to each other for their meaning. By performing the repetition or serialization of an act that has taken place already, the murder depicted in the opening shot reveals itself as a figure and so as legible only in relation to something extrinsic to itself. In fact, all the killings in the film point back to, by

repeating, aspects of the first, thus turning *The Avenger's* proliferating crimes into so many forms of return. But the film invites us to read that first murder in figurative terms as well, depicting this initial killing too as an act of substitution imbued with a meaning borrowed, by way of transference, from something else. That something else, which the film never names, pertains to the offence, or the perceived offence, that the killer (who is never revealed in the film) purports to avenge by his crimes—crimes whose locations, the film makes clear, trace a formal pattern: a triangle. *The Avenger's* victims turn out thereby to be placeholders in more ways than one. They refer to a primal wrong on which *The Avenger* finds himself fixed (reenacting that wrong compulsively as if by repeating he could reverse it) and their death-sites plot out a figure on a map that signals the killer's "identity." For the triangle, of course, is the hallmark by which *The Avenger* signs his crimes as well as the structure of the romantic relations (among Daisy [June], Joe [Malcolm Keen], and the lodger [Ivor Novello]) that Hitchcock, pioneering his distinctive mirroring of criminal and erotic relations, juxtaposes with the series of murders.¹



Whether or not the killings "avenge" an erotic betrayal that triangulated an intimate relation, they identify their author as one who inscribes a triangle through those killings, reducing his victims to the fungible material of a repetition that is literally his signature. But no more than the killer is the film concerned with the specificity of these victims: the connection between the first shot of *The Lodger* and the shot of *The Avenger's* first victim makes clear that for all the

1. This might lead us to suspect that the "crime" the killer "avenges" with his own crime is an act of adultery that transformed his real or imagined intimacy with a blonde from the dyadic relation of a couple to the three-termed relation of a triangle like that in which Daisy gets involved. In that sense, *The Avenger* would ultimately be linked to Joe as well as to the lodger, both of whom will find themselves with losses to "avenge." The former's violent response to the loss of Daisy's affections would match the latter's determination to avenge the loss of his sister.

beauty of the images—or, indeed, as a *consequence* of that beauty—the faces these two shots linger on are construed, by *The Avenger* and by Hitchcock both, as utterly generic. They are faces stripped of identity to mark their identity as human faces—or to figure the human face as it is being stripped of its living identity. Contextually, moreover, in relation to each other, the shots sketch a narrative chiasmus: the light of the radiant face at the outset fades slowly into darkness while the onset of darkness at the Coming Out ball gives way to the radiance of the face. Thus whatever “face” denotes in the film, *The Lodger* grounds it in a logic of repetition, reversal, and substitution. Inextricable from the narrative movement that consists in bringing to light what was dark, the face itself comes to allegorize the recognition of pattern, the assurance of enlightenment, and the affirmation of the scopoc regime and its imaginary investments, even as *The Lodger* subjects the face to a violent derealization.

Both of these shots of the human face mobilize what Paul de Man describes as a logic of disfiguration, destroying the face as the naturalized site of meaning’s legibility precisely to the extent that such naturalization is seen as a rhetorical effect. Writing about Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life” in a text that informs my own, de Man observes that “figuration is the element in language that allows for the reiteration of meaning by substitution ... [T]he particular seduction of the figure is not necessarily that it creates an illusion of sensory pleasure, but that it creates an illusion of meaning” (“Shelley” 114-115). But as de Man goes on to demonstrate, the “figure for the figurality of all signification” (116) in Shelley’s poem (the poet calls it a “shape all light” (352)) evinces the dependence of figure as a mode of understanding or cognition on a “violent ... act of power achieved by the positional power of language considered by and in itself” (116).² Insofar as the epistemology of figure rests on “the senseless power of positional language” (117), its “authority of sense and meaning” (116) is only something “we impose” (116). If we normally read by investing figure with a delusory epistemological stability, de Man insists that “language performs the erasure of its own positions” (119), continuously bringing us face to face with the willful construction that generates the consistency, the face, of each posited figure. De Man calls this process “disfiguration” (119) and acknowledges, in a phrase that allows us to make the surprising return to Hitchcock, “the full power of this threat in all its negativity” (121). For the threat to the face of meaning in de Man finds its corollary in the shots of women’s faces as they face their own deaths in *The Lodger*.

Like an act of *The Avenger*, these arresting shots dim the lustre of the face by reducing it to a figure. In the pro-

The Avenger may choose his victims, in part, for what the film calls their “golden curls,” but even that gold, the film suggests, is never the thing itself: it too, like the women defined by it, only constitutes a fetish that materializes a lack in the representational field ...

cess they inscribe its luminous presence with a simultaneous absence, insisting on the formal status of the face as a substitute, a sort of placeholder, whose fascinating radiance dissimulates its insistently rhetorical operation. Perhaps for just that reason *The Lodger* is the first of Hitchcock’s films to thematize the insistence of the fetish, initiating what subsequent works will confirm as a fixation on blonde-haired women, or rather, and more precisely, as a fixation on women’s blonde hair, the distinction between these formulations being that between the coherence of a totalized identity and the particularity of non-totalizable elements. On the narrative level, the film makes clear that these women are merely instances—and to that extent, disposable—of the figural possibility attached to them by way of their light-coloured hair. *The Avenger* may choose his victims, in part, for what the film calls their “golden curls,” but even that gold, the film suggests, is never the thing itself: it too, like the women defined by it, only constitutes a fetish that materializes a lack in the representational field, an absent referent that evokes the absence intrinsic to reference as such.³ Insofar as it figures, in its status as fetish, the very fetishization of figure, and thus the fetishization of the totalized meaning that the face as figure effects (and we can hardly forget that *figure* in French is the word for face itself), such golden hair marks the site at which Hitchcock, by way of a bedazzling image, images the recourse of cinema to just such images to bedazzle us, to blind us to cinema’s anxious relation to the imageless dazzle of light.

Even as the face gets reduced in these shots (by the killer and Hitchcock both) to a metonym for blonde hair, so the hair, in the visual system of *The Lodger*, proves a metonym as well. Consider what Hitchcock himself had to say about the shot with which he begins:

We opened with the head of a blond [sic] girl who is screaming. I remember the way I photographed it. I took a sheet of glass, placed the girl’s head on the glass and spread her hair around until it filled the frame. Then we lit the glass from behind so that one would be struck by her light hair. Then we cut to show an

2. See Forest Pyle for a remarkably perceptive reading of negativity in Keats and Shelley that is also indebted to the work of de Man.

3. For Freud’s analysis of the fetish as a displacement of the missing phallus, see Freud, “Fetishism,” 152-7.



electric sign advertising a musical play, *To-night, Golden Curls*. (Qtd. in Truffaut 44)

How, in this light, could we fail to observe that what Hitchcock calls the girl's "light hair" stands in for light as such? Made literally here to frame her face like a mass of effulgent rays, the hair, once back-lit through transparent glass, becomes a mere vehicle for the light passing through, emitting the fascination and hypnotic allure of a gem-like brilliance that seems to mimic the gleam of the eye observing it. As Lacan remarks while glossing his well-known story of the sardine can, "that which is light looks at me," to which he adds that the "gaze is always a play of light and opacity ... [T]he point of gaze always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel" (96). Exemplarily in this regard, the golden curls in *The Lodger* serve at once to veil and unveil such light, occasioning an oscillating movement we might describe as a cognitive glimmer that corresponds to the sensory glimmer associated with gold—a glimmer of recognition that acknowledges only by negation the negativity from which it emerges: the illegibility of light. Precisely to the degree that light itself blinds, so the film blinds itself and its viewers to the light about which we receive no enlightenment—the light that reveals such enlightenment as an allegorical displacement of light, which remains, as the *medium* of cinematic knowledge, impossible for film to shed light on.

I mean by this that the fetishized hair marks the narrativization of light, its figural enchainment to a story of illumination as the access to understanding. The film's "golden curls" bind light's fascination to a material specificity, thus making those curls the allegorical shadow by means of which light can be seen. In the absence of such narrativization, which permits its regulated veiling and unveiling, light, the medium of visibility never visible *as itself*, would be nothing but blinding effulgence, an illegible dazzle that, inherently shapeless, would vacate the universe of shape. By means of its fetishistic displacement, though, into what Hitchcock calls "light hair," light enters the realm of cognition not simply in the eroticized form



of blonde curls, but also, and more importantly, as the narrative-engendering movement of displacement, as the transference that is and that generates a sequence of events, a historical relation, a "becoming visible" that reads the form of filmic desire as the desire for form as such. Light acquires visibility, that is, as the narrative movement essential to cinema's illusion of kinesis as produced by the celluloid strip. Hence cinema, for the Hitchcock of *The Lodger*, allegorizes the light that eludes definition, comprehension, or cognition through narratives of cognitive illumination. This should recall de Man's declaration that "'Light' names the necessary phenomenality of any positing" ("Hegel" 113), a claim he makes in his discussion of Hegel's analysis of "Let there be light." The light produced by that utterance, as *The Lodger* and de Man both imply, marks the phenomenalization of the movement already performed by the utterance itself. Light, to rephrase de Man, thus "names" the phenomalization of naming as such, the thematic embodiment that undertakes to literalize its positing. "Let there be," de Man's act of pure positing, is itself already the light, the condition of becoming visible, that the narrative sequence reiterates by giving form (precisely as narrative) to this giving of form (as catachrestic naming). But that light as phenomenal appearing veils the positing it fleshes out, permitting us access to that positing only by the light of its allegorical shadow, only, that is, by enacting the narrative movement toward enlightenment that blinds us to the figurality of what we thereby (mis)take for light.

Tom Cohen's wide-ranging essay, "Political Thrillers: Hitchcock, de Man, and Secret Agency in the 'Aesthetic State,'" raises similar questions about Hitchcock's de Manian engagement with light, but it does so while privileging the allegorization that *The Lodger*, at least in my reading, both interrogates and performs. Cohen's essay brilliantly





traces Hitchcock's insistence on the trace, his exposure of the mnemotechnical substrate that undermines the mimetic valence of his cinematic texts. Referring to what William Rothman describes as the "bar series" in Hitchcock's *oeuvre*, by which Rothman means the patterned inscription of lines, often parallel and regularly spaced, created by the positioning of objects or images within the filmic frame, Cohen proposes that in Hitchcock's films "[l]ight, the aftereffect of a pulsion of shadows that demarcate, like measure or the bar-series, is stripped of its paternal and solar promise. It is the effect of a certain *techné*" (123-124). Later he adds that the bar-series is "a remnant of a marker that precedes light" (128-129). Such a reading, despite its positing of light as an aftereffect of "*techné*," which Cohen acutely links to the status of writing as non-immediacy, reproduces, nonetheless, the figural entanglement of light in the *story* of enlightenment, which is also to say, in the story of story, in the story of light as emergence or education, of light as the difference from the generative mark of the "*techné*" whose shadow "precedes" it. Though Cohen effects a compelling transvaluation of *techné* and light with this move, light remains the product of *techné* as it remains the product of Cohen's own masterful technical analysis. For Cohen illuminates the antimimetic imperative of Hitchcock's "*techné*" only through readings that treat Hitchcock's texts as *mimetic* allegorizations of this antimimetic force. Rather than *escaping* what he describes as light's "paternal and solar promise," his reading, though identifying light as secondary, implicitly repeats that promise. Out of darkness comes light; out of shadow, illumination: always the story of story's imperative as expressed in the ur-imperative that posits it: "let there be light." We apprehend this story of light by displacing light into story, by imposing the form that binds us to mimesis even as we try to escape it. "Let

there be," by calling forth something from nothing, initiates the event *of* event, of appearance or coming into being, whereby light, as the allegorical materialization of this very becoming visible, inheres in the temporal difference that is narrative's version of linguistic positing. Light, therefore, remains as inaccessible as pure difference and it names the negativity of a naming that seeks to master negativity.

