Coming Out to the Mainstream

Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

In this collection of essays we seek to contexualize and reframe the New Queer Cinema phenomenon in the wake of historically significant cultural shifts: four decades after the Stonewall Riots; three decades after the emergence of HIV-AIDS as a social and public health issue; two decades after the film movement itself galvanized broader interest in queer images in independent and mainstream film; and nearly a decade after the marriage movement gained center stage in a continuing phase of justice-seeking LGBTQ activism. These essays examine whether and how the narrative styles, themes, and ideological concerns of New Queer Cinema (NQC) have been mainstreamed—rendered familiar as broad points of interest in popular culture of the 21st century, productively challenging a queer-phobic cultural climate, and providing an incisive set of visual representations and ideological constructs that can help inform continuing contestations over queerness in academic, political, artistic, and cultural contexts. As we look back at the initial emergence of NQC, we explore in these essays what was largely an independent film movement in the 1980s and 1990s featuring queer stories told rebelliously and evocatively on the big screen. The authors in this volume seek varied ways to define and describe NQC (both its film productions and its theoretical concerns), and to identify what was (and was not) radically transformative and enduring about NQC. Most importantly these essays situate themselves in the 21st century as an attempt to assess what might be seen as a nascent reemergence of the movement, a second wave of NQC that holds potential for influence beyond the original limits of an independent film audience, critics, and the academy.

In the early 1990s a wave of critically acclaimed films captured the audiences and critical attention in the gay film festival circuit. Talented and self-identified as gay, young filmmakers such as Todd Haynes (*Poison*), Gregg Araki (*The Living End*), and Jennie Living (*Paris is Burning*) exhibited through their award-winning films a commitment to bringing gay culture into at least the prominence of leading film festivals such as Sundance. Their work, coalescing into an apparent movement, prompted B. Ruby Rich to hail it as "New Queer Cinema." These films share what Rich calls "homo pomo" characteristics. She writes that "these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive.

Above all, they're full of pleasure."[1] These films exhibited a certain exigency about queer culture—the need to establish queer identity and to challenge oppressive laws prohibiting gay marriage and adoption. The films of Gus Van Sant (*Mala Noche*), Cheryl Duyne (*The Watermelon Women)*, and Tom Kalin (*Swoon*), among many others, sought to defy gay stereotypes and give voice to the reality of gay marginalization. Their films eschewed positive representation of gays, presenting instead the gritty and sometimes seamy reality of gay subculture. In particular, NQC was a movement of defiance, seeking to defy a homophobic cultural past; to openly defy cinematic convention; and, in the wake of the dreadful specter of AIDS, to defy death itself. Even when these films didn't directly speak to these social issues, they challenged society to rethink the equality of gay culture.

By many accounts, however, the NQC movement of the 1990s ended nearly as soon as it began. These films, so richly rewarded within the indie film circuit, did not find a way into mainstream Hollywood. Therefore, Rich pronounced in 2000 that the movement was over.[2] Rich believed that the political and artistic energy of NQC had waned and had become absorbed into conventional mainstream fare that reinforced the ideological project of neoliberal multiculturalism, neutralized the radical potential of independent queer cinema, and mollified straight audiences with unthreatening characters and stories, that lodged queerity within the hegemonic logic of compulsory heterosexuality and global capitalism. Even with her pessimism, though, Rich still wrote in a 2002 article that "we need queer visions of sexuality, gender, desire, and community more than ever."[3]

One might agree with Rich that the NQC movement has given way to a lower case new queer cinema, a flurry of recent films that are more comfortable than challenging in their portrayal of gay characters, in their production by gay producers and actors, and in their interpretation by diverse audiences. Yet, we would argue that because the first wave of NQC was solely dominated and dictated by self-identified gay producers, it had little elsewhere to go beyond the indie festivals. Although these producers initiated an active queer independent cinema movement, sustained by such indie festivals as Sundance and the New York Film

[1] Rich, B. Ruby, "New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 16

[2] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 18.

[3] B. Ruby Rich, "Vision Quest: Searching for the Diamonds in the Rough," *The Village Voice*, March 19, 2002.

Festival, they did not have a broad enough circle of support to move the movement forward. They could not sustain their movement within these constraints, and so it declined as the 21st century neared. Additionally, 1990s NQC audiences sought and applauded the radical nature of queer independent cinema. Such audiences were not from a broad swath of the general public; they were, by and large, indie film festival attendees and other devotees of small distribution films. Thus, one can conclude that these audiences were distinctive in their committed interest in unapologetically queer filmic perspectives that little heeded the preferences of mainstream, "straight" audiences. Independent film festival audiences indicated a committed, activist interest in producing and supporting groundbreaking, uncompromising queer film, but to consider the costs and value of greater mainstream acceptance of the new queer presence seemed beyond the ideological scope of the movement.

