

B. Ruby Rich

Homo pomo: the new queer cinema

1992 was a watershed year for independent gay and lesbian film and video. In the spring, on the very same day, Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* and Derek Jarman's *Edward II* opened in New York City. Within days, the prestigious New Directors/New Films Festival had premiered four new 'queer' films: Christopher Münch's *The Hours and Times*, Tom Kalin's *Swoon*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End* and Laurie Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* Had so much ink ever been spilled in the mainstream press for such a cause? *Basic Instinct* was picketed by the self-righteous wing of the queer community (until dykes began to discover how much fun it was), while mainstream critics were busily impressed by the 'queer new wave' and set to work making stars of the new boys on the block. Not that the moment wasn't contradictory: the summer's San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival had its most successful year in its 16-year history, doubling attendance from 1991, but the National Endowment for the Arts pulled its funding anyway.

The queer film phenomenon was introduced in 1991 at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, the best spot in North America for tracking cinematic trends. There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image. All through the winter, spring, summer and autumn, the message was loud and clear: queer is hot. Check out the international circuit, from Park City to Berlin to London. Awards have been won, parties held. At Sundance, in the heart of Utah's Mormon country, there was even a panel dedicated to the queer subject, hosted by yours truly.

The Barbed Wire Kisses panel put eight panellists on stage, with so many queer film-makers in the audience that a roll call had to be read. Film-makers stood, one by one, to applause from the matinee crowd. 'Sundance is where you see what the industry can bear,' said panellist Todd Haynes, there to talk about *Poison's* year on the firing line. He stayed to be impressed by earnest 18-year-old Wunderkind Sadie Benning, whose bargain-basement videos, shot with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision and produced for less than \$20 apiece, have already received a retrospective at MoMA.

Isaac Julien was suddenly cast in the role of the older generation. Summarising the dilemmas of marketing queer product to general audiences, he described a Miramax Prestige advertising campaign for his *Young Soul Rebels* that used a bland image of guys and gals hanging out, like a Newport ad gone Benetton. Julien got them to change to an image of the black and white boyfriends, Caz and Billibud, kissing on a bed. The box office improved.

Tom Kalin struggled to reconcile his support for the disruptions of *Basic Instinct's* shoot with his film *Swoon's* choice of queer murderers as subjects. Australian film-makers Stephen Cummins and Simon Hunt related the censorship of an episode of *The Simpsons*, where a scene of Homer kissing a swish fellow at the plant was cut. The panel turned surprisingly participatory. One Disney executive excoriated the industry. Meanwhile, Derek Jarman, the grand old man in his fourth decade of queer activity, beamed. He'd never been on a panel of queers at a mainstream festival.

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

Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitely breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity pol-

itics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure.

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

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

Christine Vachon, co-producer of *Swoon* and *Poison*, is sure that the heat was produced by money: 'Suddenly there's a spotlight that says these films can be commercially viable.' Still, everyone tries to guess how long this moment of fascination will last. After all, none of this is taking place in a vacuum: celebrated in the festivals, despised in the streets. Review the statistics on gay-bashing. Check out US immigration policy. Add the usual quota of internecine battles: girls against boys, narrative versus experimental work, white boys versus everyone else, elitism against populism, expansion of sights versus patrolling of borders. There's bound to be trouble in paradise, even when the party's just getting going.

Dateline: Toronto

Music was in the air in Toronto in September 1991, where the reputation of queer film and video started to build up. Or maybe I just loved Laurie Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* because it made my elevator ride with Jessye Norman possible. Lynd's film uses Norman's aria from Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* as its madeleine – supposedly Lynd sent Norman the finished film as a belated form of asking permission, and she loved it so much she agreed to attend the world premiere at



Queer new wave:
Tom Kalin's 'Swoon' (1992)

Toronto (with red carpet in place and a packed house going wild, she sat through the screening holding Lynd's hand). *R.S.V.P.* suggests that the tragedy and trauma of Aids have led to a new kind of film and video practice, one which takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. This time, it's art for our sake, and it's powerful: no one can stay dry-eyed through this witty elegy.

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

Both low-budget and high-end film-making showed up in Toronto. Not surprisingly, the guys were high end, the gals low. Not that I'd begrudge Gus Van Sant one penny or remove a single frame from *My Own Private Idaho* – a film that securely positions him as heir-apparent to Fassbinder. So what if it didn't get a single Oscar nomination?