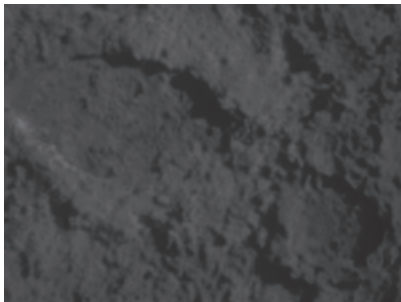
Could *The Lodger* better illuminate this structure inseparable from our delight in narrative than by associating its title character, and the burden of its own will-to-story, with a flicker, swaying, or change in the intensity of a light? If, just before he knocks on the door, the gaslight suddenly dims in the house at which the lodger will ask about rooms, it is not merely so Hitchcock can foreshadow his shadow-like entrance into the film, but also so Hitchcock can link, through metonymy, an insert shot of a gas lamp returning to its former degree of brightness with the following shot of the lodger removing the scarf that had covered his face. More than merely enabling, that is, the recognition of his face, light is that recognition itself. Its fluctuation, its flickering difference, is repeatedly allegorized in the narrative as the movement toward cognitive mastery, toward the dawning of an awareness, if only of the temporal difference that separates a now from a then.

Doesn't a version of that movement mark the film's most famous shot? When the people from whom the lodger rents rooms hear him pacing the floor above they turn their gaze to the ceiling and Hitchcock's camera follows suit. The film then cuts to the hanging light slowly swaying back and forth. Since this movement alone cannot convey its source in the lodger's footsteps, Hitchcock goes one step further. He shows the link between the swaying lamp and the weight of the lodger's steps by superimposing on the shot of the lamp (from the perspective of those looking

up) a glimpse of the lodger walking above, an effect he achieved by filming the lodger through a specially-made plate-glass floor. As in the opening shot, where the girl's light hair was spread out on glass and lit



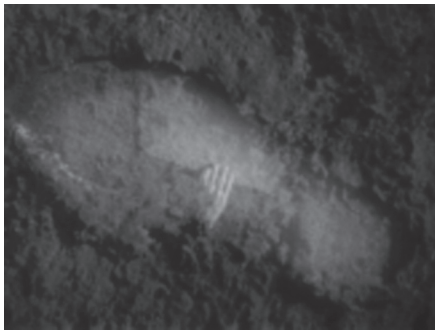
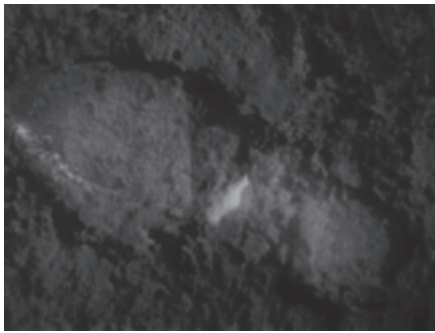
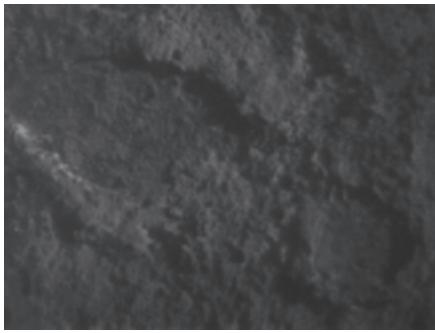
This constitutes, then, a foundational moment, a ground, of Hitchcock's art: the moment when the ground we stand on, the legibility of cinema as narrative, is exposed as the allegorization of light, as the displacement of light's illegibility into the temporal movement of (re)cognition.



from below, so here the same set of elements combine (human subject, plate of glass, and source of light) to enact the film's interest in narrative allegories that seem to yield cognitive transparency through light's transposition into knowledge. Graphically rendering an act of cognition, an inferential reading predicated on a logic of cause and effect (the lamp is swinging *because* the lodger, unseen, is pacing above), this sequence proposes that reading, like logic, effects its illuminations by means of a light that the film associates less with transparency than with the process of becoming transparent through narrative articulation. The narrativization by which the film seems to lead to a cognitive transparency is portrayed as no more than the allegorical elaboration of this swinging light—a light that here, as later in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960), figures cinema's disfigured face. This constitutes, then, a foundational moment, a ground, of Hitchcock's art: the moment when the ground we stand on, the legibility of cinema as narrative, is exposed as the allegorization of light, as the displacement of light's illegibility into the temporal movement of (re)cognition. Perhaps that explains why the lamp disappears in the final shot of this sequence. The light is supererogatory now, absorbed in the act of cognition that makes narrative itself the shedding of light.

But the film contains one crucial sequence where allegorization fails to conceal the blindness it strives to deny.⁴ Like the scene of the lodger's pacing the floor, this one too depicts the movement toward interpretation as understanding, but it exposes the seeming transparency that such a narrative of enlightenment produces as the effect of a (cinematic) projection. Entering a secluded London square on a typically foggy night, Joe, the stolid police detective assigned to catch The Avenger, catches, instead, the lodger about to kiss Daisy, Joe's fiancée. After making a scene that prompts Daisy to sever their engagement and leave with the lodger, Joe sinks down to the bench on which Daisy and the lodger had been embracing and leans forward with a heavy heart and wounded, downcast eyes. The film then cuts to Joe's point of view and directs our attention, inexplicably at first, to a dark patch of dirt at his feet. But such a description, however accurate, risks distorting the effect of this shot, which depends on the fact that we are not quite sure just what we are meant to see. Or rather, to put this another way, the shot entails our encounter with a seeming resistance to legibility. We may recognize, more or less quickly, the outline of a footprint at Joe's feet, but why this is worthy of notice surely leaves us at a loss. Joe and the lodger (among others, no doubt) have stood on the

4. As Paul de Man makes clear, the logic of allegory entails a narrative movement from ignorance to awareness, from an obstacle to its overcoming, whose paradigmatic expression might be found in the words of "Amazing Grace": "was blind but now I see." See "The Rhetoric of Temporality" 187-228.



spot Joe studies, so nothing should be less surprising than finding a footprint in the dirt. But the pairing of “footprint” and “detective” frames this nonetheless as a “clue.” And if the viewer is clueless about what it all means, Joe, we discover, is not. In reverse shot we now see his face brightly lit, though the diegetic source of light—the lamp beneath which he sits—ought to leave his face in the shadow that the brim of his hat would cast. Instead, his face now shines with light as if illuminated by what he has seen.

When the camera cuts back to the shot of the ground, two changes now take place. First, we see, superimposed on the footprint, a shot that repeats the moment when the lodger, displeased by the paintings of blonde-haired women on the walls of his rented rooms, suspiciously turned the pictures, and so the women’s faces, to the wall. In the frame of the footprint we watch his hand reversing a painting once more, supplanting a blonde-haired woman’s face with the picture frame’s imageless obverse. Second, this shot, which refuses us access to the fetishized “light hair,” seems, instead, to turn that hair’s lightness back into light

as such, for light now pools in the footprint, thereby giving it clearer shape. In this way the footprint’s empty frame emerges as an image of the emptying out or negation of the image—of the disfiguration that reads face as a figure, and thus threatens, like the killer, to destroy it.

If the light only gains visibility, though, insofar as it fills the footprint, which might function then as the print or photographic impression of light itself, then that footprint gains visibility here only as the detective makes it a screen for the images he rehearses in his mind. Though the film eventually disavows the recognition to which those images lead him—that the lodger himself is The Avenger and that Daisy will be his next victim—this cognitive movement produces the light that illuminates the pattern on the ground, thus grounding our own recognition of form (that of the newly-illuminated footprint as well as that made visible in the lodger’s incriminating activities) in the detective’s misrecognition.

Mistaking for transparent understanding what the film shows as literally a superimposition, Joe himself *posits* the meaning whose perception thereafter seems to enlighten him, enacting thereby an allegorical translation of “let there be” into light. In using the impression of the lodger’s foot as a screen onto which he then projects impressions of the lodger, Joe produces a quintessentially cinematic epistemology. If he seems to be viewing a film of sorts in the screen of the empty print, though, it is one that reduces the movements of film to discontinuous images, like the slides of a magic lantern show, and that thereby disfigures the naturalization to which classical editing aspires. Not that the images lack fluidity; they move across the footprint’s “ground” in a steady and stately flow. But each is isolated from its narrative context and adduced in relation to the others as a separate “clue” or piece of evidence. Thus the hand shown reversing the painting slides left and out of the footprint-as-screen while the lodger’s black bag, which doubles the one associated with The Avenger, slides into view from the right. After cutting to show us Joe’s face as he links these images in his mind, thus identifying what he sees as a cognitive montage that leads him to the moment of illumination when he posits, as if perceiving it, the

Mistaking for transparent understanding what the film shows as literally a superimposition, Joe himself paints the meaning whose perception thereafter seems to enlighten him, enacting thereby an allegorical translation of “let there be” into light.



lodger's identity as *The Avenger*, the camera returns to the footprint supporting his hallucinatory vision. A glimpse of the lodger embracing Daisy, here largely a mass of blonde hair, slides off to have its place taken by one last image: the swaying lamp used before to figure cognitive illumination.

Why should this lamp be the endpoint suggesting the lodger's culpability? The reductively naturalistic response, that its movement betrayed the lodger's anxiety as he nervously paced the floor, does not explain why it trumps the more incriminating bag or the more perverse, gesture of turning the paintings of blonde women toward the wall. But the lamp recalls the earlier elaboration of transparency and superimposition, suggesting, in this scene's meditation on projection and narrative construction, the understanding or enlightenment that flashes up when opacity gives way to legibility and the formlessness (mis)construed as light's antithesis takes form. The lamp, in this case, would epitomize the temporal sequence of filmic images as the formal displacement (through allegorization) of light's blinding illegibility. That condition of illegibility is transposed onto the dirt before it gets sublimated into meaning through the projection of image and form. We barely even notice, therefore, that the appearance in the footprint of the swaying light as the figure of illumination coincides with the disappearance of light from the shape of the footprint itself, a shape whose form is now swallowed up by the darkness from which it emerged.

Light as the disfiguration of form, the illegibility of light itself, is the horror, I want to argue, against which Hitchcock's films defend. Often, as in *The Lodger*, they do so by displacing the force of "let there be," the quintessential act of positing, onto the phenomenality of light as fetishized in "light hair." If the fetish as such gives presence

and form to what, in the absence of fetishization, signals a radical loss, then this primal narrative of Hitchcockian fetish in the form of "golden curls" announces, like *The Avenger's* triangle, Hitchcock's investment in the production of form through acts of positional violence. It reveals, that is, his commitment to seeing the flicker of light at the heart of the "flickers" as generating cinematic narrative as an allegorization that imposes form on the flicker that thereby flickers into meaning. The violence inherent in this positing of form as the figure of flickering light would at once repeat and defend against the violence of light as formlessness, as the disfiguration of figure. In this way the narrative allegory retains the negativity of the flicker, which it positivizes as enlightenment, cognitive mastery, or comprehension. That flicker, that differential relation in time at the core of the filmic event, becomes the basis for the bringing to light of form, paradigmatically as a face, that gives light a negative visibility in the shadows it imprints. Hitchcock may often discuss the MacGuffins with which he fills his plots, but *The Lodger* suggests that those plots

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are in some sense always MacGuffins themselves, snares by which Hitchcock blinds our eyes to the blinding horror of light, to the shapeless effulgence his camera would bind to the visible form of a face.

His films may rhetorically disfigure that face by seeming to bring us face to face with the light that effaces enlightenment, by reducing each image of “golden curls” to nothing but the sign or inscription of itself produced by a flicker of light, but Hitchcock, as the end of *The Lodger* makes clear, restores nonetheless the redemptive glow of the face that figures his film. For his cinema “knows” that knowing remains the effect of allegorical narrative and every attempt to face the light as a formlessness untethered to figure imposes on it another figure of cognitive illumination. The erasure or undoing of figure, after all, becomes one more narrative allegory reaffirming the legibility of allegory as figure. The metonymy that *The Lodger* adduces in the form of “golden curls,” or better, in the form of what Hitchcock himself identified as “light hair,” thus partakes of a fetishization essential to his cinema: the fetishization that postivizes a differential flickering by making it a sign—like the sign announcing “To-Night, Golden Curls” that blinks on and off at the end of *The Lodger*, reaffirming the substitutive relations among light, light hair, and signification. In this way Hitchcock’s film makes visible the negativity of light itself—a negativity *The Lodger* tries to negate by bringing it to light in scenes of enlightenment that leave us in the dark. That darkness, which serves as our only defense against the formlessness of light, is the darkness of allegory’s “dark conceite” (407), as Spenser famously called it, whereby Hitchcock posits, in the form of light hair, the equation of light and form in order to give us, in form as such, the only light we can face.