As NQC has re-emerged in its revised, expanded form in the 21st century, the movement has found much greater appeal to a broader, mainstream audience. Indeed, those audiences who made *Brokeback Mountain* into a blockbuster hit and Academy Award nominee mainly viewed the film at their local malls and downtown theaters, not at the more secluded and intimate film festivals. In his Chapter Four analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*, Luke Mancuso indicates that in its wake revisionist notions of sexual diversity can productively work their way through the circuits of the public cinematic imagination. *Desperate Housewives* fans streamed to see Felicity Huffman play a MTF transsexual in *Transamerica*, a film that brought both the medical and spiritual issues surrounding transsexuality to the general film audience (topics addressed by JoAnne Juett in Chapter Three). Are these films anomalies within Hollywood cinematic fare of the 21st century? Perhaps, but they have broken barriers and challenged audiences (even audiences who were largely unaware of broader currents in queer history and culture), and charted a reemergence for new queer cinema in this continuing century. In light of this boundary-crossing among audiences—the willingness of many mainstream audiences not only to tolerate, but also to embrace queer cinema by voting with their dollars at the Cineplex—NQC has attained at least a part of the cultural transformation that the original movement appeared to promise: broader challenges to gender identification in 21st century cinema.

Such broader challenges will not merely unsettle society; they will not simply overturn the metaphorical apple cart. As David Adair adroitly argues in Chapter Two of this volume, the actual "critique of judgment" regarding NQC reception must transgress its exclusive critical community. NQC, in its nascent second wave, is poised to refocus the cinematic

community in a productive struggle to inscribe transgender consciousness into the collective cultural understandings of human rights. The queer, transgendered conscious films of the late 20th century and the 21st century, such as *Hairspray*, *Shortbus*, and *Family Stone* deal forthrightly with the humanness of their characters—their struggles, their desires, and their pain. In Chapters One and Ten, Bob Nowlan rejects the pessimism of B. Ruby Rich, and he instead draws upon a thorough reading of *Shortbus* and *Urbania* to suggest that the more recent queer cinema indeed shows promise of queer impact for social and political gain. The fluidity of identity, embraced by the drag queens of *To Wong Foo* and the queered masculinity of *The Departed*, breaks the mold of ghettoizing labels and forces critics and spectators alike to struggle with or even celebrate what Christian Gay describes in Chapter Nine as "the continuum between homosocial and homosexual behaviors and desires in male-male social interactions."

And yet, while we find there is significant evidence that NQC has achieved successes in forging greater mainstream acceptance of queer perspectives in cinema, a robust and useful debate continues about how ideologically incisive, how productively challenging, and how aesthetically compromised queer cinema has been and continues to be. The essayists in this volume come to different conclusions about whether the first wave of New Queer Cinema ultimately amounted to a radically transformative film movement (or whether it was unified enough to represent a movement at all), and a similar debate continues to examine the liberating potential of the second wave of more straight-friendly queer film. It is certainly the case that a viewer in the 21st century will encounter a greater range of queer images in moving image culture (feature film, documentary film, television) than one would have seen in the years before the movement. For instance, in Chapter Two David Adair argues that although New Queer Cinema ended its initial run limited by its alignment with an academic idealism, it still holds significant potential for inspiration and transformation in its 21st century version. In Chapter Eight, David Jones points out that an emerging concern for intersectionality in recent NQC discourse opens the potential to identify the erasure of "otherness" and unpack "hegemonic whiteness" in *Boys Don't Cry*.

With the weight of oppression and the force of marginalization slowly slipping away, NQC has perhaps an even greater, certainly a broader, purpose as it moves into the mainstream. NQC no longer sits as the homosexual opposite pole of the binary opposition of hetero/homo or on either side of the gay/lesbian dichotomy; its new position is truly transgender, challenging the mainstream to look beyond traditional

identification of character, director, and audience. 21st century political, cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical changes in gender perceptions and definitions have opened the way for queer cinema to move beyond binary challenges to promote a new wave of openness and inclusion.

What do we make, then, of the burgeoning number of queer stories that are circulating not just in arthouses but in mainstream media? How much of a transformation in our collective sensibilities does this trend represent, and will it carry us toward what in Chapter Six Nan McVittie calls queer utopia—a cultural landscape, where, as she puts it, depth models of identity have no meaning, and cultural identities of all sorts are commonly understood as multiple, fluid, and performative? Such a utopia, even children's programming, such as *Pee Wee's Playhouse* and *Pee Wee's Christmas Special*, provides opportunities to deploy queer perspectives. Or, as Anna Nowak in Chapter Five and Kathryn Kane in Chapter Seven suggest, has the current centrality of the gay and lesbian marriage movement amounted to a conservative re-orientation of queer politics—following the lead of neoliberal multiculturalism in holding that differences related to queer identity are simply another part of the American cultural mosaic to be assimilated into current sociopolitical structures? In Chapter 11, the final essay of this collection, Alexandra Juhasz suggests an answer in that the new queer cinema might in reality be a productive queer cinema, claiming a stake in society's future with social and political transformation in mind.

PART I:

QUEER THEORY/NEW QUEER CINEMA: FOUNDATIONS AND HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

QUEER THEORY, QUEER CINEMA

BOB NOWLAN

1.