At the other end of the spectrum was veteran avant-gardist Su Friedrich, whose latest film, *First Comes Love*, provoked catcalls from its largely queer audience. Was it because its subject was marriage, a topic on which the film is healthily ambivalent, mingling resentment with envy, anger with yearning? Or was it an aesthetic reaction, since Friedrich returns to a quasi-structuralist mode for her indictment of institutionalised heterosexuality and thus possibly alienates audiences accustomed to an easier queer fix? Was it because the director was a woman, since the only other lesbian on hand was Monika Treut, who by now should probably be classified as post-queer? Whatever the reason, Friedrich's elegant short stuck out, a barometer in a pack of audience-pleasers.

The epiphanic moment, if there was one, was the screening of Jarman's *Edward II*, which reinscribed the homosexuality so integral to its sixteenth-century source via a syncretic style that mixed past and present in a manner so arch that the film easily fits its tag, the 'QE2'. Think pastiche, as OutRage demos and gay-boy calisthenics mix with minimalist period drama. Homophobia is stripped bare as a timeless occupation, tracked across centuries but never lack-

ing in historical specificity. Obsessive love, meanwhile, is enlarged to include queer desire as a legitimate source of tragedy.

For women, *Edward II* is a bit complicated. Since the heroes are men and the main villain is a woman, some critics have condemned it as misogynist. Indeed, Tilda Swinton's brilliance as an actor – and full co-creator of her role – invests her character with more weight, and thus more evil, than anyone else on screen. But the film is also a critique of heterosexuality and of a world ruled by royals and the Tory Party, and Isabella seems more inspired by Thatcher than woman-hating. Annie Lennox is clearly meant to be on the side of girls and angels. Her solo 'Every Time We Say Goodbye' accompanies Edward and Gaveston's last dance, bringing grandeur, modernity, even post-modernity, to their tragedy. The song comes from the Aids-benefit album, *Red Hot and Blue*, in which video Lennox inscribed images of Jarman's childhood in a tribute to his activism and HIV status. Thus does Jarman's time travel insist on carrying the court into today's gay world.

Dateline: Amsterdam

The official car showed up at the airport with the festival's own steamy poster of girls in heat and boys in lust plastered all over it. Amsterdam, city of lights for faggots and dykes, offered the promise of an event purely one's own in the city celebrated for queerness. Expectations were running high, but in fact the festival showed all the precious advantages and irritating problems that life in the ghetto entails. It was a crucible for queer work, all right, but some got burned. How does this event fit into the big picture set by the 'big' festivals? Well, it doesn't. The identity that elsewhere becomes a badge of honour here became a straitjacket. But would 'elsewhere' exist without the 'here'?

Amsterdam was an exercise in dialectics in action, with both pleasures and dangers. Film-maker Nick Deocampo from the Philippines was planning his country's first gay festival and hoping that the 'war of the widows' wouldn't forestall it. Race, status, romance, gender, even the necessity of the festival came up for attack and negotiation, on those few occasions when the public got to talk back. Pratibha Parmar affirmed the importance of a queer circuit – 'my lifeline' – sure that it's key to the work. Jarman disagreed: 'Perhaps their time is up,' maybe life in the ghetto now offers diminished returns. So though Jarman and Ulrike Ottinger got awards

here, and though Jarman used the opening night to call for the decriminalisation of Oscar Wilde, the meaning of such an event remained contested.

Not that there weren't good films at Amsterdam. But the best work seemed to come from long ago or far away, like the great shows of German cross-dressing movies or the Mary Wings tribute to 'Greta Garbo's lesbian past' or the extraordinary 60s fantasy from Japan, *Funeral of Roses*. There were even two terrific new lesbian films, both deserving of instant cult status. Cleo Uebelmann's *Mano Destra* brought bondage and domination straight to the viewer, serving up knot fetishism and the thrills of specular anticipation with an uncanny understanding of cinema's own powers. From a trio of Viennese film-makers (Angela Hans Scheirl, Dietmar Schipek, Ursula Puerrer) came *Flaming Ears*, a surreal fable that draws on comics and sci-fi traditions for a near-human love story visualised in an atmosphere of cabaret, rubble and revenge. Its fresh 'cyberdyke' style reflects Austrian sources as diverse as Valie Export and Otto Muehle, but shot through with Super-8 visual rawness and a script that could have been written by J. G. Ballard.