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Documenting Transgenderism and Queer Chronotope in Postsocialist China

Along with economic reform and the reintroduction of a market economy, China has seen an increasing tension between the socialist regime and the capitalist agenda since the 1980s. In tandem with incongruities between the political and economic realms, China's postsocialist condition has also found expression in the cultural terrain. In particular, the formation of an "alternative public sphere" has been facilitated by a changing mediascape that includes practices and venues outside the state system (Zhang 30). Notably imperative to this alternative public culture is the growing strand of independent documentary filmmaking known as the New Documentary Movement. Launched by filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, Zhang Yuan, and Jiang Yue in the 1990s, the New Documentary generally rejects the official tradition of newsreels and *zhuanti pian*—literally "special topic films"—which are characterized by footage compiled in accordance with pre-written scripts, and by directly addressing the audience from a grand, top-down perspective (Berry "Getting Real" 117). In opposition to these previous forms, the New Documentary highlights the "spontaneous and unscripted quality" of on-the-spot realism (122), conveying a deep concern for "civilian life" from a "personal standpoint" (Lu 14-15). Thematically, the New Documentary distances itself from official discourses, choosing instead to document the lives of ordinary people, especially those on the periphery of society, such as marginalized artists, migrant workers, miners, Tibetans, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, and those who are queer-identifying.

While lesbianism has been the focus of several films since the new millennium (beginning with *The Box* [Ying

2001] and *Dyke March* [Shi 2004])¹, female impersonation and transgenering are also salient queer subjects (arguably starting with *Miss Jing Xing* [Zhang 2000]) in this wave of independent documentary filmmaking. In this article, I would like to focus on two Digital Video (DV) documentaries of the latter category: *Snake Boy/Shanghai Nanhai* (Chen and Li 2001) and *Mei Mei* (Gao 2005).² I have chosen these two documentaries because of their main subjects' involvement with different forms of transgenderism³ that, taken together, incisively demonstrate the particular ways queer-identifying subjects in contemporary China negotiate their agency in terms of temporality, spatiality, individuality/collectivity, money/labour, and imagination. As will become clear, the often mutually conflicting political, economic, and cultural forces characteristic of China's postsocialist condition mediate these factors.⁴

1. For a discussion of lesbian documentary films from China, see Chao.

2. *Snake Boy* and *Mei Mei* were shown at the first and second Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001 and 2005, respectively. For an insightful analysis of queer representation in New Documentary *vis-à-vis* digital technologies and queer bodies, see Robinson (112-29).

3. For an account of the history and practices of cross-dressing in Chinese theater, see Li. For a recent joint endeavor in the emerging "Chinese transgender studies" that brings to light a wide variety of transgender practices ranging from theatre to literature, to religion, and to popular cultures in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, see Chiang. Here, I follow Chiang's definition of transgender as "practices of embodiment that cross or transcend normative boundaries of gender" (7).

4. Chris Berry has argued for an understanding of Chinese postsocialism in parallel with Jean-Francois Lyotard's articulation of postmodernism, proposing postsocialism as a state in which "the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after the faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost" ("Getting Real" 116). Meanwhile, Berry maintains the distinct material condition of Chinese

As the eponymous subject of *Snake Boy*, Coco is a talented, gay-identifying jazz singer based in Shanghai. Coco's persona, however, has drawn criticism by noted China Studies scholar Paul G. Pickowicz, for whom Coco appears to be little more than "a neocolonial invention and soulless plaything of the new and profoundly unattractive 'expatriate' community in Shanghai" (16). While Pickowicz's stance is informed by postcolonial criticism from a macro approach that unwittingly downplays the individual, my subsequent analysis on a micro level will point to the contrary, particularly the queer agency involved in Coco's self-fashioning of his stage performance and offstage persona. However, where Coco's performance enlists transgenderism through an emphasis on vocal style over attire, my discussion of stage artist Meimei (the central subject of *Mei Mei*) draws attention to her transgenderism as a performance that involves *both* attire and vocal style. As I will stress, Meimei's attire and vocal style vary according to the changing geopolitics interwoven with the subject's life trajectory

Snake Boy and *Mei Mei*, I argue, express queer agency as negotiated through a spectrum of gender performance. By queer agency, I refer to the will and life-force that is often perceivable in and through queer subjects' resistance to, or negotiation with, heteronormative institutions and expressions, be they gender-based or otherwise. In tension with Judith Butler's articulation of "gender performativity" as a totalizing heteronormative mechanism, the queer agency animated by Coco and Meimei is made visible and audible through the subjects' "refusal to repeat" heteronormative gender ideals (Straayer 176). Additionally, their queer agency is notably played out against the parameters of both temporality and spatiality. Borrowing (and queering) Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of "chronotope" ("time-space"), my use of "queer chronotope" shares the emphases in current queer scholarship on queer temporalities and sexual geographies that prove to be so foundational to the subject formation of various sexual dissidents.⁵ Coco and Meimei's negotiation of their dissident subjectivities, I contend, is further imbricated in China's postsocialist economy. To some measure, it contributes to what Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel call an "alternative archive" that, as a feature of the New Documentary and a crucial part of the aforementioned "alternative public sphere," houses unofficial documents and affects that are unrecognized or marginalized by the official discourse.

postsocialism characterized by the "contradictions" between economic force and ideological control, which simultaneously exercise substantial influence on public discourse and cultural expressions ("Staging Gay Life" 168).

5. This growing scholarship on queer temporalities and sexual geographies includes writings by Carolyn Dinshaw, John Howard, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Elizabeth Freeman, among others.

Filed in 2001, *Snake Boy* presents a vivid portrayal of Coco, a then-twenty-four-year-old jazz singer who, since age seventeen, had been performing in Shanghai nightclubs. Trendy and fluent in English, Coco is nonetheless not a Shanghai native, but originally from Shaoyang, a remote county in Hunan Province in central China. While the word "snake" in the film's English title refers to both the sign of the Chinese zodiac Coco belongs to and the mystical image of the snake to which Coco likens his own persona, the film's Chinese title—literally translated as "Shanghai boy"—indicates Coco's intimate blending of himself into Shanghai's cosmopolitan culture and glamorous nightlife. Aside from shots that follow subjects or showcase settings, the film is, for the most part, composed of original interviews conducted with Coco, his parents, his former teachers, and those who befriend him either personally or professionally. These interviews are interspersed with video footage, photos, and print materials from Coco's past.

By queer agency, I refer to the will and life-force that is often perceivable in and through queer subjects' resistance to, or negotiation with, heteronormative institutions and expressions, be they gender-based or otherwise.

The film offers a portrait of Coco, who was born in 1977 to parents who were both professionals in local Chinese opera. Coco's musical talent was apparent from a young age, and in 1994 at age sixteen he became the youngest student at the prestigious Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The first years of Coco's study in Shanghai coincided with a prospering of city nightclubs that featured musical performances. Here, Coco encountered jazz for the first time; enthralled by this particular musical genre, he soon began performing jazz in nightclubs. At this stage, he modeled his singing style after Billie Holiday. In the meantime, Coco also came to terms with his gay identity. The film goes on to recount his first relationship—an interracial one—in France in 1997, following his decision to drop out of school while pursuing a career as a stage and recording artist.

Two themes are fundamental to this narrative: one centres on Coco's performance, and the other concerns his sexual orientation. Not only are these themes inseparable from one another, they are interwoven by a sense of queer agency. Notably, Coco's immense attraction to jazz involves layers of self-fashioning in his subject. As a musical genre that underlines the performers' improvisation and personal



Coco performs “The Girl from Ipanema” at a fashionable Shanghai club

expression, jazz is often recognized for its “spontaneity,” expressive freedom and an emphatic sense of “individuality” (Berendt 371).⁶ This characteristic, in a postsocialist setting, potentially resonates with a deep-seated sensibility that overtly rejects the previous generations’ forceful renunciation of any individualism in favour of the collective interest under socialist nation-building. This, in short, can be taken as “a defiance of the hegemony of collectivism” characteristic of socialist China (Chen and Xiao 148).

Indeed, as an artist who grew up in post-Mao China, Coco associates his own pursuit of a musical profession with his father. In Coco’s view, his father possessed great musical gifts but “his times [the socialist era] did not allow him the full opportunity to showcase his talent and fulfill his dream.” Given that Coco sees his artistic pursuit as a succession of his father’s ambition, Coco’s performative aim inextricably involves a negotiation of personal expression that, while bearing the temporal ramifications of postsocialism, finds its clear voice in jazz performance.

Further, Coco’s jazz singing involves multiple boundary-crossings. When Coco sings like Billie Holiday or Lena Horne, he—as a non-black male jazz vocalist—virtually crosses the boundaries of race, gender, and culture on a phantasmatic level. The phantasmatic, according to Butler and Slavoj Žižek, is characteristic of human subjectivity, in that it involves the constant writing and re-writing of identificatory boundaries, and which comes into being through fantasy staged against the *mise-en-scène* premised upon the exclusion of certain expressions rendered illegitimate or unintelligible in the Symbolic (Butler

6. Joachim-Ernst Berendt defines jazz as a form of art that originated in the United States through the confrontation of African American and European music. He argues that jazz differs from European music in that the former has a “special relationship to time defined as ‘swing;’” it involves “a spontaneity and vitality of musical production in which improvisation plays a role;” and it contains a “sonority and manner of phrasing which mirror the individuality of the performing jazz musician” (371).

93-119, Žižek). Here Coco engages in a kind of “sonic drag” (Koestenbaum 165) that, by crossing the boundaries of race, gender, and culture through singing, recreates the *mise-en-scène* for his subject formation. This recreation is key to Coco’s staging of a subjectivity that is different from the Chinese mainstream, and that is primarily marked by gender ambiguity and queerness. While Coco’s particular performance style allows him to exercise his queer agency, it also provides Coco with a strategy to negotiate his gay identity in public, where he can strategically act out—but not specifically spell out—his queer identification. This strategy was especially significant before March 2001, when homosexuality was finally removed from the list of mental disorders issued by the Chinese Psychiatric Association.

When Pickowicz criticizes Coco as a “neocolonial invention and soulless plaything” patronized by Shanghai’s expatriate community, he reductively assumes a macro approach by trying to critically define Coco’s performance in relation to a cultural framework dominated by the West (16). His criticism somehow neglects Coco’s gay identity, along with Coco’s negotiation of his queer subjectivity through musical performance. In his critique of Coco’s lack of agency, Pickowicz also conveniently ignores the fact that Coco does not stop at imitating Billie Holiday or being what Pickowicz describes as a “lesser version of the original” (16). As the film shows, Coco and his band have been avidly experimenting with fusing jazz to a variety of music, ranging from Chinese percussion music, to Chinese folk song, to bebop. These musical experiments point to yet another layer of negotiation in Coco, who—against the pitfalls of Western cultural imperialism or neocolonialism—is first and foremost a self-conscious musical artist in addition to being a gay vocalist.

In sum, Coco fashions his queer subjectivity through artistic performances marked by self-conscious musical experiments, in addition to his blurring of gendered, racial, and cultural boundaries. Against the pitfalls of Western cultural imperialism, Coco’s queer agency emerges from his defiance of both heteronormative institutions and socialist collectivism. His self-fashioning against the socialist era, together with his willed migration from Shaoyang to Shanghai (China’s most culturally inclusive metropolis profoundly influenced by the open-door policy in the post-Mao era), notably registers the temporal-spatial ramification of Chinese postsocialism, embodying the kind of queer chronotope at stake in this essay.