In full color on the front cover of the March 24, 1992 *Village Voice* we see a reproduction of an early scene from Derek Jarman's *Edward II* of two naked men engaged in a passionate kiss; as B. Ruby Rich's cover story suggests, this image is representative of "a queer sensation" sweeping across the festival circuit from Toronto to Park City to Berlin to New York to Amsterdam and beyond, and from critical acclaim and popular success in these festivals to the equivalent at the edge of the cultural mainstream. According to Rich, these "are remarkable films," whose appearance together "en masse" is in fact "no coincidence," because "something extraordinarily queer is going on."[1]

What then is this new queer sensation all about and what explains its sudden impact? Rich proposes that these “new queer films” are "bringing the self out of the closet, annexing whole new genres, revising histories in their own image," and, seemingly most impressive of all, rapidly becoming "the “in” thing" such that you don't even have to be queer "to get the picture." Above all else, Rich contends, the films of this new queer cinema, despite differences in aesthetic vocabularies, strategies, and concerns, "are united by a common style," a style Rich labels "homo pomo." This new queer cinematic style embraces a variety of different kinds of constituents: as Rich puts it, "homo pomo" involves making significant use of appropriation, pastiche, and irony; "a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind"; and "definitively breaking with older humanist approaches" that accompanied prior forms of "identity politics" in ways that are "irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive." "Above all," Rich claims, these films are "full

[1] B. Ruby Rich, “A Queer Sensation,” *Village Voice*, March 24, 1992, 41-44.

of pleasure"—"they're here, they're queer, get hip to them."[2]

The New Queer Cinema arises as a part of a larger New Queer Emergence, from roughly 1987 through 1992, of a new *queer* mode of subjectivity defined above all, as Michele Aaron describes it, by a shared "attitude" of "defiance"—"defiance directed" versus "mainstream" heterosexist and homophobic (or, more precisely, heternormative) society and versus pre-existing "mainstream" forms of conservative assimilationist and liberal reformist gay and lesbian politics and culture.[3] What initially united diverse strands of this new queer movement was a shared queer spirit of impatient anger. Queers were outraged gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and allied misfits and outsiders who sought to move from expression of rage toward demanding satisfaction in response to what outraged them, including by seizing and appropriating what they could when this was not given them in response to their demands. This queer spirit was principally the product of the evolution and intensification of struggle from the middle through the end of the 1980s in fighting back against both 1) the decimation of gay communities by AIDS and by the stigmatization of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people as responsible for AIDS, and 2) a rising tide of violence directed against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people that far exceeded scapegoating them as responsible for AIDS. What distinguishes that markedly *queer* moment in a much longer ongoing struggle to fight back against AIDS—and concurrent manifestations of prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and violent abuse—was that *queerity* here represented an aggressively offensive form of defense on the part of "victims" who not only refused the status of victim but also demanded that the conditions that rendered them victims be changed—and changed immediately. This stage of contemporary queer radicalism can, in fact, be distinguished by the forceful articulation of a series of five interconnected refusals and demands:

1. Queers refused to plead politely with powerful straights for these straights to throw them a few crumbs of support for only slightly greater tolerance, but instead demanded that straights support complete tolerance, and acceptance, of queers—and to do so right away.

2. Queers refused to wait patiently for straight society gradually to open itself up to allow for greater acceptance of the queerly different, but instead demanded that queers be accepted right away and everywhere

[2] B. Ruby Rich, "A Queer Sensation," 41-44.

[3] Michele Aaron, ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

within straight society as equal—as enjoying equal right of access and equal opportunity to exercise the resources, powers, and capacities of the larger (straight-dominant) society.

3. Queers refused to remain closeted or to downplay their queerity as they worked and played within straight society, but instead demanded that straight society accept queers "as they are."

4. Queers refused to tolerate—and instead demanded an end to—government and medical industry inaction and delay in deploying the resources sufficient to end the AIDS epidemic.

5. Queers refused to tolerate, and instead demanded an end to homophobic violence, whether this violence took the form of a) overtly physical attacks upon queers; b) discriminatory and prejudicial laws and government regulations directed against queers; c) news and entertainment media mis/under/and non-representations of queer life and queer lives; or d) demonizations of queers disseminated by fundamentalist religious organizations and by institutionalized representatives of general cultural and/or local community mores.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, therefore, the term "queer" became an increasingly prominent term of positive self-identification, yet far from simply a newly fashionable term to denote a commonality of identity among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

Contemporary queer use of *queer* was, in fact, from the beginning, most often conceived both as an invocation and as a problematization of the notion of a collective identity rooted in sexual and gender commonality. "Queer" was, in other words, often used both to denote and to refuse to denote identity. As Allan Berube and Jeffrey Escoffier wrote at the time of the rise of the short-lived yet nonetheless influential Queer Nation,

> Queer Nationals are torn between affirming a new identity—"I am queer"—and rejecting restrictive identities—"I reject your categories"; between [rejecting] assimilation—"I don't need your approval, just get out of my face"—and wanting to be recognized by mainstream society [yet on their own terms]—"we queers are gonna get in your face."[4]