It was a shame that the Dutch press marginalised the festival, because the kind of 'scoop' that the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* would later find in Utah could have been theirs right at home. A new kind of lesbian video surfaced here, and with it emerged a contemporary lesbian sensibility. Like the gay male films now in the limelight, this video has everything to do with a new historiography. But where the boys are archaeologists, the girls have to be alchemists. Their style is unlike almost anything that's come before. I would call it lesbian camp, but the species is, after all, better known for camping. And historical revisionism is not a catchy term. So just borrow from Hollywood, and think of it as the Great Dyke Rewrite.

Here's a taste of the new genre. In Cecilia Dougherty's *Grapefruit*, white San Francisco dykes unapologetically impersonate John, Yoko and the Beatles – proving that appropriation and gender-fuck make a great combination. Cecilia Barriga's *The Meeting of Two Queens* re-edits Dietrich and Garbo movies to construct the dyke fan's dream narrative: get the girls together, help them get it on. It's a form of idolatry that takes the feminist lit-crit practice of 'reading against the grain' into new image territory, blasting the results on to the screen (or monitor, to be exact). In one episode of Kaucyilia Brooke

and Jane Cotts' *Dry Kisses Only*, Anne Baxter's back-stage meeting with Bette Davis in *All About Eve* is altered, inserting instead of Baxter a dyke who speaks in direct address to the camera about her life working in a San Francisco lesbian bar, her love lost to Second World War combat. She's cross-cut with Bette's reaction shots, culminating with Davis taking her arm (and taking her home).

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

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

Park City, Utah

Everything came together at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City. Christopher Münch's *The Hours and Times* is a good example. Audiences fell in love with this imaginary chronicle of Brian

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

'Puts the Homo back in Homicide' is the teaser for Tom Kalin's first feature, *Swoon*, but it could easily apply to Gregg Araki's newest, *The Living End*, as well. Where Kalin's film is an interrogation of the past, Araki's is set resolutely in the present. Or is it? Cinematically, it restages the celluloid of the 60s and 70s: early Godard, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Badlands*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, every pair-on-the-run movie that ever penetrated Araki's consciousness. Here, though, the guys are HIV positive, one bored and one full of rage, both of them with nothing to lose. They could be characters out of a porn flick, the stud and the john, in a renegotiated terrain. Early Araki films are often too garage-hand, too boychick, too far into visual noise, but this one is different. Camera style and palette update the New Wave. Araki's stylistic end runs have paid off, and this time he's got a queers-on-the-lam portrait that deserves a place in movie history – an existential film for a post-porn age, one that puts queers on the map as legitimate genre subjects. It's quintessentially a film of its time.

And so is *Swoon*, though it might seem otherwise, what with the mock-period settings, the footage purloined from the 20s, and the courtroom-accurate script, based on the 1924 Chicago trial of Leopold and Loeb, the pair of rich Jewish boys who bonded, planned capers, and finally killed a boy. In the wake of the Dahmer case, it would be easy to think of this as a film about horrific acts. *Swoon*, however, deals in different stakes: it's the history of discourses that's under Kalin's microscope, as he demonstrates how easily mainstream society of the 20s could unite discrete communities of outsiders (Jews, queers, blacks, murderers) into a commonality of perversion. The whole look of the film – director of photography

Ellen Kuras won the prize for cinematography in dramatic film in Park City – emphasises this view with the graphic quality of its anti-realism, showing how much Kalin, Kuras and co-producer Vachon tailored its look.

As part of a new generation of directors, Kalin isn't satisfied to live in the past, even a post-modern past. No, *Swoon* takes on the whole enterprise of 'positive images', definitively rejecting any such project and turning the thing on its head. I doubt that anyone who damned *The Silence of the Lambs* for toxic homophobia will swallow *Swoon* easily, but hopefully the film will force a rethinking of positions. Claim the heroes, claim the villains, and don't mistake any of it for realness.

Throughout Sundance, a comment Richard Dyer made in Amsterdam echoed in my memory. There are two ways to dismiss gay film: one is to say, 'Oh, it's just a gay film'; the other, to proclaim, 'Oh, it's a great film, it just happens to be gay.' Neither applied to the films in Park City, since they were great precisely because of the ways in which they were gay. Their queerness was no more arbitrary than their aesthetics, no more than their individual preoccupations with interrogating history. The queer present negotiates with the past, knowing full well that the future is at stake.