Like Coco, the titular subject of *Mei Mei* is not native to the metropolis, but was born and raised in Dandong, a small border city in Northeastern China.⁷ However, unlike Coco, Meimei’s transgender performance, incorporates

7. For a more detailed discussion of *Mei Mei* along with Zhang Hanzhi’s *Tang Tang* (2005), see Chao.



Meimei in her flamboyant costume in a Beijing bar

both vocal style and costuming. Shot between late 2003 and early 2005, *Mei Mei* is divided into three sections: the first leads to Meimei's "farewell concert" before her marriage to a man, which turns out to be short-lived; the second revolves around Meimei's attempt to return to performing life, which is eventually cut short by her illness; and the third depicts Meimei's sojourn in Dandong with her parents. While the film involves the subject's travel between Beijing and her hometown, it notably sheds light on certain aspects of cross-dressing that are mediated by changing geo-politics. For instance, when in Beijing, Meimei sometimes chooses to wear skirts even when she is offstage. However, when Meimei leaves for Dandong, she must wear trousers instead, so as to eschew the scrutiny and gossip of the locals. Clearly, Meimei enjoys greater autonomy in

It is through the transgression of gender norms that a trans-local imagination free from poverty and homophobia is simultaneously activated.

regard to her appearance in Beijing, a metropolis, than in her hometown, a small and remote city. As a small-town sexual dissident whose personal desire contradicts public expectation, Meimei could have sought relative autonomy in Beijing. Yet, by the film's third act, Meimei cannot help but acquiesce to the regulatory constraints of her hometown after losing her mobility due to poor health and economic distress. Not only must Meimei give up her preferred feminine apparel and long hair, she also loses the stage for cross-dressing performance in her desired fashion.

Meimei's life trajectory, to a large extent, coincides with the logic of what Judith Halberstam calls "metronormativity" (36). This refers to the tendency in many normalizing narratives of LGBTQ subjectivities to conflate the urban with the visible, while treating the rural as what John Howard terms a "geopolitical closet" that renders queer subjectivities invisible (xix). Constrained as she is during

her protracted recovery at home, Meimei nonetheless starts to practice Peking opera, demonstrating her queer agency. In a broader sense, the viewer must take into account that, in Peking opera, a matrix of "formulated" (*chengshi hua*) skills associated with various role-types (*hangdang*) and an abstract signifying system of stage installation have been developed over the centuries.⁸ While the gender system in the Peking opera is not fully subject to the principles of reality, operatic transgenderism is also justifiable as an artform. The fact that Meimei practices Peking opera while stranded in Dandong can thus be understood as an expedient through which she can moderately channel her desire for female impersonation, while simultaneously distancing herself from the negative imaginaries associated with "gender inversion" (*xing daocuo*). In so doing, a sense of queer agency nevertheless emerges from her denied queer subjectivity.

Just as Coco's jazz performance registers a postsocialist ramification in its emphasis on personal expression and a Westernized outlook considered illegitimate in socialist China, Meimei's cross-dressing performance in Beijing is likewise inflected by postsocialism on at least two levels. On one level, Meimei justifies her transgender performance by arguing that she earns a living by her own labour (*kao ziji de laoli zhuanqian*). Meimei's argument acutely blends the concepts of money and labour, respectively the two valuations most foundational to capitalism and socialism (Rofel 96-127). Chinese postsocialism, as has been noted, is exactly marked by the uneasy coexistence of capitalism and socialism.⁹ On another level, Meimei's rendition of Chinese pop songs from Hong Kong (particularly late queer icon Anita Mui's "Woman as Flower" [*Nuren hua*]) further indicates a cosmopolitan dimension in her queer subject formation that desires a phantasmatic transcendence of the local by way not so much of the West (as in Coco's



Meimei performs Peking opera in plain clothing in a local community centre in Dandong. The characters behind indicate the centre's political affiliation with the Communist party.

8. For an account of the history and practices of Chinese theatre, see Mackerras.

9. See, for example, Dirlík and Zhang.

case), as by way of the regional. For Meimei, gender arguably forms, to quote Butler, the very “vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of ... class” (130). In other words, cross-dressing performance animates the fantasy of becoming a woman—a “real” woman—in order to find an imaginary man who represents the promise of permanent shelter from homophobia and poverty. For some Chinese female impersonators, the consumption of transnational mass media thus involves the negotiation of a trans-local imaginary mediated by gender, where gender is always embedded in class and inseparable from sexual orientation. It is through the transgression of gender norms that a trans-local imagination free from poverty and homophobia is simultaneously activated. Such processes, I suggest, configure a crucial dimension integral to the subject-formation of numerous male-to-female gender-crossing practitioners in postsocialist China.

Snake Boy and *Mei Mei* foreground queer agency as it is negotiated through the spectrum of transgender performance as played out against the parameters of temporality—namely postsocialist vs. socialist eras—and spatiality, particularly the urban/rural divide, and the local-regional-global nexus. The subjects’ negotiation of their dissident subjectivities also brings into focus China’s postsocialist economy, as exemplified by the way in which subjects come to terms with such valuations as individuality vs. collectivity, and labour vs. money. Together, they shed light on the intricate dynamic between queer agency and queer chronotope in a postsocialist environment. These two documentaries manifest a crucial part of the queer experience that is socially grounded yet marginalized in mainstream discourse. With the commitment of the filmmakers and their queer subjects alike, such queer experiences also become an indispensable dimension of the expanding alternative archive contributed by China’s New Documentary films.

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Queer Mobility, Irish Masculinity, and the Reconfigured Road Movie in *I Went Down*

Beginning in the 1990s, there emerged a number of queer Irish films that used postmodern tropes of movement and mobility to interrogate shifting forms of identification and belonging in contemporary Ireland. Films such as *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Clayton 1996), *2by4* (Smallhorne 1997), *I Went Down* (Breathnach 1997), *Borstal Boy* (Sheridan 2000), and *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan 2005) are structured by journey narratives that trace the queer male subject's movement as he negotiates his sexuality in relation to shifting social and spatial structures. These films frame the queer male subject's journey within a coming-out narrative, implying the liberatory potential of mobility with regards to the development and disclosure of sexual identity. At the same time, they signal a distinctly male crisis of identity linked to the mobile subject's physical and psychic disassociation from stable referents of identity associated with placehood. This essay focuses on *I Went Down* to examine how the film's adaptation of the road movie links individual mobility with sexual liberation while provoking a crisis of identity through the queer male subject's displacement from dominant Irish society. Specifically, I propose the concept of queer mobility as a disruptive position of alterity that challenges hegemonic structures and social norms, and reveals identity as fundamentally unstable.

This essay uses "queer" as an analytical tool for considering identity as a process of becoming rather than a static state of being. While queer is often used as an umbrella term for diverse sexual practices and identities that do not fit into institutional and socially sanctioned categories, I extend its usage beyond individual sexuality to examine the sexual politics of space. This approach is informed by a

poststructuralist understanding of space as multiple, fluid, and contested, both producing and produced by social identities and relations. As Henri Lefebvre argues, "the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself" (129). This notion of a mutual relationship between space and identity allows for an interrogation of how particular place-making practices and spatial politics inform social relations and shape sexual identities. In particular, queer renderings of space have focused on the sexualisation of space and the spatiality of sexual desire. Queer theorists such as Jon Binnie, Gill Valentine, and Jean-Ulrick Désert challenge the normalization of space as heterosexual in order to undermine heteronormative structures of power and privilege which marginalize and exclude non-heterosexual identities, behaviours, and desires. Specifically, Désert develops his concept of "queer space" to theorize how queer bodies can disrupt normalized conceptions of space by revealing it as contested and contradictory. Rather than viewing certain spaces as straight and others as queer, Désert suggests that all space has the potential to double as queer space, and that space remains latent until activated by a queer presence: "where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape" (21). Désert posits queer space as simultaneously public and private in order to blur the boundaries between inside/outside and centre/margin, and to hint at more hybrid spatial positions and complex identity formations.

Larry Knopp further theorizes the disruptive potential of queer bodies to complicate the stable relationship between identity and place. He argues that queer relations to space are “all about the flows of movement and passings” rather than belonging to a fixed and static site (23). He suggests that queer subjects may privilege perpetual mobility and placelessness rather than placehood and sedentarism precisely because “social and sexual encounters with other queers can feel safer in such contexts—on the move, passing through, inhabiting a space for a short amount of time” (23). By revealing space to be inherently unstable and contested, and by producing alternative and non-normative social and spatial relations, queer bodies thus offer the potential to undermine those binary systems and structures of privilege through which hegemonic discourses operate.

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I Went Down adapts the narrative structure and conventions of the road movie within an Irish context to examine how movement along the road liberates the queer Irish male subject from rigidly defined social identities and gendered roles. The film does not emerge as an explicitly queer text. Yet, by using queer mobility as an analytical framework, this essay seeks to productively re-read the film as queer to examine how mobility acts as a disruptive and catalytic force by subverting and transforming stable forms of identity and space. *I Went Down* follows Irish ex-cons Git (Peter McDonald) and Bunny (Brendan Gleeson) as they travel from Dublin to Cork and then back to Dublin on a mission to kidnap a man named Frank Grogan (Peter Caffrey) under the orders of Dublin mob boss Tom French (Tony Doyle). Both Git and Bunny are initially characterized within a hard-bodied hypermasculine ideal. Yet as the men move forward along their journey, this characterization is undermined by the characters’ increasing lack of agency and control over their mode of transportation and their surroundings.

The film’s subversion of the men’s masculinities reaches a climax point approximately halfway through the film in a scene where Bunny reveals to Git that he had a not



Figure 1: Git and Bunny drinking side by side in the roadside motel pub

entirely unwelcomed sexual encounter with a man while he was in prison. The scene begins with Git and Bunny stopping at a roadside motel for the night. They head to the motel pub for a pint, and the first shot of the two men inside the pub is of them framed side by side, smoking cigarettes and drinking their Guinness in unison (Figure 1). Bunny begins to tell Git his theory on women, differentiating between good looking and ugly women and theorizing how their looks influence their attitudes about life. Throughout Bunny’s speech, the men are framed together. Bunny’s theory prompts Git to ask him about his marriage. Bunny tells him that he has been married for twelve years, but also admits that his wife has changed the locks on the house they share and will not allow him inside. As Bunny tells Git that he was imprisoned for over six years for attempted armed robbery, the characters are framed individually, with cross-cuts between close-up shots of Bunny and Git. Bunny reveals that in jail, “there was a man I shared a cell with for two or three months. And what went down—it wasn’t full—I’m not a queer you know. Me wife doesn’t know.” He then tells Git that French knows about Bunny’s sexual indiscretion and is blackmailing Bunny by threatening to tell his wife about it unless Bunny keeps working for French.

In this confession, Bunny does not frame his sexual encounter as an attack or rape, leaving it unclear whether it was consensual. Instead, he appears more anxious about it becoming public knowledge. By leaving it ambiguous as to whether it was a welcome or unwelcome experience, and whether Bunny was a willing participant, the film undermines Bunny’s hypermasculine gangster persona and makes it difficult to view him as unambiguously heterosexual. At the same time, when Bunny reveals that his motivation for pursuing Grogan is to prevent his sexual dissidence from being publicly exposed, the film suggests that the men’s journey is Bunny’s attempt to re-inscribe himself back into the patriarchal status quo. Thus, even as Bunny’s journey is the catalyst for his queer confession, this same mobility is fuelled by a desire to re-assimilate into dominant patriar-

chal structures by conforming to the ideals of the Irish male hard-bodied gangster community.