This ambiguity did not, however, prevent Berube and Escoffier from nonetheless subsequently concluding that queers "are building their own *identity* [emphasis mine]."[5] Likewise, even as leading queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick early on contended, in a position supported by many

[4] Allan Berube and Jeffrey Escoffier, "Queer/Nation," *Out/Look*, no. 11 (1991): 12–14.
[5] Ibid., 14.

contemporary queer theorists and activists, that "queer use of *queer*" did not represent the assertion of a new political identity but rather the organization for political action around a "fracturing of identity" ("Identity Crisis" 27), the "new queer politics" that was supposedly now "beyond the politics of identity" was nonetheless still directed towards organization around a queer "*post-identity*."[6] This "post-identity politics" amounts, in effect, to organization around (and indeed still on the *basis* of) an identity reunderstood as fluid rather than fixed, as constructed and performed rather than inherent and ascribed.

So what then might a queer post-identity politics, informed by queer theory, involve in practice, especially in relation to making films—and in relation to making sense of films? To help answer this question I need first to offer a composite summary of queer critical praxis.

Queer critical praxis focuses priority attention upon a critical intervention into the discursive construction of sexualities and genders in terms of binary oppositions of normal versus abnormal, dominant versus subordinate, included versus excluded, and familiar versus strange. Queer critical praxis deliberately problematizes prevailing notions of the distinction and opposition between each of these paired terms, deconstructing what it contends represents a violent hierarchy that establishes the former in a position of apparent superiority. Queer critical praxis performs this deconstructive work by striving to show the extent to which the former category is always thoroughly dependent upon the latter, including in every attempt it makes to justify its claim to superiority. For example, you can't define or explain what heterosexuality is without doing so in relation to, and in distinction from, homosexuality; heterosexuality therefore needs homosexuality to make any sense, even to exist at all—as heterosexuality. Queer critical praxis aims, moreover, to reveal the normal as actually, ultimately as abnormal as the nominally abnormal, the dominant as actually, ultimately subordinate as the nominally subordinate, the included as actually, ultimately as excluded as the nominally excluded, and the familiar as actually, ultimately as strange as the nominally strange. It's in essence a matter of standpoint, or perspective—how, in the case of film, the film invites and encourages it audience to read its representations of these seeming binary opposites, as well as how this audience will do so—how this audience will decode what the film encodes. And, an oppositional or negotiated decoding of a film certainly might well read it

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, et. al. "Identity Crisis: Queer Politics in the Age of Possibilities," *Village Voice*, June 30, 1992, 27–33.

queerly where the film itself does not seem to suggest or propose such a decoding, but a queer reading often is enhanced and strengthened by a film that itself appears to be encoded to invite and encourage a queer decoding—where this queer reading amounts to a preferred or sympathetic reading of the same film. Moreover, determining what is encoded and what is not, or, in other words, what is suggested and proposed by the film itself and what is not, often is readily subject to queer critique as well.

Queer critical praxis aims to demonstrate that the conception of the normal that the normal employs to argue for itself as normal depends upon first conceiving of the abnormal in order, ostensibly, to distinguish normality as that which is not abnormal.[7] Even conceived on such a negative basis (i.e., as the opposite of what it defines as the other), queer critical praxis contends that the normal inevitably proceeds to violate its own logic of what it proposes amounts to normality. The normal is, as such, always thoroughly contaminated, in every attempt to insist upon its normality, with the logic of the very abnormal against which it seeks to define itself. What's more, queer critical praxis finds this same pattern at work in the attempts of the dominant to account for its dominance versus the subordinate, the included to account for its inclusion versus the excluded, and the familiar to account for its familiarity versus the strange. Again, to go back for a moment to the binary pair of heterosexuality/homosexuality, this means that every attempt to define and delineate heterosexuality has to refer to and relate to homosexuality—while attempting to explain the former as normal and the latter as abnormal depends upon setting up an arbitrary standard for distinguishing normal from abnormal that can easily be reversed and overturned by looking at things from a different vantage point or perspective. As many queer theorists have proposed, *there's nothing in many respects queerer than normative heterosexuality—or straightness*. This is, in other words, a highly *unnatural* state, one that requires multiple strange convolutions, and self-deceptions, to fabricate. In the practice of physically heterosexual relations, moreover, many straight people behave quite queerly—in forms and to extents that they often would not want to become widely known.

[7] In short, it is impossible to conceive of and define what is normal without conceiving of and defining what is abnormal. The abnormal is, in fact, typically distinguished far more precisely and clearly than the normal such that, in effect, the normal becomes "whatever is not abnormal." This is akin to defining "Whiteness," for instance, in a White-dominant society and culture, primarily, even exclusively, in terms of what it is not as opposed to what it is.