Like film, video is a harbinger of that future, even more so. Yet Sundance, like most film festivals, showed none. To make a point about the dearth of lesbian work in feature film and to confront the industry with its own exclusions, the Barbed Wire Kisses panel opened with a projected screening of Sadie Benning's videotape *Jolies* – and brought down the house. With an absolute economy of means, Benning constructed a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dyke* such as we've never seen before. 'I had a crush. It was 1978, and I was in kindergarten.' The lines are spoken facefront to the camera, black-and-white images floating into the frame alongside the words enlisted to spell out her emotions on screen, associative edits calling settled assumptions into question.

The festival ended, of course. Isaac Julien returned to London to finish *Black and White in Colour*, his documentary on the history of blacks in British television. High-school dropout Sadie Benning left to show her tapes at Princeton, and to make another one, *It Wasn't Love*, that proved she's no fluke. Derek Jarman and Jimmy Somerville were arrested for demonstrating outside London's Houses of Parliament. Christopher Münch and Tom Kalin picked up

prizes in Berlin. Gregg Araki found himself a distributor. New work kept getting produced: the San Francisco festival found its submissions up by 50 per cent in June. The Queer New Wave has come full circle: the boys and their movies have arrived.

But will lesbians ever get the attention for their work that men get for theirs? Will queers of colour ever get equal time? Or video achieve the status reserved for film? Take, for example, Cheryl Dunye, a young video-maker whose *She Don't Fade* and *Vanilla Sex* put a sharp, satiric spin on black romance and cross-race illusions. Or Jean Carlomusto's *L is For the Way You Look*, a definitive portrait of dyke fandom and its importance for, uh, subject position.

For one magical Saturday afternoon in Park City, there was a panel that traced a history: Derek Jarman at one end on the eve of his 50th birthday, and Sadie Benning at the other, just joining the age of consent. The world had changed enough that both of them could be there, with a host of cohorts in between. All engaged in the beginnings of a new queer historiography, capable of transforming this decade, if only the door stays open long enough. For him, for her, for all of us.

Pratibha Parmar

Queer questions: a response to B. Ruby Rich

Queer cinema has been going on for decades, although not in its current manifestation – that is, a marketable, collective commodity produced by white gay men in the US. Jarman's work has always seemed queer to me, but now a collective confidence, taking queer as a given, is emerging. It's a point we've reached through years of political organising. In New York, for example, both Todd Haynes and Tom Kalin have been nurtured by queer activism such as ACT UP.

Elements of Rich's article seem somewhat misleading, in particular the marking out of Sundance as the beginning of a new queer historiography. I also felt perturbed by the obvious

absence of a whole litany of lesbian film-makers who aren't referenced. The fact that a group of very talented white gay men are getting exposure and access to budgets is to be welcomed, but we also need to consider the difficulties, through gender inequality, of access to economic and marketing resources for lesbian film-makers.

I find the formal inventiveness of the recent films exhilarating. Queers have been marginalised to such an extent that we have felt compelled to subvert dominant genres. Now the question of pleasure is very high on the agenda, not surprisingly in the age of Aids. Cultural interventions can be pleasurable, too.

I am wary of talking about an overarching queer aesthetic, as my sensibility comes as much from my culture and race as from my queerness. In queer discourses generally there is a worrying tendency to create an essentialist, so called authentic, queer gaze. My personal style is determined by diverse aesthetic influences, from Indian cinema and cultural iconography to pop promos and 70s avant-garde films. My film *A Place of Rage*, which explores questions of sexuality but doesn't prioritise these, sold out in the LA and San Francisco lesbian and gay festivals, proving that audiences are hungry for queer visions painted on a broader canvas.

My work has much wider distribution and profile in North America. Racism and censorship exist on both sides of the Atlantic, but there is a sense in the US that recognition for my work is based on merit rather than personality or tokenism. Queer aesthetics has been developing in both places and there is an ongoing exchange. For instance, there is a filmic dialogue between *Looking for Langston* and *Swoon*, as there is

between Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien, even though their work is very different.

In Britain, there is clearly a gap in institutional support for most queer films. One of the only exciting developments in the recent past has been the pioneering *Out* television series, which has given many of us access to funding and to a much wider audience.

Rich's article suggests that there is an ongoing debate about the role and need for lesbian and gay film festivals. By arbitrarily putting Jarman and myself in opposite camps, Rich, I fear, is inventing a false debate. Queer festivals are essential for many film-makers, especially lesbians and people of colour, because it's often the only place we can get our work screened and affirmed. I know Jarman would agree with this. What's becoming clear, however, is that these festivals are programmed predominantly by white gay men and women who prioritise their own constituencies, further marginalising queers of colour. *First published in September 1992 (volume 2, number 5).*