This tension between deviance and conformity becomes further evident when two women walk into the pub immediately following Bunny's confession and the film works to re-stabilize the men (and the pub space) as heterosexual and homosocial. As Git turns to look at the women, the background music becomes louder and the film returns



Figure 2: Bunny listens outside Git's motel room door

to framing the two men together. The pub shifts from operating as a site for Bunny's queer confession to a space that facilitates the men's sexual pursuit of the two women as Bunny gets up from his seat to approach them. This doubling of the pub space as simultaneously queer and homosocial recalls Désert's concept of "queer space." The tension in this scene between Bunny's sexuality and his negotiation of the public and private divide within the pub (shifting from a secretive confession to a public pursuit of the women) undermines stable forms of identity and space.

Yet even as the film works to re-stabilize homosocial norms through the presence of the two women, it continues to develop queer undertones with regard to Bunny's character. Later that night, as Git and Bunny pee side by side at the urinals in the pub washroom, Bunny looks down at Git's penis with interest and comments on its size. After Git takes one of the women from the pub to his motel room and they begin to have sex, they are interrupted by the sound of Bunny listening voyeuristically outside the room door, with Git even momentarily breaking away from the woman to go and try to catch Bunny in the act (Figure 2). Although the film shifts away from any explicit engagement with Bunny's queer sexuality, this scene still suggests particular anxieties surrounding Bunny's masculinity; as Michael Patrick Gillespie points out, Bunny "suffers quite self-consciously from sexual ambivalence in an environment intolerant of that kind of ambiguity" (92).

The complicated relationship between the liberatory potential of queer mobility and the ongoing pressures of hegemonic patriarchal impulses is further evidenced in the film's adaptation of the road movie genre. While Irish

film scholars such as Luke Gibbons and D  og O'Connell have characterized *I Went Down* as a road movie, they have not fully addressed how the film uses the iconography and conventions of the road movie to produce a queer form of masculinity. As a masculinist film genre with particular historical and cultural ties to 1960s American counterculture, the road movie has since evolved and been adapted within different national and cultural contexts. At the same time, Laura Rascaroli claims that at the genre's core is the use of "journey as cultural critique, as exploration both of society and of one's self," that is preserved amidst shifts in cinematic style, narrative structure, thematic concerns, and representational strategies (72). Even as *I Went Down* retains this generic core, its specifically Irish context sets it apart from the traditional American road movie. Replacing the boundless American highways and expansive landscapes with the by-ways of the Irish midlands, and emphasizing its protagonists' discomfort with technology and mechanized transport rather than the harmonious relationship between machine and man that is central to the traditional road movie, *I Went Down* not only evokes a strong sense of local particularity but uses these points of difference to suggest a crisis of masculinity.

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Git and Bunny's initial movements along the road are motivated by French's orders. Whereas the traditional American road movie tends to frame the protagonist's journey as a form of escape or rebellion, as scholars such as Timothy Corrigan and David Laderman have suggested, *I Went Down* frames Git and Bunny's journey as an act of compliance, with their movements dictated by French's instructions. The conforming nature of their journey is further evidenced by its circularity. The men travel from Dublin to Cork and then back toward Dublin. They are not moving through space into the unknown but instead remain on a circular course that will return them to their origin, implying character regression rather than development. The film emphasizes the circularity of their journey in a scene shortly after they have kidnapped Grogan in Cork and begin heading back toward Dublin. Their car is stopped by a Garda   who is helping to tow a broken car off



Figure 3: A circular journey—Git and Bunny head back to Dublin



Figure 4: On the road in *Easy Rider*

the road. After a short exchange with the officer, they pass through the police barricade unchallenged and a long shot shows the car driving away from the barricade and toward the camera. In the shot, the road forms a U-shape so that as the car moves toward the camera it follows the curve of the road and begins to head back in the same direction the characters came from. Not only does this shot reference the small size of Ireland, since Git and Bunny have been able to cross from one side of the country to the other in two days, but it stands in stark contrast to the more conventional landscape shots used in American road movies, such as *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), where the highway stretches out to disappear into the distant horizon (Figures 3 and 4). Such an explicit reformulation of the American road movie is not found in other queer Irish journey films, such as *The Disappearance of Finbar* and *Breakfast on Pluto*. This more direct reference to the road movie in *I Went Down* therefore signifies the film's self-reflexive play with film genre, acknowledging the influence of American culture on Irish cinema even as it attempts to shape a specifically Irish cultural product.

I Went Down further distinguishes itself from the traditional American road movie by refusing to evoke the same joys of mobility and exploring space. Rather than travelling along a highway that borders expansive landscapes, Git and Bunny travel along byways that border the bogland. There are very few long shots in the film that emphasize the characters moving across the landscape. Instead, their

movements along the road follow a start-and-stop pattern whereby a shot showing them driving away down the road is often followed by a shot of them stopping for some reason. For example, when Bunny steals a second car after having to ditch the first one, there is a shot of Git waiting by the side of the road in a small town and then Bunny pulling up to the curb. Git gets into the car and Bunny drives off down the road. The film then cuts to a bird's eye shot of an idyllic Irish landscape with lush green fields and a picturesque farmhouse in the distance, before tilting downward to reveal Bunny leaning over the front hood of the stationary car, which has broken down. Throughout the film, the characters' movements through space are halted by bouts of immobility and frustration. This tension between mobility and immobility is indicative of broader oppositions surrounding tradition and (post)modernity, and the local and global ambivalence that characterized Ireland in the 1990s. Even as Ireland's economic boom and entry into the global market signified its modernization and liberalism, ongoing social contradictions and inequalities surrounding immigration laws and abortion rights suggest the persistence of conservative ideologies. The film thus complicates the dominant Irish cultural narrative of national progress through the characters' inability to move smoothly forward.

Git and Bunny's stunted mobility is largely the result of their inharmonious relationship with their mode of transport, which acts as an impediment to their journey. Whereas Corrigan argues that the vehicle in the American road movie becomes "the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction" (146), this symbiotic relationship between self and technology is undermined in *I Went Down*. Git and Bunny initially set off to Cork in a stolen car, but their inability to open the car's petrol cap at the gas station alerts the attendant's suspicions. Bunny ditches the car as a precaution, forcing the men to walk through country fields to the next town. Bunny steals a second car, which becomes increasingly unreliable as the heater malfunctions, the radio refuses to work and the car finally breaks down

The men's antagonistic relationship to their vehicle and their environment undermines claims to conventionally masculine traits of agency and control, and their physical displacement from dominant Irish society suggests that hegemonic concepts of masculinity are becoming unhinged.



Figure 5: On the “straight” path—Git and Bunny drive off down the highway toward Dublin Airport

completely on the side of the road. After Git and Bunny abandon the second car and are forced to continue their journey on foot, the Irish landscape offers a further source of defeat. The rain begins to pour down and Git falls, gets stuck in the bog, and needs to be rescued by Bunny.

While the landscape impedes the men’s forward movement, Ruth Barton suggests that the film’s setting in the Irish midlands operates as a liminal space that offers the potential to redefine Irish masculinity outside traditional paradigms. Because the “Irish midlands represents one of Ireland’s least colonized regions, subject neither to the Romantic gaze of tourism nor the physical hallmarks of colonial architecture” (Barton 198), Git and Bunny are freed “from the kind of inorganic cultural identities imposed on other areas of Ireland and thus more able to explore the alternatives” (199). The men’s antagonistic relationship to their vehicle and their environment undermines claims to conventionally masculine traits of agency and control, and their physical displacement from dominant Irish society suggests that hegemonic concepts of masculinity are becoming unhinged. The liberatory potential of such disassociation then emerges explicitly in the scene in the roadside motel pub with Bunny’s queer confession, despite its immediate disavowal.

As Git and Bunny move along their journey, tensions emerge as their place-bound sense of self is de-stabilized and they become increasingly disassociated from rigidly defined gender identities and social roles. By examining how *I Went Down* both adheres to and departs from road movie conventions, I reveal how Git and Bunny’s movements through space at once de-stabilize and essentialize their identities in relation to hegemonic discourses. While the film begins to use queer mobility to subvert and transform dominant social norms produced by national paradigms, it fails to engage directly with Bunny’s non-normative sexuality and ultimately frames his sexual ambiguity more broadly as a form of confused masculinity. The film’s closing shot, which shows Git and Bunny driving down the highway to-

ward Dublin airport, further emphasizes a continued hold on the linear “straight” path (Figure 5).

By ending the film with Git and Bunny leaving Ireland, *I Went Down* links queer mobility to the imagining of a future elsewhere that offers greater freedoms and opportunities than Ireland. Yet the film’s final shot also emphasizes the ultimately linear nature of Git and Bunny’s journey and implies a continued hold on heteronormative (“straight”) structures. In doing so, the film undermines the disruptive potential of queerness to de-naturalize social norms and challenge heterosexual privilege. In this closing shot, *I Went Down* once again engages with the tension between the liberatory potential of queer mobility and the forces of hegemonic patriarchal logic. The men’s liberation (and smooth movement forward) is achieved through their act of conforming to the linear road. Therefore, even as *I Went Down* makes evident the reconstruction of Irish identity within global parameters, it promotes a sense of personal identity which remains delimited by a heteronormative framework; as Bunny emphatically asserts, “I’m not a queer you know.”

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Queerness as Conviviality

Race, Sexuality, and Risk in *Instructions Not Included*

This article examines the film *Instructions Not Included* (Derbez 2013) in relation to queer theory and critical Latino/a studies. Queer, throughout this paper, refers to the term as it pertains to resistance as well as contingency. Jasbir Puar writes that queerness “as an assemblage moves away from excavation work [and] deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects” (*Assemblages* 121-122). Instead of arguing that queerness is exclusively dissenting, resistant, and alternative, which Puar notes that it indeed is and does, queerness “underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations” (121-22). Resistant and contingent forms of queerness in popular culture and film are part of a complex interplay between the role of queerness, race and ethnicity.

Instructions Not Included opens up ways to explore how queerness is constitutive of the ethnoracialization of Latina/os and vice versa. Valentín (Eugenio Derbez), the film’s main character, is a Mexican migrant living and working in the US who, while indeed heterosexual, performs an ethnic social formation in the US that is also defined by racist and sexualized discourses and practices. Eithne Luibhéid writes that detention centres and border areas, for instance, institute ways to mark bodies as racial, sexual, cultural, gendered, and economic outsiders to the national body (xix). Citizenship is thus intimately connected to a patriarchal sexual order that sought and still seeks to maintain white racial purity and property relations (xix). The national border ultimately organizes a militant confinement of bodies that are calculated as risks to the presumed natural order of things.

The racialization of Valentín and his daughter Maggie (Loreto Peralta) is contingent upon what Isabel Molina-Guzmán calls the “ethnoracial dimensions” of Latinidad (4). Media signifiers of Latinidad, as Molina-Guzmán argues, rely on “the production of familiar ethnic characteristics” such as “language, dress or music” while simultaneously depending “on phenotypic racial markers such as facial features, hair texture and skin color [sic]” (4). While these representations may work in tandem, where in one context Salma Hayek can be Mexican and Brown, they may also contradict each other, where, for instance, white Cameron Diaz may identify as Latina (4). In this way, Peralta’s Maggie functions as a contradiction: on the one hand, her whiteness grants her privilege and normativity while, on the other hand, the ethnoracial dimensions of Latinidad queer her. In the case of Valentín, his character arc reveals that regardless of his efforts living in the US—even if they fall into normative categories, such as his raising of Maggie, his employment, and his lack of criminal record—he is a perpetually impossible subject to the nation-state, power, and capital.

While an impossible subject to the nation-state, Valentín is nonetheless a social actor who navigates white supremacy and its homonationalist articulations through an ethics of queerness as conviviality. As this essay will discuss, Derbez, the writer, director, and star of *Instructions Not Included*, scripts the narration of queerness as a form of conviviality which, Puar argues, is an ethics that challenges notions of self and other. To begin with, I will examine the role of homonationalist subjects in the film, such as

Maggie's mother Julie (Jessica Lindsey), who understands racialized others as a risk to their construction and preservation of self. Derbez's Valentín, on the other hand, views the other as a resource and creates spaces for these self/other subjects to meet. I will then turn to the more important role queerness as conviviality plays in allowing the exploration of subject formations that create places to meet outside of the courthouse, the law, and national borders. Thus, queerness as conviviality becomes a disengagement from normative definitions of liberation. Finally, I will consider how resistance and transgression to an absolute self/other are complicated by an ethics that recognizes "that political critique must be open to the possibility that it might disrupt and alter the conditions of its own emergence such that is no longer needed" ("Prognosis" 168-169). As such, it produces a critical mode of epistemological thought that expands the framework in which queer theory is applied to film.