Queer critical praxis marshals this deconstructive methodology to support its rejection of essentialist understandings of gender and sexual identity, in particular the minoritizing notion of lesbian and gay difference where lesbians and gays are treated as if they constitute a class of persons discretely distinguishable from those who are straight on the basis of a fundamentally different—and entirely separate—kind of seemingly natural orientation. Instead of this minoritizing perspective, queer critical praxis proceeds on the basis of a universalizing conception that reunderstands "straight" and "queer" as inextricably imbricated, and all conventional demarcations of gender and sexuality identities as highly fraught, tenuous, provisional, unstable, and ultimately incoherent—so that, in short, we all take up identity positions and engage in identity practices that overlap with and flow into each other. We *perform* gender and sexuality, queer theorists argue, according to normative scripts that we for the most part unconsciously internalize in the course of our socialization and acculturation (and from the vantage point of queer theory, socialization and acculturation do not end in childhood adolescence or with the achievement of adulthood but rather continue throughout the course of our lives). It is the repeated performance of the roles these scripts define that produces the semblance of substantial gender and sexual identities (but, in fact, according to queer theory, we maintain no real essential, innate sexual or gender identity at all: it's all an illusion, if, admittedly, a quite convenient and useful one). Since, queer theory contends, this (performativity) is a continuous process and one which is in fact highly unnatural (i.e., very much a product of what our specific culture dictates) as well as (ultimately) extraordinarily unstable, there are always cracks, fissures, gaps, and holes in every attempt to naturalize the performance—i.e., to make it seem like gender and sexual identities simply emanate from biological nature. It is immensely difficult, queer theory contends, to do so (to naturalize in this way), requiring the investment of considerable resources, in order to try to conceal the ways that gender and sexual identities are always first and last performances, and, as such, both inescapably artificial and ultimately arbitrary (arbitrary in the sense of historically and culturally conventional). In sum, queer critical praxis works on the basis of an acceptance of the queer theoretical position that proposes we *perform* gender and sexuality; we don't "express" what is innate or essential to our "natures." And queer critical praxis aims, persistently, and inventively, to shows this to be—everywhere—the case.

What, if anything, then, from a queer theoretical vantage point, distinguishes queer from straight ways of social being? How, in other words, does it make any sense, given what I've just written, to recognize

straight versus queer human subjects (or human subjectivities) once we deconstruct the notion of there existing a hard and fast distinction between the two (between straight and queer)? Queer theory does contend that maintaining this distinction remains in large part highly problematic, as doing so tends to sanction conformity to the prescriptions and proscriptions conjured by an illusory polarization that functions to repress the embracing of other (than rigid, bipolar) possibilities and to oppress those marked as abnormal along this normalizing scale. At the same time, however, queer theory accepts that distinguishing queer from straight remains a necessary consequence of the historically, and perhaps even naturally, finite limits of human imagination and forms of social organization. Insistence upon maintaining the practical semblance of a distinction between queer and straight also can serve as a convenient fiction. It may, queer theory is often wont to suggest, even prevent, or at least forestall, totalitarian tendencies toward the absorption, containment, and dissipation of emergent forms of resistant, disruptive, and subversive kinds of gender and sexual difference (i.e., maintaining some kinds of identity and practice as markedly "queer"—and others, by default, as markedly "straight"—prevents everything from being turned into a repressive sameness). In short, for queer theory, the force of the queer relies upon the preservation of a kind of boundary-effect at the same time as queer critical praxis involves the queer troubling, and transgressing, the boundaries that the straight trusts tend to separate itself from the queer. In other words, to put it more simply, being/becoming/identifying as/and acting queerly means, above all else, transgressing, disrupting, and subverting straight norms and conventions. What's more, queer theory conceives it to be possible sharply to distinguish queer versus straight modes of manifestation and engagement with the continuous instability, incoherence, flux, and play of gender and sexual identity, such that the queer, especially as mobilized in queer critical praxis, represents the performance of an identity-effect by all those who cannot—or will not—conform to the dictates of the naturalizing illusion that gender and sexual identities are, could be, or should be straight-forward, fixed, stable, and coherent. Queers, and again especially as mobilized in queer critical praxis, act out the fluidity, instability, and incoherence of gender and sexual identities.

Queer critical praxis embraces the position of the queer therefore as offering a powerful vantage point from which effectively to critique common (mis)perceptions concerning the place (or lack of place) of gender and sexuality across the full range of social relations and institutions as well as cultural discourses and practices within which we participate

throughout the course of our everyday lives. In carrying out this work, queer theory finds all extant varieties of queerity—of whatever a particular community, society, and/or culture conceives of and treats as strange, odd, abnormal, bizarre, and perverse forms of human (anti-)social behavior—potentially interesting and significant, yet implies that, historically, same-sex erotic attraction, desire, and interaction most frequently functions as the paradigmatic instance of the queer. In other words, homosexuality is that which has tended to be and continues to tend to be widely regarded as the queerest kind of social behavior. Queer theory frequently therefore conceives of homosexual queerity (as well as, less often, the perhaps even more troubling, boundary-crossing and boundary-dispensing form of bisexual queerity) to represent the historically most unsettling, disturbing, and threatening instance of "the other" at work within—and upon—the (post)modern social and cultural imaginary (i.e., space of collective phantasy and imagination). However, that last point requires an almost immediate qualification, as from the vantage point of queer theory, in the aftermath of the successes—and especially the failures—of gay and lesbian "liberation" in the now four decades subsequent to the watershed moment of the Stonewall riots, no longer does the homosexual (or even the bisexual) *per se* manifest a particularly powerful queerity. On the contrary, all those either unable or unwilling to conform to heteronormative standards for stable, consistent, and coherent forms of gender and sexual identity (and difference) today embody this potential for transgressive resistance, disruption, and subversion.