Puar challenges queer disability studies, and, as this article suggests, queer theory in film, to "craft convivial political praxis that does not demand a continual reinvestment in its form and content, its genesis or its outcome, the literalism of its object nor the direction of its drive" ("Prognosis" 169). This assertion helps us see the value of reading Valentín as a queer subject: while he is not homosexual, bioinformatics and biocapital deem his body available for injury, necessary to sustain the temporality of capitalism's progress and modernization. Derbez's scripting of Valentín's thoughts and actions is thus significant in crafting a political praxis whereby self-annihilation can open possibilities of imagining queerness in new ways.

"In spite of his many limitations"

Valentín's body, where he was born, and his undocumented status in the US position him as forever queer and when Maggie's mother, Julie, attempts to reconnect with Maggie, she argues that Valentín's labour, parenting skills and personhood are not ways of being and knowing appropriate to provide Maggie a "normal upbringing" (as in, a white middle class upbringing). Julie's character arc, as that of a white US citizen, is significantly different to Valentín's. In the beginning of the film Julie is a college student, donning a hippie outfit, and presumably on vacation or studying abroad in Acapulco. There, she has sex with Valentín and becomes pregnant. After Maggie is born, she decides to leave the child with Valentín and return to the US. Julie becomes a lawyer and her reappearance later in the film reveals that she is now married to a woman. However, Julie's sexuality does not make her queer; instead, her whiteness,

able-bodied identity, incorporation into institutional power structures such as the law, and her use of the ethnoracial dimensions of Latinidad against Valentín to queer him and gain custody of Maggie render her what Jasbir Puar calls a "homonationalist subject" (*Assemblages* 46). As Puar states,

US patriotism momentarily sanctions some homosexualities, often through gendered, racial and class sanitizing ... homosexuals embrace the us-versus-them rhetoric of US patriotism and thus align themselves with this racist and homophobic production. Aspects of homosexuality have come within the purview of normative patriotism, incorporating aspects of queer subjectivity into the body of the normalized nation. (46)

In this vein, the figure of Julie becomes part of a "deracialized queer liberal constituency" articulating "normative narratives of nation" and contributing to the "proliferation of queer caricatures in the media and popular culture [which] all function as directives regarding suitable and acceptable kinship, affiliative and consumption patterns" (46). This is exemplified during the courtroom battle for custody of Maggie, when Julie confesses her abandonment of Maggie and, in an effort to regain custody, she invokes a homonationalist position and renders Valentín a risk, deeming his labour, language, and parenting too queer for the US. In other words, Valentín's ontological and epistemological constructions are not legible as valuable since, according to Julie's logic, she will provide a "safer" environment for Maggie in the US. Julie states:

I confess: I am guilty. I abandoned my daughter. But I have come to this court to rectify that mistake and I ... I'd like to thank Valentín because in spite of his many limitations, for example, not being able to speak English after six years of living in this country and being forced to take a job that exposes him to reckless danger [...] in spite of his limitations he's always done ... he has always done what's best for Maggie, at least what he thinks is best for Maggie. And I am sorry, I know, I screwed up once but I—I won't do it again and I can't allow my daughter to stay with a man whose idea of rewarding a child is to throw her off some rocky cliff!

Here, Julie articulates a homonationalist narrative whereby her sense of self is constituted by the construction of an "incapable" other. In the film, the figure of the homonationalist builds its legitimacy and status as a "capable" citizen through Latino labour and asserts its "capacity" to care for life within an ableist and racist discourse. According to Julie, Valentín's inability to "speak English after six years living [in the US]" renders him incapable of raising Maggie correctly and aptly. Additionally, Julie justifies her vapid homonationalist plea for a second chance with her daugh-



ter through critiquing Valentín's way of rewarding Maggie since it is built on how Valentín's father raised him in Mexico. In the opening scenes of the film, Valentín's father throws him off a cliff to teach him how to overcome his fears. This formative experience is useful for Valentín since, as he states at the end of the film, his father taught him how to be prepared for the expected while Maggie taught him how to be prepared for the unexpected. Julie's white lesbian feminism reads this as ubiquitous of a "feeble-minded," "incapable," and forever queer approach to parenting.

Risk

The courtroom scene also demonstrates how the dimensions of race, migration, and sexuality intersect with the formulation of identity in terms of risk, calculation, prognosis, and statistical probability. More clearly, the scene shows how the white lesbian woman (Julie) views the Mexican man (Valentín) as incapable of parenting not only due to his non-whiteness, but also due to risk. Puar argues that to "stretch the perceived contours of material bodies and to infuse queer disability studies with formulations of risk, calculation, prognosis and statistical probability," identity must be understood "not as essence, but as risk coding" (165). This assertion is productive in understanding Valentín's construction through the "prevailing ideas of variability and risk," as well the custody battle's contingency upon which parent can yield a less risky life and death for Maggie statistically (165). After Julie's confession, Valentín's lawyer tells him he needs to find a low risk job because, according to statistics, his job as a stuntman is the third riskiest job in the US. Additionally, Julie warns that Maggie should not live with a man whose job may kill him. When Valentín asks Julie why she is trying to take Maggie away from him, even though Valentín never stopped Julie from seeing Maggie, Julie responds by saying: "Because I fell in love with her! Because I'm not willing to see her just two weeks a year. Because she's safer with me, and because ... she's my daughter!" These discursive forces interpret Va-

lentín's life as a risk. In this statement, Julie demonstrates that a white lesbian woman cannot be predetermined as queer solely on the basis of her sexuality. The figure of Julie instead shows how rights-infused homonationalist subjects are constituted through a dialectic between self and other. The articulation of grievances for these subjects (which we can read as resistance) is always already established through the construction of an at-risk other—an other who is risky, who must not be valued as a parent and person, and whose very being and labour, and even death, allows for the life of the dominant subject.

Derbez Scripts Queerness as Conviviality

In the weeks leading to the custody trial, Julie's efforts to other Valentín are effective and Julie is issued a court summons to spend three afternoons a week with Maggie. The trial and the subsequent summons force Valentín to find a "low risk" job to impress the judge. Subsequently, Valentín becomes personal assistant to an old white woman. As a demonstration of Derbez's skillful ability to critique white supremacy, the old white woman requests Valentín walk her dogs. Without coincidence, the dogs are named Diego and Frida—rendering the famous Mexican artists as fetishized and domesticated pets. Derbez positions Valentín's subjugation as a "risk" in multiple ways and by doing so also critiques the dualisms of white feminism. While Valentín is under pressure from white lesbian feminism's use of the law to strip him of custody in the figure of Julie, Derbez also demonstrates how the supposed liberation of white women—exemplified by the baby-boom-era older woman—is contingent on the fetishization (Julie travelling to Acapulco where she has sex with a Mexican man), domestication, and dehumanization of bodies of colour; in this case, specifically Latino and Mexican bodies. The white woman naming her dogs after two prolific and important Mexican artists positions US cultural imperialism and its itinerant white feminism as sites of domination. This domination is masked as empowerment and liberation while most transparently functioning as a biopolitical force, whereby white life occurs only through the social death, death-to-be, and actual death of communities of colour in the US and peoples throughout the global south.

In a notable contrast to the ways white life is imbued by brown and black death in a stark Hegelian self/other dialectic, Derbez scripts conviviality as a form of understanding queer theory on film. Puar defines conviviality as a response to notions of resistance, oppositionality, subversion, or transgression, since these are "facets of queer exceptionalism that unwittingly dovetail with modern narratives



of progress in modernity” (“Prognosis” 168). Moreover, for Puar, conviviality complicates the “big utopian picture” and “surrenders certain notions of revolution, identity politics and social change” in an effort to produce an experimental step (168). This experimental step is not invoked as a “politics of the universal or inclusive common, nor an ethics of individuatedness,” but rather as a “futurity enabled through the materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet” (168). Derbez suggests a futurity enabled through the materiality of bodies as a place to meet when he willingly creates a place to have Maggie meet her mother, Julie, at a theme park after Julie reaches out to Valentín. When Julie approaches Valentín about meeting her daughter, Derbez scripts Valentín to operate with conviviality. Thus, instead of using the law to create a self/other absolutism which would enable him to gain custody from the woman who decided not to care for his daughter (which Julie does do), Valentín welcomes Julie into the fold.

Puar writes that conviviality foregrounds “categories of race, gender and sexuality as events—as encounters—rather than as entities or attributes of the subject” (“Prognosis” 168). Valentín, as a convivial queer subject, creates a productive and healthy place for bodies to meet. When Julie requests to see Maggie more often, Valentín agrees, and when Julie wants Maggie to fly to New York and so they may spend time together, Valentín is again willing. Here, Derbez scripts and theorizes a queer subject not as individuated, but instead as one who disrupts the self/other dialectic. Referencing the words of Arun Saldhana, Puar conceives of conviviality as a way of letting oneself “be destabilized by the radical alterity of the other, in seeing his or her difference not as a threat but as a resource to question your own position in the world” (168). Valentín’s life is not constituted through the death of others, or through viewing others as a risk or a threat for personal gain. Instead, it is informed by thinking of the “other” as a resource; even in the case of Julie, who left Maggie at his door and took off, Valentín views Julie’s existence as a potential resource for Maggie.

One of the most pertinent ways in which Valentín performs conviviality is through his labour as a stunt double.

Less concerned with himself, Valentín is constantly willing to potentially self-annihilate for the purposes of providing for Maggie. When Julie first abandons Maggie, leaving her with a surprised Valentín in Mexico, Valentín has only a picture of Julie working as a yoga instructor in a hotel in California to search for her so that he may return Maggie. After arriving at the hotel in the photograph, Valentín, who does not speak English, asks a worker if she knows the whereabouts of Julie. After mistakenly interpreting the worker’s answer, he stumbles into the presidential suite of the hotel only to find a casting director who is looking for a stunt double. Although the casting director has no idea of the mistake, Valentín waits for the man to end his conversation before asking if he knows Julie’s whereabouts. In the midst of the madness, Valentín walks to the suite’s balcony and finds that Maggie has crawled away from where he hid her (a box in a storage closet) and is about to crawl right into the hotel pool. It is in this moment of crisis that Valentín is first read as convivial. In an “experimental step,” with the outcome of his thought and action unknown, Valentín steps over the balcony and conjures the memory of his father throwing him off a cliff back in Mexico when he was young to teach him how to conquer his fears. Valentín jumps and rescues his daughter from the water. In this moment, Valentín recognizes that he has to venture into potential self-annihilation to create a place to meet his daughter. He constructs a futurity based on the possibility of losing one’s self and, in doing so, allows the radical alterity of the other to come together and “dissipate through

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intensification and vulnerabilities” (Puar “Prognosis” 168). Valentín’s jump—which ultimately catches the attention of the casting director, who then offers him a job as a stunt double—is a performance of Puar’s theory of conviviality. Prior to this point in the film, Valentín is primarily concerned with handing Maggie over to Julie, returning to Mexico, and avoiding his forthcoming heterosexual crisis altogether. However, the jump to save Maggie from drowning is constituted as an event that restabilizes Valentín. This experimental step or better yet leap could have annihilated Valentín but it does not. It is at this moment that Valentín, despite the fact he does not want to be without documentation in the US, invites the occurrence of a political transformation to his social being. In doing so, Valentín embraces

Valentín, despite the fact he does not want to be without documentation in the US, invites the occurrence of a political transformation to his social being. In doing so, Valentín embraces his positioning in the US as a queer subject convivially.

his positioning in the US as a queer subject convivially. In other words, Valentín knowingly embraces an ethical stance where no absolute self or other exists; a stance that is open “to something other than that what [he] might have hoped for” (169). Derbez carefully scripts this event as Valentín’s path to something unexpected and it is at the site of his labour as a stunt double where queerness as conviviality critically operates in a temporally disorienting fashion.

In one such notable scene, Valentín is the stunt double for Johnny Depp (impersonated and acted by Danny Lopez). Depp is playing the main character of “Aztec Man” and Valentín is enlisted to perform a stunt where Depp is catapulted into a stone wall by Spanish colonizers. As soon as the Spanish conquistador swings his sword to break the catapult’s rope, the white director cuts the scene, and replaces Depp with Valentín. Depp tells Valentín “enjoy yourself” and Valentín is thrown against the wall. The director tells Valentín “that was perfect” before directing him: “Try not to look scared when your face smashes against the wall.” The camera then turns to a frame where Valentín is smashed against the wall once again. After nine takes (or, read in another way, after being killed nine times) Valentín is finally knocked unconscious. It is only at this point that the director is satisfied with the shot.

While this scene certainly symbolically demonstrates the continuous violence enacted against bodies of colour, it can also be read according to this essay’s focus on queerness as conviviality. Derbez produces a scene that can be read as a parable of self-annihilation, where the Hegelian self/other dialectic is destroyed. To state this idea more clearly, Derbez positions Valentín as in possession of what I call a stunt-double conviviality. This term refers not only to Derbez’s scripting of Valentín’s self-annihilation, whereby his daughter’s life and body constitute his own, but it also indicates Valentín’s embodiment of performative queer temporality. In this scripting, Derbez produces solidarity across peoples, time, and space. The suffering of indigenous communities all over the Americas at the hands of Spanish colonizers in the past, and their erasure and subsequent endurance in the present-future, become embodied in the Latino, mestizo body of Valentín.

Disavowing an essential identity, Valentín takes the convivial experimental step and produces a place for the indigenous body and the Latino body to meet. Valentín’s author, Derbez, foregrounds the categories of race and indigeneity as an event and constructs futurity as “enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet” (Puar 168). This meeting place connects Latina/o communities to indigenous communities in the past-present-future. Unlike the figure of Julie, who asserts her form of being and knowing within a rigid self and other binary, Derbez scripts the figure of Valentín to complicate the “big utopian picture” of social change (168). Here, the critique is of subjectivity achieved through rights-based activism and/or revolution and the capture of a nation-state that, like the figure of Julie, always already constructs the self through the production of other, impossible subjects. As a result of this scripting, Derbez alters the ground upon which the story is created and sustained, and ruptures the structures of white supremacist logics that attempt to divide and conquer across racialized communities. Derbez calls upon the audience to engage in stunt double conviviality and jump, because while we may never know where will we land, at least it is a leap toward something else, a politics of becoming, an acceleration toward newer worlds, and a disruption and alteration of the very body we are supposed to double.



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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) cin-

ema 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 Ba-

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diou, 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).

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)





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,



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

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.

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).

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

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.

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, eventual 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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Claire Davis

VIFF 2014

As the essays in this issue of *Cinephile* have demonstrated, one of queer theory's greatest strengths is its unrestricted access to the many and varied types of cinema. Queer theory's interrogations extend far beyond queer-identified cinema; reaching to the heights of art cinema and the *avant-garde*; to the depths of trash and genre films; to the popular cultural products screening at the multiplex each weekend; and from Hollywood to international cinemas. This broad applicability is perhaps unsurprising given queer theory's challenge to the assumptions that inform our categorizing of films in such a manner, yet its expansive relevance is nonetheless worthy of mention. It was with this in mind that I sought films appropriate to *Cinephile's* 2014 report on the 33rd annual Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF).

In previous years, the Fall/Winter issue of *Cinephile* has profiled those films at VIFF that relate to the specific issue's topic.¹ When faced with the enviable task of seeking out films relevant to our issue topic this year, I was struck by the inevitable realization that I could quite possibly see *any* of the 349 films shown at the 2014 festival and justify their inclusion in an issue titled "New Queer Theory in Film." Faced with this conclusion, I chose to narrow the selections offered to those films shown at VIFF that were advertised as part of the broad category of LGBTQ-interest. Of the 349 films shown, roughly fifteen fell into this bracket. They hail from eleven different countries, and are variously award-winners, documentaries, short films, and feature length fiction films. Each one is a significant and interesting addition to the ever-expanding (if loosely-defined) queer cinema canon.

The six films selected for short review in the following pages are intended to reflect the diverse range of LGBTQ-interest films that were on offer at VIFF this year, although

the total number of such films screened is notably small. Judging by VIFF's rather limited selection, queer cinema remains a niche market, but this is certainly not the result of stagnant or homogenous offerings. Instead, the LGBTQ-interest films at VIFF 2014 were complex, nuanced, and thoughtful portraits of a range of characters and people that exist outside the arbitrary boundaries we place around normative identity. These films challenge viewers to engage with subjects in a manner that refuses the subject's placement on the fringe, despite their social and political marginalization. These considered portrayals demand our centred and focused attention. Rather than employing LGBTQ themes as a stand-in for transgression and exclusion, these films work to increase the visibility of LGBTQ communities and individuals and, in doing so, emphasize the importance of ensuring that LGBTQ stories are told.

About VIFF: *We would like to offer our thanks to the staff and volunteers at VIFF for their support and their outstanding contribution to Vancouver's film culture. The following is quoted from the festival's website, VIFF.org.*

Both in terms of admissions and number of films screened (130,000 and 341 respectively in 2013) VIFF is among the five largest film festivals in North America. We screen films from 75 countries on nine screens. The international line-up includes the pick of the world's top film fests and many undiscovered gems.

Three main programming platforms make our festival unique: we screen one of the largest selections of East Asian films outside of that region, we are one of the biggest showcases of Canadian film in the world and we have a large and vibrant non-fiction program.

Attracting a large, attentive and enthusiastic audience the festival remains accessible, friendly and culturally diverse.

1. Please see the *Cinephile* website for our 2013 report, "VIFF: Undeniably Super" by Kevin Hatch and Kelly St-Laurent, and *Cinephile* 8.2 for our 2012 report, "Extreme Vancouver" by Chelsea Birks and Dana Keller.



Something Must Break introduces us to the lonely and alienated character of Sebastian (Saga Becker), who sometimes prefers to be called Ellie. At the film's opening, Sebastian is hesitant to identify as the feminine Ellie, and wanders through the fringe areas of Stockholm in search of human connections, whether fleeting or otherwise. When these wanderings lead to Sebastian being assaulted in a grimy bathroom, he is rescued by straight-identified punk Andreas (Iggy Malmberg). The two tentatively enter a relationship, during which time Sebastian feels increasingly comfortable allowing Ellie to come to the fore.

Sebastian and Andreas flit through the city's parks and dingy bars, engaging in drunken exchanges in the night. Their relationship exists in spite of its uncertain placement within gender and sexual orientation categories, and is thus a prime example of the exclusion upon which such categories are premised and the fundamental failures of such grouping. Has there ever been a declaration of love more on the mark than Andreas's confession to Ellie, "You're so beautiful I want to vomit"? The authenticity of Andreas and Sebastian's exchanges is untarnished by sanitized and stale symbols of love, with the film preferring to allow the performances of Becker and Malmberg to demonstrate the complexity of sexual and romantic attraction. Director Ester Martin Bergsmark (*She Male Snails*) and co-writer Eli Levén, both of whom identify as transgender, have captured an enthralling and volatile relationship that is affected by, without being defined by, the queer identities of those involved.

Something Must Break earned critical praise and won a number of awards at European film festivals in the past year, including the prestigious Tiger Award at Rotterdam International Film Festival. *Something Must Break's* ability to demonstrate the liberatory potential of love, without requiring that love to be a lasting connection, elevates this film beyond the rote romantic drama to artistry.

In 2010, Belgian choreographer Alain Platel asked seven aging drag performers in their twilight years if they would return to the spotlight and the stage one last time. Originally intended to have a limited run, *Gardenia*, became an enormously popular cabaret, with the performers traveling to twenty-five countries and giving over 200 performances. Thomas Wallner's documentary, *Before the Last Curtain Falls*, is an extraordinary portrait of the gay and transgender stars of the show, many of whom have had the best experience of their lives performing in *Gardenia* and are uncertain what lies ahead.

Wallner spent eighteen months with the different subjects of his documentary and the film gains access backstage to their private homes, cars, and dressing rooms. All performers share details of their lives in talking head interviews, with their stories becoming meditations on existence and identity. In particular, the performers reveal the courage it has taken to live as they choose and the struggles they have too often faced because of their queer identities. One man was a closeted homosexual for over fifty years of his life, another performer swore to her mother as a child that she would never let a surgeon touch her body and has kept that promise into her old age, despite her identification as a woman. All performers struggle with the arrival of old age, fearing what loneliness may lie ahead.



Gardenia is the swan song for its performers, many of whom have long ago given up on love, live alone, and fear dying alone. At the beginning of the show, they enter in traditional menswear, before metamorphosing into their drag identities through the application of dresses, wigs, heels, and make up. At times during the film, the camera meanders around a tableaux of the performers, all paused in the act of preparation. Bearing witness to the last, spectacular performance of *Gardenia* is to experience both joy and heartbreaking melancholy in *Before the Last Curtain Falls*.

Man on High Heels

Man on High Heels is a Korean crime thriller with a distinctive twist: the lead character, Yoon (Cha Seung-won), desires nothing more than the freedom to transition from male to female. Yoon's body is that of a hypermasculine, scarred, and muscular cop, yet Yoon inwardly identifies as female.

The film is propelled forward by two crime narratives: a young female cop, Jangmi (Oh Jung-sae), is attempting to bring down a serial rapist at the same time as Yoon seeks to destabilize one of the city's biggest gang leaders, Boss Huh. However, it is Yoon's struggle to disengage from her life as a male that offers the film its emotional weight. Scenes of entertaining ultraviolence (one gangster is stabbed in the neck with a bag of noodles) are accompanied by quiet and character-driven sequences where Yoon applies make up, visits the doctor, and hides her face while standing in an elevator lest the people beside her identify her body as male and wonder why she is dressed effeminately.



Man on High Heels compassionately demonstrates the lack of space for transgender women in hypermasculine spaces. The police force and gangster underworld are uninhabitable for Yoon once she decides to transition and she is compelled to hide her identity even after she has resigned from her job as a police officer. The film is at pains to demonstrate the alienation felt by Yoon, who is trapped within a body that is admired by her peers as a bastion of masculinity. Yoon's abilities as a cop are directly linked to her embodied displays of extreme violence, a reality emphasized by the film's assertion that she never needs to use a gun, instead, her maleness and knives are all that is required. Especially moving are the flashback sequences to Yoon's childhood romance with a young male school friend, a love that they struggle to negotiate against pressure from their peers to condemn their affection.

For uncertain reasons, director Jang Jin's popularity remains largely confined within South Korea despite his status as a major innovator of film, television, and theatre. Hopefully *Man on High Heels* offers an opportunity for international audiences to recognize his prolific filmic talent.

White Bird in a Blizzard

Gregg Araki (*Totally Fucked Up*, *The Doom Generation*, *Mysterious Skin*) of 1990s New Queer Cinema fame offers a film that falls somewhere between disturbing thriller and coming-of-age teen flick with *White Bird in a Blizzard*. Kat (Shailene Woodley) is only seventeen when her mother, Eve (Eva Green), mysteriously disappears. She arrives home from school to find her father, Brock (Christopher Meloni), sitting stiffly on the couch and stating monotonously that her mother is gone. Over the next few years, Kat finishes high school and leaves for university, all the while surprisingly unconcerned by the unknown fate of her mother. Only when Kat comes home for Christmas three years after the disappearance of her mother does the truth of that day begin to emerge.