For queer theorists, "queer" is, therefore, not so much an adjective or a noun that refers to the broad array of contemporary lesbigay identities, but rather a verb that marks out a shifting field of gender and sexual discourses and practices that work "to queer" both the straight and the lesbigay. This queering, in other words, proceeds by taking up the position and the interest of those who occupy the sexual margins of mainstream lesbigay sub-cultures as well as the far fringes of dominant-straight-culture. In sum, it is not a question of *being* queer but rather of *doing* queer.

As frequently, therefore, as queer theory tends to privilege homosexual forms of queerity (along with, to a lesser and yet far from negligible degree, bisexual forms of queerity), many queer theorists, in contrast, tend to find transgender modes of queerity much queerer. Transgender queerities evidence the extent to which one of the principal pillars within the binary logic of Western phallogocentric thinking (where the socially symbolic phallus acts as the de facto center, or virtual God, of patriarchal relations), and its attendant forms of social organization (i.e., the division

of the category of gender into the apparently obvious duality of man and woman) by no means represents a simple cultural reflection of biological logic (or, to put it in ultimately just as problematic yet slightly different terms, a direct cultural response to natural necessity). On the contrary, queer theory contends that the dominance of gender binarism results from a lengthy and continuing history of repeated violent imposition and restriction upon the potentially free play of gender, post-gender, and a-gender identities. In short, here, once again, queer theory contends that monogenderism is restrictive and incoherent and inauthentic—versus transgenderism: it desperately pretends to a solidity and a normality that it cannot sustain, prove, or justify. By deliberately denying—and, even more than this, actively, diligently striving to erase—all signs of the equivalent naturalness and normality of transgender forms of human being and relating, while at the same time attempting to conceal or otherwise mystify the fact that this is what it is doing, the straight once again sets itself up for a subversive queer counter-attack. Queer critical praxis responds here not only by exposing the dependence of gender binarism upon violent suppression but also by challenging the adequacy of gender binaristic as well as heteronormative frames of intelligibility ever to do justice to the actual as well as potential range of human physiological-psychological and social-sexual modes of identity, difference, and relation.

2.

Writing in 2010, does envisioning queer cinema as a means and medium of the kind of queer political praxis I have just elaborated seem outdated, even anachronistic? Does it continue to make sense to distinguish queer from non-queer varieties of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender film? After all, even many leading scholars working in gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-and-queer cinema studies now make use of "queer" more broadly and loosely. For example, in their 2006 book *Queer Images: a History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin propose the following five ways of responding to the question: "What is queer film?":

> **1.** "A movie might be considered queer if it deals with characters that are queer." Elaborating, Benshoff and Griffin make clear by "characters that are queer" they mean characters that are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; that are either denotatively or connotatively homosexual or bisexual; and that either denotatively or connotatively deviate from

prevailing gender or sexual norms.[8]

2. "Films might be considered queer when they are written, directed, or produced by queer people or perhaps when they star lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer actors." Here Benshoff and Griffin propose the filmmakers commonly associated with the "so-called New Queer Cinema" "are good examples of films produced by people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, and/or queer," but by no means the only examples. In fact, closeted filmmakers, past and present, Benshoff and Griffin contend, often "inflect a queer sensibility into their work." This queer sensibility seems to correspond directly to experience of living as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer—in any way and to any degree—within straight-dominant society.[9]

3. "A queer film is a film that is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators." Benshoff and Griffin argue here that all films "might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position," reflective of the different ways lesbians, gays, and other queers experience films versus the ways straights do. For example, queers more often engage in "reading against the grain" of the film's preferred—invited or encouraged—meaning than straights do, including by reading films in "camp" ways or in camp terms that straights can't readily imagine. Seemingly, therefore, as a result of their social positioning and of the ways they make sense of and experience this social positioning, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and other queers are inclined to read films differently than straights do. So, in sum, a queer film is a film made sense of by a queer spectator.[10]

4. Certain genres tend to emphasize alternatives to "normality" broadly conceived, including but extending beyond gender and sexual normality, and these genres—such as horror film, science fiction film, fantasy film, the Hollywood musical, animated film, avant-garde film, documentary film, and other kinds of independent film—may all be conceived of as examples of "queer film."[11]

5. Queer films include any and all kinds of films that invite and encourage spectators to identify with characters who are considerably different from who spectators normally conceive themselves to be, and who they normally identify as. This can include films that encourage straight audiences to identify with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters, but it can also include many other kinds of identifications with 'the other' as well, including identification across lines of race and class.[12]

Perhaps this is what queer cinema has become since the *end* of the

[8] Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: a History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2006), 9–10.
[9] Ibid., 10.
[10] Ibid, 9–10.
[11] Ibid., 11.
[12] Ibid., 11–12.