White Bird in a Blizzard has received mixed reviews since its premiere at Sundance earlier this year, with most citing the film's confused tone as the reason for their unenthusiastic response. However, the film's exploration of Kat's emerging sexual freedom is where it finds its strength. As Kat states at the opening of the film, "Just as I was becoming nothing but my body—flesh and blood and raging hormones—[my mother] stepped out of hers and left it behind." Kat's relationships with her sexual partners—alternately her deadbeat yet attractive neighbour and the police officer involved in the search for her mother—are played out against an odd backdrop of nightmarish suburbia. This setting, which constantly rings false, aptly reflects the presence of Kat's missing mother, who was unhappy with her life as a housewife. The campy dialogue and jumbled spaces of the film feel like the awkward body Eve stepped out from and left behind, a body that Kat is establishing her separation from. In this sense, *White Bird in a Blizzard* offers a novel and thoughtful reflection on the moment of transition between childhood and adulthood as one establishes their own distinct identity.



Canadian film's *enfant terrible* Xavier Dolan is at his best in *Mommy*, although one wonders what this really means for a filmmaker already on his fifth feature at only twenty-five. *Mommy* follows the story of Diane Després (Anne Dorval), a single mother to her troubled and often violent son Steve (Antoine Olivier Pilon), living in a near-future Canada where parents can commit their children to state care if they deem it necessary. Diane's indomitable and fearless mothering does not allow her to contemplate this option and when her neighbour, Kyla (Suzanne Clément), begins homeschooling Steve he flourishes.

The relationship between Diane and Steve, and later Kyla, is where *Mommy's* greatness resides. The performances by all three leads lay bare the same exuberance and unbridled expression so evident in Dolan's cinematography. There is a recklessness about Dolan's filmmaking that is infectious: He gleefully adds the anthemic Oasis song "Wonderwall" to the film soundtrack, enlists his characters to stretch the film from its distinctive 1.1 aspect ratio to widescreen, and employs a constantly mobile camera that careens between the characters as they scream at one another. When these techniques are matched with the powerful performances at the film's core, *Mommy* climbs under your skin.

Mommy earned Dolan the jury prize at Cannes this year (an award shared with Jean-Luc Godard) and it has been selected as Canada's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2015 Academy Awards. The film's single-mother/troubled-son dynamic is one already explored by Dolan in his first, semi-autobiographical film *I Killed My Mother*. The unapologetic and bold expression of family melodrama appears to be where Dolan excels, with all of the messy relationships between unconventional families so perfectly enshrined in his films. The love that exists between Diane and Steve evades easy or fixed definition and it is the energy of their bond that lingers long after the film has ended.

Father Sam Ryan (Michael Murphy) is a Roman Catholic Priest at a Niagara Falls parish living a relatively quiet life when he receives a letter regarding an incident that happened over forty years ago. Christopher, who is dying, wants to know the events of an evening the two spent together when Fr. Ryan was a young man in his twenties at a parish in Northern Ontario. *Fall*, which had its world premiere at VIFF this year with Canadian director Terrance Odette in attendance, meanders through the days and weeks following Fr. Sam's receipt of Christopher's letter.



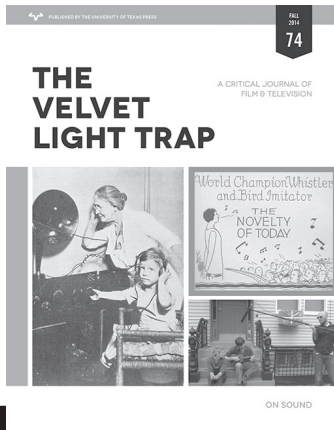
The pacing of *Fall* is slow and meditative, untroubled with the need to push along the narrative and more concerned with studious attention to the unpeeling of Fr. Ryan's character. The terms of his exchange with fifteen-year-old Christopher remain worryingly unclear, and the priest's own memories of the event remain out of our reach as the audience. His position as a community leader, one to whom others turn for advice and counsel, is assiduously undermined by the uneasy presence of his own past in the form of Christopher's letter. Fr. Sam's interactions with Chelsea (Katie Boland), a soon-to-be-wedded woman having an affair, and Reza (Cas Anvar), a gay Iranian man mourning the recent loss of his mother, give the character pause for reflection on the nature of redemption and sin, as we slowly try to piece together a version of possible events.

The shots of the Ontario landscape in Odette's film are beautiful, providing a snow-laden backdrop for Murphy's lonely drives between Christopher's home in Northern Ontario and his parish in Niagara Falls. The performances of Michael Murphy and Suzanne Clément, who plays Christopher's grieving widow Catherine, are particularly affecting. Although a sensitive subject matter that has been dealt with many times before, Odette endows *Fall* with a thoughtful and reflective tone that differentiates the film from similar cinematic fare.

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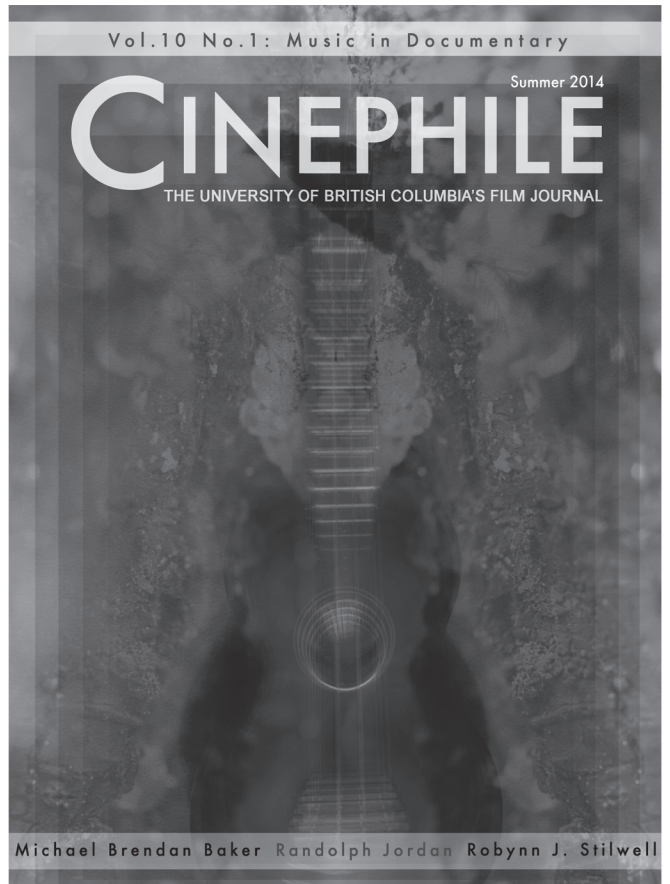
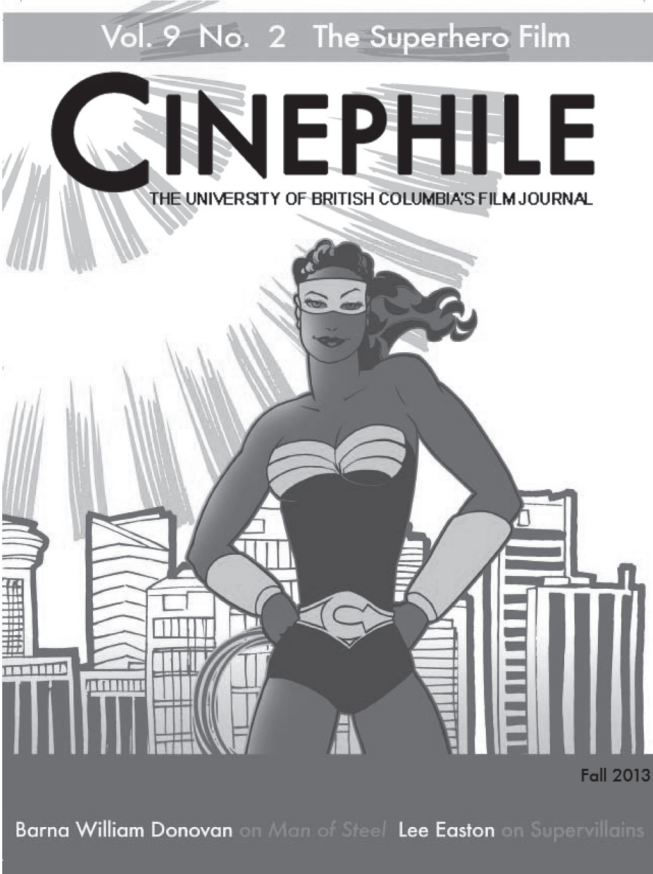
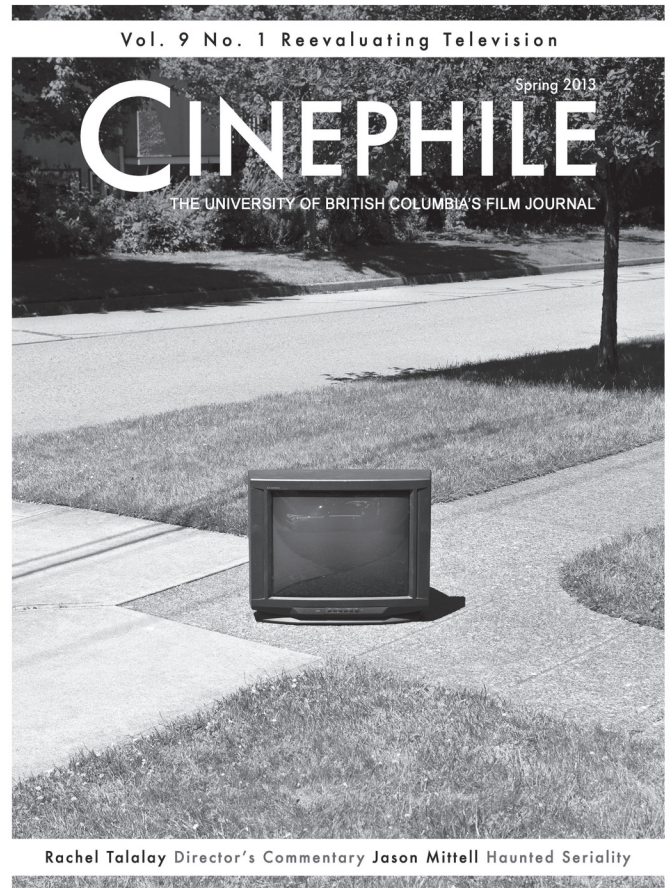
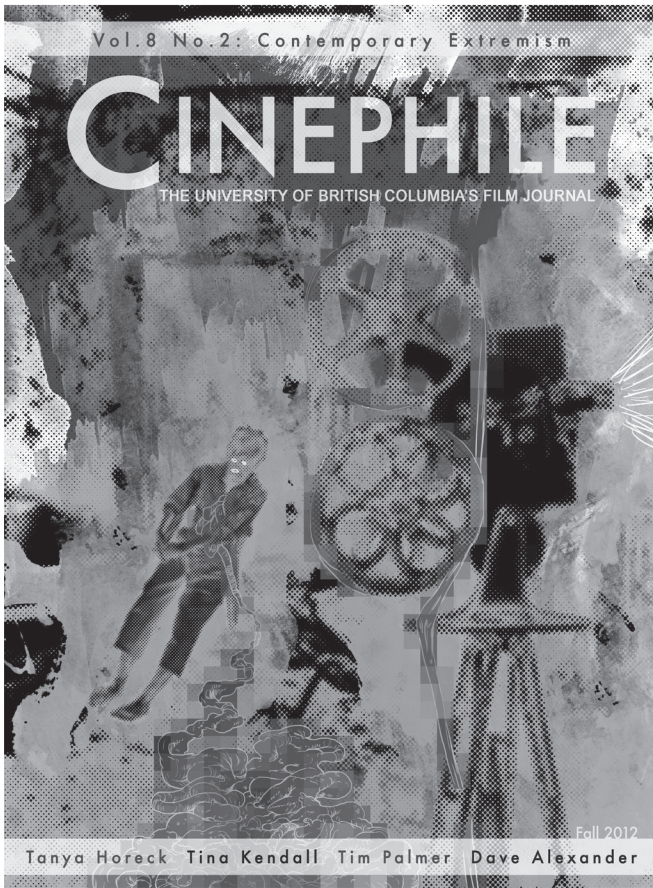
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