New Queer Cinema. Michele Aaron appears to support this position in her "Introduction" to *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader* (2004). By the middle of 1990s, Aaron argues, the New Queer Cinema was effectively over. As a result of this reading, Aaron's primary concern is making sense of the "the legacy" of the New Queer Cinema:

> Cynically put, NQC kick-started Hollywood's awareness of a queerer audience (a combination of the 'pink profit' zone and the general public's current delectation) and its appropriation and dilution of queer matters. Albeit 'gaysploitation', queer work and queer themes found financial support, and the careers of [Todd] Haynes and [Gregg) Araki were launched . . . That said, there is evidence that NQC triggered significant cultural and critical (and small-p political) gains. Its real impact, and value, are not to be measured by the quantity or quirkiness of potential members, but by the queerer culture it ushered in.[13]

But what kind of "queerer culture" and what kinds of "small p-political gains" does it entail? Aaron proposes the following features:

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

All of this, however, suggests an absorption and incorporation of queerity into a liberal-pluralist straight culture. From absorption and

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[13] Aaron, "Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).8.

incorporation it is only a short distance to reification and commodification. Is "queer" today merely the signifer of a particular fashion of consumption, corresponding to a niche market to which capital readily caters, and which indeed challenges nothing, threatens nothing, in the existing organization of social relations, founded on generalized commodity production and private ownership of the means, processes, and ends of social production? How, if at all, do "queer films" promote alternative ways of making sense of—and practicing—gender and sexuality that require, extrapolated to their furthest logical conclusion, social *transformation*? To what extent is the necessity of social tranformation advocated, even prefigured, by the ways characters in these films relate to, and participate in, spheres of labor and leisure, work and play, private and public, individuality and sociality, collegiality and camaraderie, friendship, family, community, intimacy, affection, romance, and love? To what extent do these films expressly challenge and critique *capitalist* values, and imagine *post-capitalist* alternatives, even arguing for the necessity of the latter to render gender and sexual emancipation substantially meaningful and pervasively real?

Queer cinema has yet to follow this kind of revolutionary pathway, while many so-called 'queer films' made since the late-1980s to early 1990s heyday of the New Queer Cinema suggest little to nothing in society at large needs be changed to accommodate the interests of their 'queer' characters, who by and large seek only to be tolerated and accepted within the prevailing status quo, with that status quo remaining essentially unchanged.

However, this is not the whole story.

3.

In "View from the *Shortbus*," published in the fall 2008 issue of *GLQ*, Nick Davis argues that

> *Shortbus*, whatever its limitations, portends exciting trajectories and vivacities for modern queer cinema, a genre that, nearly twenty years after its most public presentation, must seemingly have its vital signs monitored on a nearly annual basis. As recently as 2004, Michele Aaron, one of New Queer Cinema's key scholarly devotees, felt pessimistic enough to attest that "despite that initial furore on the Indie Scene, and the dramatic increase in the production of, and audience for, queer films during the the 1990s, a new *and enduring* sector of popular work failed to materialise" (8). Surely, though, the aesthetic energies and political engines of queer cinema have not expired but shape-shifted—the genre's styles, tropes, audiences, vocabularies, and paradoxes are as destined to mutate and to supersede its initial, enabling gestures as those of any cinematic or

> theoretical movement. Crucially, by imbuing the radicalism of the real-sex films into its reprisal of New Queer tropes, *Shortbus* reanimates both genres in its own timely and specific ways, tailored to the discursive climate not of the early 1990s, as so much scholarship on queer cinema continues to be, but of its own, our own cultural moment. The candor of the film's erotic images, their deep coimplication with *Shortbus*'s internal stylistic variety and processes of production, and the theoretical ramifications of these formal, erotic, and political choices produces a subversive form of counterpublic sexuality that preserves that "popular radical" spirit that Aaron, like so many of us, wants queer cinema to foster.[14]

What's more, Davis contends, since queer cinema was in fact "never exactly a 'genre'," [15] it has always been better understood as a mobile sensibility. Davis reads B. Ruby Rich's famous initial 1992 twin public proclamations of the arrival of the New Queer Cinema (first published in the *Village Voice* and then, second, in *Sight and Sound*) as not "delimiting a category" but rather "heralding an abruptly widening horizon" with "aims, templates, and [a] political reach" explicitly conceived, from the beginning, as "unfixed, uneven, and purposely heterogeneous."[16]

This reading Davis asserts versus Rich's own subsequent re-reading of her initial pronouncement, in her 2000 *Sight and Sound* article "Queer and Present Danger," where, as Davis sees it,"Rich herself narrowed the breadth of her earlier essays and added pessimistic fuel to the would-be funeral pyre of queer cinema."[17] In this revisiting of the "sensation" for which she had been the most prominent initial champion, Rich argues that queer cinema has moved from "radical impulse to niche market."[18] Eight years later, Rich finds that the so-called "queer films" of the mid to late 1990s had become increasingly innocuous, and non-adventurous, focusing on highly limited, narrowly identity-based target audiences, as opposed to actively fostering identifications across, and beyond, conventional demarcations of (essentially) distinct sexual and gender identities.[19] In this later article Rich seems to align her position with one that evaluates the New Queer Cinema as a brief historic interval, a quick burst of innovative

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[14] Nick Davis, "The View from the *Shortbus*, or All Those Fucking Movies," *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 4 (2008): 625–626.
[15] Ibid., 626.
[16] Ibid., 636.
[17] Ibid.
[18] B. Ruby Rich, "Queer and Present Danger," *Sight and Sound* 10, no. 3 (2000): 23.
[19] Aaron, "Introduction," in Aaron *New Queer Cinema*, 8.

and challenging film-making quickly coopted and contained.

Following this line of interpretation, "post-queer" "gay-lesbian-bisexual-and-transgender cinemas" soon displaced the distinctly "queer" impetus of the late 80s to early 90s New Queer Cinema. And this displacement ran parallel with the steady assimilation—throughout the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s—of "queer" difference into a still partially marginalized but also ever increasingly tamed, heteronormatized, once-more fixed-identity minority population, with the latter once again striving for acceptance on "straight terms" within a "straight society" that remains, at best, only very limitedly "queered."

However, in contrast with Rich's later pessimistic position, Davis, writing as late as 2008, maintains considerable optimism that queer cinema, not only has, as Aaron put it, in 2004, accounting for her somewhat more cautious optimism, "triggered significant cultural and critical (and small p-political) gains"[20] but also that queer cinema *continues to do so*, while showing promise for further such substantial queer impact yet to come:

> I contend that these films are activating rich, new relationships among not just the theories but the sensations of sexuality, visuality, and community, especially because the films are so powerfully ambivalent about the idealization of those notions in other movies and cultural spheres. In so imbricating sexual daring and (why deny it?) erotic titillation with political reflection, these explicitly sexual films sustain and extend the projects that New Queer Cinema undertook so audaciously for anglophone audiences in the early 1990s. Within that context, the value and fascination of *Shortbus* inhere not in any myth of global uniqueness or in clichéd oppositions between American puritanism and Continental sophistication but in the film's distinctive braiding of a New Queer lineage into its simulacra of "real sex", allowing a generic as well as political reconsideration of these contemporary and still-evolving traditions.[21]

I suggest, following Nick Davis, that it does continue to be useful to make sense of select films as *queer* films, including, notably, ones like *Shortbus* and *Urbania* (which I address in my later chapter in this book, "*Urbania* and Queer Cinema"), that, as was the case with the hallmark films of The New Queer Cinema, are able, in Aaron's words, to bring about "a marriage between the popular and the radical."[22] And, like Davis, I believe that "queer cinema" must be conceived concretely, allowing for

[20] Aaron, "Introduction," in Aaron *New Queer Cinema*, 8.
[21] Davis, "The View from the *Shortbus*," 625.
[22] Aaron, "Introduction," in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 8.

considerable change over time and variation across space. After all, what is "queer"—and what is "straight"—in the context of a particular historical and social conjuncture may well not be in another, and, in fact, this divergence may result not only from the ability of "the straight" to absorb, contain, coopt, and tame "the queer," but also from the ability of the queer in turn to de-sorb, break open, free up, and render wild the straight. Admittedly, this tends to be a substantially uneven relationship, with the straight tending to exercise greater power than the queer, but as long as resistance to an absolutely monolithic social conformity survives, and as long as social norms are instituted and exercised in ways that in fact entail marginalizing consequences, space for the queer will exist—and the need for a queer agency enabled by this queer situation will persist. The specific constituents of the queer margin and the straight center will frequently change, yet that in and of itself does not eliminate the division between straight and queer.

Shortbus is most notable not so much for graphically depicting its actors engaging in extensive "real" sex, of multiple kinds (although this depiction certainly sharply distinguishes the film from much more readily assimilable kinds of post-New Queer Cinema gay, lesbian, and bisexual films), but rather for proposing that sexual dissatisfaction and non-fulfillment are root causes of general social alienation and widespread cultural malaise, and for proposing a counter-public alternative versus normative privatization of individuals' sexual lives (and lifestyles), in which a utopian community (here located at the Shortbus Club) assumes collective responsibility for the satisfaction and fulfillment of everyone's individual sexual desires and needs, directly supporting and assisting in a plethora of possible avenues for such satisfaction and fulfillment.

But the issue of defining the "queerity" of "queer film" needs be complicated still further, again following Davis' lead. If *Shortbus* helps "engender new challenges to political or cultural assumptions"[23] through its fusion of a simulacra of "real" counterpublic sex with a fabrication of a "real" utopian sexual counterpublic, it still, Davis concludes, "eventually succumbs to a privatized and heavily psychologized overidentification between erotic release and specifically metropolitan vitality, thereby dulling a great deal of the nuance in its more carefully framed, counterpublic character up to that point."[24] And, the film's ending, Davis also reminds those ready too uncritically to embrace *Shortbus* as quintessentially queer, contains its own exclusions—and occlusions—

[23] Davis, "The View from the *Shortbus*," 627–628.
[24] Ibid, 630.